Contextualizing Sufi Rituals and Practices at a Non-Mazar Shrine of Delhi: A Case Study of the Tomb of Sultan Ghari

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Abstract: This article explores the rituals and practices performed at a popular shrine in Delhi. This shrine, however, does not fall under the category of a Sufi shrine but is revered as such because of the ritual significance attached to it. Essentially a tomb of a prince, this structure has assumed the status of a shrine over a period of many centuries, and due to the reverence by people of the nearby villages, this tomb-shrine has assumed cultic proportions, so much so that it is regarded almost as a shrine in the Sufi landscape of Delhi.

Keywords: Shrine, Non-Sufi, Rituals, Monument, Mazar, Tomb, Practices, Rituals

I. INTRODUCTION

The tomb of Sultan Ghari is located in the village of Malikpur Kohi, 4 miles west of Mehrauli. The tomb is often referred to as a ‘shrine’ though historically it is a tomb with no specific religious or spiritual functionality. The purely political motive behind the construction of this tomb by Sultan Iltutmish for his son becomes evident by reading the plaque engraved on the entrance of the monument:

“This blessed building was commanded to be erected by the great Sultan, the most exalted Emperor, the lord of the necks off the people, the shadow of God in the world, the bestower of safety on the kingdom, the sultan of sultans, Shamsuddunya Waddin, who is specially favoured by the Lord of the worlds, Abul Muzaffar Iltutmish, the Sultan, the helper of the chief of the faithful, may God perpetuate his rule, as a mausoleum for the king of kings of the east Abul Fath Mahmud, may God forgive him with his indulgence, and make him dwell in the centre of the paradise in (the months of) the year 629.”

This tomb was originally built as a structure which could house the grave of the son of Sultan Iltutmish, Nasir ad-din Mahmud. The titles used in the plaque at the entrance for the Sultan clearly suggest that it was for personal glory that the tomb was constructed, and like many other architectural edifices of the time, this too was an example of a structure that was built by the Sultan to glorify his son as the symbol of royalty. The self-congratulatory nature of the message on the plaque at the entrance does not offer any evidence of the structure being constructed for religious or spiritual purposes. Over a period of time, however, this tomb like many other Sultanate structures in the city lost its relevance in terms of its architectural or political positioning, though Sultan Ghari emerged as an arena of religious piety and has continued to be so. The term ‘ghari’ was used for the tomb because the dead body of the prince was kept in the ‘ghar’ or cave instead of a casket or a bed as is customary among the Muslims.

Most people who visit the site today are unaware of the factual history of the site. They worship the site as a religious place where their ‘pir’ who grants them their wishes lies buried. Unaware of it being a funerary structure which was built by a king for his son, visitors, most of them devotees, visit the shrine with great reverence for the ‘pir’ who lies buried inside the octagonal chamber. The devotees have not made any attempt (or so it seems from the field study conducted at the site) to find out about the actual history of the tomb or to gather any information about the non-religious nature of the tomb. Their interpretation of it being a holy place which needs to be venerated, and the ‘pir’ who needs to be worshipped, is seen to be the most appropriate understanding among the local residents of the villages surrounding the structure.

There are many references to the tomb of Sultan Ghari being worshipped as a holy site or as a shrine. S.A.A. Naqvi published a report in 1947 clearly stating that “His tomb is even now regarded as sacred by the Muslims and every year on the sixteenth day of the month of Ziq’ad, his Urs or anniversary is celebrated and his shrine is thronged by pilgrims. The tomb was brutally vandalized in 1947 during the violent ridden times of the partition of the country. Another evidence of it being referred to as a site where a saint is buried comes from an archival record dating back to 1955. Many years later, the Jamiat Ulema e-Hind wrote to the Ministry of

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2 Gazeteer of Rural Delhi, edited by Dr. Uma Prasad Thapliyal, Delhi University Press, Delhi, 1987, p. 411
3 S.A.A Naqvi, Sultan Ghari, Delhi, Ancient India: Bulletin of the Archaeological Survey of India, vol. III, 1947, pp. 4-10

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Education to get the tomb repaired in order to facilitate the celebration of the upcoming Urs or the death anniversary of the saint. The Archaeological Survey of India repaired the tomb within a span of two months on the instruction of the Ministry of Education.

The tomb is preserved and maintained by the Archaeological Survey of India, but the actual caretakers of the tomb are the local residents of the Mahipalpur and neighbouring areas who truly revere this site as a religious site and visit the place every Thursday. Most of the devotees at the site come from Rangpuri, Mahipalpur, Kishangarh, and Masoodpur. Apart from these local visitors, some people from other parts of the city also visit the shrine on Thursdays. Both Hindus and Muslims visit the site to offer prayers.

