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Sacred Landscape of Islamabad

Zulfiqar Ali Kalhoro on traditional devotional practices in rural areas around Islamabad

by Zulfiqar Ali Kalhoro — November 1, 2019 in Features, Heritage 0

Three stones which were sacred to Hindus inhabitants at Peja village, Islamabad

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here are a number of shrines and sacred spaces in and around Islamabad which have been used and approached by people looking to redress their everyday problems.

TIn the past, some of these shrines and sacred spaces had been used by people of different faiths. Currently, these spaces and shrines, which were abodes of non-Muslims in ancient times, have been Islamized by the people of Potohar. They have domesticated the landscape to their own beliefs and purposes – and reinvented stories to reinforce their religious and political power.

In order to co-opt any space, they construct an enclosure around it, or simply mark it with small stones. There are also instances of converting a natural landscape into cultural landscape.

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I have been traveling in the Potohar region since 2000 and have seen many prehistoric and historic sites in the larger region in general and Islamabad in particular, which were later modified and used by Hindus as well as Muslims. Their function as sacred spaces remained even when they became shrines.

One of the Hindu sacred spaces, which is no more venerated is located near the village of Bobri in Islamabad. The site is locally called “Jira”, where one finds rock shelters overlooking a dry nullah. As regards the term Jira, there are many possible theories; it could be the phonetic variation of word “Jatra” or “Yatra” meaning journey or pilgrimage to a “Tirtha” or crossing place or to any of



View of the Soan River near Pharwala village

the countless shrines dedicated to goddesses and gods, most often of very local origin or fame. Another possible derivation of the word could be from “Jiva” meaning soul. One finds there clothes of women apparently offered to the diety when their wish was fulfilled. Upon their first visit after marriage to such sites or shrines, they used to offer their clothes to the deity. This custom is still widespread in some parts of Tharparkar particularly in Nagarparkar among the Meghwar women who offer their clothes to Sachia Devi, an avatar of Parvati.

There are a series of sacred rocks which are located in the villages of Darwala, Bora Bangial, Peja, Gora Mast, Bhimbar Tarar and Bagh Joghian where there are a number of sacred spaces depicting geometric signs and cupules or cup-marks which were possibly related to the performances of rituals by ancient as well as modern humans. Sacred rocks emerge from the Soan River at Bagh Joghian and run east and southwest. These rocks terminate at the village of Peja in the shape of three natural standing stones making a trinity. These standing stones could be a divine trinity for the Hindus. These natural landscapes were domesticated by ancient people through various rituals. Through the performance of various rituals these natural landscapes were converted into cultural landscapes and a number of shrines were made to magnify the power of supernatural.

The domestication of landscapes in the villages of Islamabad is very common and widespread. People have different interpretations about various sacred spaces. Some of these spaces are very ancient and others have been recently used.



Bowls at the shrine of the saintly woman in Gora Mast Village

People domesticate the landscape either by constructing a structure or making an enclosure. After doing so, they perform various rituals to sanctify the place. The domesticated landscape constructs and creates the identity of those who perform the rituals at these spaces and it becomes a ceremonial landscape – serving as a shrine to the local people and a money spinner to the creator of that shrine (the sajjada-nashin).

Some of the sacred spaces in Bagh Jogian which were used by the Nath Jogis to practice austerities in the past are now held sacred by Muslim tribes. They frequent these spaces to seek blessings. In order to Islamize the pre-Islamic sacred spaces, they associated stories of mythical heroes and holy persons (Babas or Buzurgs) who they believe used to visit these places. It is they who grant various boons to those who visit.

One such pre-Islamic shrine which was possibly a Buddhist or Hindu sacred space is now being honoured by the villagers of Gora Mast in Islamabad. This sacred space is located east of the Gora Mast village in the village necropolis. People believe that the grave of a saintly woman lies under the tree. Actually this tree was worshiped before Partition by Hindus when they were in the majority in the village. The tree cult was common and widespread when Hindus resided in the village. When they left for India, some Muslim tribes retained the sanctity of the space and invented stories about a saintly woman. There are no remains of an actual grave under the tree. However; close to the sacred tree are old graves of Muslim Rajputs.

People of the village frequently visit the shrine and offer sweetmeats to the holy person. They bring sweetmeats in bowls and leave them at the grave, believing that the saint would eat them. They also distribute sweets at the shrine. After distributing sweets, they place the bowls at or near the shrine and they never take them away. If they take away the bowls, the saint will cause harm to those who violate the sanctity of the space. One sees a large number of bowls lying near the grave. Local people believe that saint recognizes their service and devotion through these bowls/objects. Likewise, people tie pieces of cloth with a branch of a tree. Every piece of cloth is a supplication to a saint to ask for health, a child etc. These pieces of cloth keep reminding the saint about the problems that the devotee faces. After the problems have been removed, they untie or remove the piece of cloth from the tree.

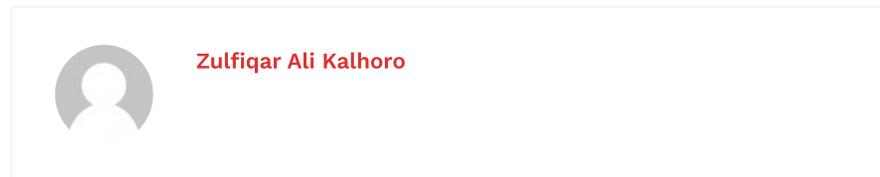
Such practices reflect the widespread saint veneration in the rural areas around Islamabad. On Fridays, they swarm the shrines to pay homage to the saints. This has become a booming business in Potohar in general and rural areas of Islamabad in particular. In recent years, there has been a dramatic rise in shrine constructions in rural

areas of Islamabad which elevates the position of a shrine builder from an ordinary person to the most powerful and influential person in the village in a very short period of time. This further leads to building more shrines with fictional stories galore.

Annual and biannual festivals (melas) are held at the newly built shrines that are fashioned out of the natural or ancient cultural landscape. These change the public identity of the owner of a shrine (the sajjada-nashin). A shrine becomes a money spinner for him and he enjoys not only religious influence but also political power which he derives from the shrine whose foundation he has built on lore. In this way, they also acquire a claim to what they describe as mystical knowledge – which later establishes a mystical genealogy for their descendants to continue to enjoy religious as well as political power.

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