

Women not allowed: How patriarchy rules Pakistan's Sufi shrines that also celebrate the feminine

Monday 8 October 2018, by [KHALID Haroon](#) (Date first published: 5 October 2018).

In September, two women sparked a protest by passing through the Bahishti Darwaza at the shrine of Baba Farid.

The Bahishti Darwaza, or Gateway to Paradise, at the shrine of Baba Fariduddin Shakarganj in Pakpattan opens for only five days a year. Sitting atop what must be an ancient mound, the shrine looks over all of Pakpattan, a city that gradually developed around the grave of this 12th century Sufi saint, head of the Chisti Sufi order.

Here, Baba Farid, who also happens to be the first classical Punjabi Sufi poet, is believed to have taught his students in a modest madrassa. One of them was Nizamuddin Auliya, who eventually became the head of the Chisti Sufi order. In fact, the name of Bahishti Darwaza is attributed to Nizamuddin Auliya, who is reported to have once dreamt of the Prophet passing through this door and saying that whoever passes through this door will enter paradise.

One of two doors leading into the shrine, the door is only opened on the occasion of the saint's urs, or death anniversary, when a large festival is organised at the shrine. Devotees flock to Pakpattan to partake in this celebration, and almost a million of them manage to pass through this door and exit the shrine through the other, in the hope of securing paradise for themselves. The door remains open for ordinary devotees for the first two nights while the last three nights are reserved for VIPs, including ministers, commissioners and police officers.

Following this custom, on the fourth night on September 20 – which happened to be the ninth night of Muharram – the commissioner of the district was invited. The commissioner was accompanied by the district police officer, responsible for security at the shrine. Sufi shrines across Pakistan have come under [attack](#) in the last few years. In 2010, a [bomb blast](#) outside the shrine of Baba Farid resulted in the death of six persons.

Soon after the two officers had passed through the door, there was a ruckus at the shrine. Egged on by one of its caretakers, devotees started protesting against the officers, accusing them of breaking a centuries-old tradition. Both officers were women. And according to the shrine's tradition, no woman can pass through the door or enter the inner sanctuary, where Baba Farid's grave is located.

This tradition exists across all Sufi shrines. The argument goes that the presence of a menstruating woman – menstruation being an “inherently impure process” – might defile the purity of the shrine. How dare these women, irrespective of their official ranks, cross a threshold that their sex does not allow them to, the caretaker argued. Even Benazir Bhutto was not allowed to cross this threshold when she visited the shrine in the 1990s, he said, stating the fact as a matter of pride.

A Sabarimala-like verdict in Pakistan?

It is ironic that Sufi shrines, in many ways, challenge the conventionalities of traditional religion and societal mores, and yet maintain such patriarchal and misogynistic notions. The absurdity of the tradition becomes more blatant if one reflects on several rituals and rites at these shrines that are expressed in a highly feminised form. For example, shrines celebrate the death anniversary of the Sufi saint instead of his birth anniversary. The urs festival symbolically represents a marriage, when the Sufi (bride) finally becomes one with the Divine (bridegroom). It is for this reason that a devotee in Sufi poetry always refers to himself as a woman.

Even in the hagiographical literature of the Sufis, one would find these expressions of femininity. For example, it is believed that the 17th century mystic Bulleh Shah learned how to dance at the abode of a courtesan in an attempt to appease his master, Shah Inayat, whom he had angered. It was by dancing with ghungroo in his feet that Bulleh Shah managed to win over Shah Inayat again. The audacity of the act is clearly understood if one keeps in mind that Bulleh Shah belonged to the Syed caste, direct descendants of the Prophet and the highest caste in the folk spiritual caste hierarchy. His becoming the apprentice of a courtesan was the ultimate act of rebellion, a defiance of the very notions of “purity” and an embracing of the “impure”. However, these notions of purity and impurity continue to survive at his shrine in Kasur, where, similar to other Sufi shrines, the entry of women is forbidden, for fear that they may be in an “impure” state.

The story of the shrine of Shah Hussain in Lahore is no different. The 16th century Sufi saint, like Bulleh Shah, through his poetry and his life, challenged the very notions of sacred and profane, turning profane into sacred and vice versa. Yet, today, in the name of purity and sanctity, caretakers at his shrine continue to perform the very acts of profanity he rejected.

The Indian Supreme Court’s judgement on September 28 allowing women of all ages to enter the [Sabarimala temple](#) is landmark. Upholding the right to religion, the judgement attacks the foundation of patriarchy. One can hope that one day, a similar judgment in the Pakistani context can also be made. For now, it seems even the state officials, responsible for providing security to the shrine, are not above the grip of patriarchy.

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