Ritual Practices at Sultan Ghari

Every Thursday, devotees pour in to the premises to offer prayers. Like most monuments under the ASI, this monument also has an entry fee. Interestingly, the locals are allowed to enter the area without a ticket on Thursdays. This free entry suggests that even ASI treats this site as a shrine and allows visitors free entry to perform religious rituals. The fact that the structure is used both by Hindus and Muslims in equal measure is ratified by the fact that on the occasion of Holi, many devotees visit the site and offer water as a mark of auspiciousness. A number of Hindu devotees of nearby villages, at the grave, extend invitations to the ‘saint’ for making his presence felt at marriages and other socio-religious functions. Few meters away from the tomb there is a small temple which is also visited by the Hindu devotees on Thursdays who offer flowers and sweets at the temple and smaller huts built around it.

The spatial proximity between the Muslim shrine and the Hindu temple make it a space for socio-cultural interaction to take place between the two communities. It is interesting to note that for the locals, the tomb of Sultan Ghari is the only shrine which they frequent. It is spatially convenient for the local residents to visit this tomb because it is in close proximity to the villages that are inhabited by them. They do not have to travel to a distant place to get the blessings of a pir.

The main reason behind people visiting this shrine is mannat. Most people who visit the shrine have either asked for mannat or their mannat has already been fulfilled and they visit the shrine as a mark of gratitude. For the purpose of this study, 42 people were interviewed, out of which 26 people said that they visited the shrine because of a mannat which they had asked for and till its fulfillment they would visit the shrine every Thursday, the rest were those whose mannat had already been granted and who visited the tomb as a mark of gratitude.

A major ritual which is associated with the granting of mannat at this shrine is the feast which is organized by the devotees as a mark of gratitude. On Thursdays (not every Thursday but very often), there is a feast which is organized at the ground adjoining the tomb, and this feast also provides a platform for inter-community interaction. This feast is organized by the local residents of the area whose wishes are fulfilled by the pir they worship (the holy spirit who answers their prayers), and though there is no pir or saint buried inside the compound of this structure (unlike other dargahs), the devotees believe that it is because of the miraculous powers of the pir that their wishes have been granted. This feast is attended by many people and for a few hours the site livens up and the atmosphere is that of a fair or mela with flower sellers, cooks, organizers, and devotees all interacting with each other and playing their roles.

The food is prepared within the tomb complex, either on the ground or inside the octagonal chhatri beside the tomb. Apart from the food that is served to all the visitors, water is also made available to everyone who is present for the feast. Water tankers are installed in order to facilitate the availability of proper drinking water to the devotees who visit the shrine during the feast. The practice of distributing food at a shrine is common to almost all dargahs in the city, however, at the tomb of Sultan Ghari this assumes the proportion of a feast wherein people congregate to participate in the festivities. At other shrines, the people either distribute food on their own from degs outside the shrines or at a spot assigned to them or they give money to the authorities to feed the poor.

This feast which brings together members of both the communities usually begins at 12:00 noon and continues till 3:00 pm in the afternoon. The feast is organized on such a large scale that all the facilities are made available to the devotees, including tents and carpets where they sit and eat their food. It is interesting to note that most of the organizers belong to the Hindu community, and the people who are fed during these feasts belong to both the Hindu and Muslim communities. There is no formal committee to organize these feasts, and unlike the other dargahs of Delhi where feasts are organized by the dargah authorities, here feasts are organized by those whose wishes are granted. As a result, on some days there are more than one feasts, depending upon the mannat which is fulfilled.

Similar feasts are organized on a more grand scale on the occasion of Holi and Diwali, apart from the annual Urs which is celebrated around the end of September or the beginning of October. Most respondents claimed that they visited the tomb during Urs to pay their respects to their beloved pir. Out of the 42

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4 Preservation of Monuments in Delhi- Request from JamiatUlema e-Hind, New Delhi, ASI, Document No. 15 B/10/55-G/ASI

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respondents 36 said that they visited the tomb every year during Urs. Unlike most of the dargahs in Delhi where the respondents said that they visited the shrine during Urs only once or maybe once in four or five years, at the tomb of Sultan Ghari, the respondents said that they visited the shrine repeatedly every year during Urs. This, again, might be because of spatial proximity as most people who visit the shrine during Urs come from nearby villages, and are those who visit the shrine either every Thursday or at least twice a month.

The local residents of Rangpuri, Kishangarh, Masoodpur, and Mahipalpur share a special equation with the pir. Some women from the village of Rangpuri have taken up the responsibility of keeping the site clean. They believe that they are serving the pir and that this will bring them spiritual bliss. They keep the premises clean and ensure that the lamp inside the tomb chamber is lit permanently. Women from both the communities partake in this service. Most of these women have been visiting this tomb for many years now, and on interviewing some of them it was found that they have been visiting the tomb for over 10 years and share a deep spiritual bond with the place. They spend most of their time during the day at the tomb.

Two women, who have taken up the responsibility of keeping the tomb and its surroundings clean, claim that their manmar was fulfilled by the pir, after which they became ardent devotees and started visiting the shrine every Thursday. Similarly, many of those who were interviewed as part of the field study claimed that they shared a close spiritual bond with the place and being local residents, they believed in the miraculous powers of the pir. On being asked who the pir was, none of them could name the saint.

Devotees at this site do not show any inclination towards establishing the historicity of the ‘saint’ or ‘pir’ they worship so ardent. Some visitors also said that they visit other shrines in the city. Out of 42 respondents, only 12 said that they visited other dargahs. The most popular shrine apart from their local shrine was that of Qutub Sahib at Mehrauli. Some had also visited the shrine of Shaikh Nizamad-dinAuliya and Mai Sahib. The allegiance of the devotees to their pir is of immense value in assessing their repeated visits to a site. At the tomb of Sultan Ghari, it is evident that most people are not traditional dargah visitors, they perhaps have no understanding of Sufism either. They only believe in one saint, who resides within the walls of this mysterious structure, and they revere their saint. Some of the devotees do have a sense of the outside world, in terms of knowing that a Sufi tradition exists in the city, however, most people are oblivious to this and believe only in the miracles performed by their pir. For them, the institution of Sufism or spirituality is defined by what the pir has given them or what the pir will do for them in future.

It is as a matter of ritual that they visit the shrine and pay homage to the ‘saint,’ not knowing that the person who lies buried at the site is not a saint but a Prince—the son of Sultan Iltutmish.

Religious Affiliation of Visitors

For the Hindu devotees who visit the shrine, perhaps it is the nature of the space which is akin to a Hindu temple—a closed underground chamber which houses the grave of the prince (like the garbhagriha of a temple which houses the main deity). It may be because of the nature of this space and the fact that it resembles an inner chamber of a temple chamber which Hindus do not find in violation to their faith and visit the site to pay homage. It might also be the religious inclination of the people which makes the site look like a place of worship, which it originally was not envisaged to be. From an analysis of the data given in the Table (given at the end of the article), it becomes clear that as far as the religious affiliation of visitors at this tomb is concerned, the number of Hindu visitors are more than the number of Muslim visitors, and although a significant number of Muslims come to pray at the mosque in the tomb complex, the rituals are performed more arduously by the Hindus, including organizing the feast, offering flowers and chadar, and praying at the octagonal tomb chamber. On interviewing a student who studies at a private university in Delhi NCR, it became evident that before every auspicious occasion, he along with this family (Hindu Jats from the neighbouring Mahipalpur village) visit the shrine and perform the ritual of offering flowers, sweets and incense sticks. It is interesting to note that this student, who happens to be a student of History at the undergraduate level, also did not know that the tomb does not house the grave of a pir but that of a prince.

Muslim visitors also pray at the tomb chamber, however, Hindus outnumber them in the kind of rituals performed at the site. Both the communities have developed a special affinity with the pir over a period of time, and this shows in the way in which they organize feasts and participate in the festivities. Whatever the reason behind so many Hindu devotees visiting this tomb, it needs to be understood that the tomb provides a platform for socio-cultural synthesis between the two communities.

Resemblance to Sufi Rituals

Like other dargahs in the city, devotees at the tomb of Sultan Ghari offer flowers, chadar, incense sticks (agarbatti), sweets, milk in tiny tumblers, and money. Offering the chadar along with flowers, like the other shrines, is a ritual practice which is performed by many visitors. The shopkeepers, who sell these items outside the precincts of the tomb, claim that on Thursdays their sale of flowers, incense sticks and chadars is very high. On other days, according to them, not too many people visit the shrine as a result of which they do not make enough profit.
Similar to the Sufi tradition of visiting dargahs every Thursday (on *jumme raat*), this tomb is also visited by people on Thursdays more than other days. It is not clear as to when this practice of visiting the tomb began, however, it is evident that the standard rituals of a dargah (including visiting the shrines on Thursdays) are practiced at the tomb. Like the dargahs of Delhi which are frequented by people every Thursday and like the dargah of Chiraghi-Delhi which is visited every Thursday by the local residents of the area, this tomb is visited by devotees who come faithfully on this day to pray and make offerings.

### Table: Numerical analysis of visitations at the tomb of Sultan Ghari

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sr. No.</th>
<th>Category</th>
<th>Numerical Data</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Reason for pilgrimage</td>
<td>26- asked for <em>mannat</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>16- <em>mannat</em> already fulfilled</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Periodicity of visitation</td>
<td>30- visit every Thursday</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>5- visit twice a month (on Thursday)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>7- visit once in a while (once in 2-3 months)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Religious affiliation of visitors</td>
<td>24- Hindus</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>18- Muslims</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Visiting other shrines</td>
<td>12- visit other shrines in the city</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>30- only visit Sultan Ghari</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6.</td>
<td>Pilgrimage during <em>Urs</em></td>
<td>32- visit the site every year during <em>Urs</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>10- visit once in 3-4 years or have visited only once or twice</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*The total number of respondents was 42.*

## II. CONCLUSION

The tomb-shrine of Sultan Ghari is venerated as a Sufi mazar by the visitors at the shrine. It is interesting to note that people who visit the shrine have no knowledge about it being a tomb of a prince, rather than a dargah of a Sufi saint. They venerate the site like a shrine and perform rituals similar to those performed at a dargah. To conclude, it may be reiterated that the tomb of Sultan Ghari, is an important place of ritual worship in Delhi, and though it is not a mazar, its religious significance in the lives of devotees cannot be negated.

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