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## Healing the spirit: The social and religious impact of Sufi shrine practices in Pakistan

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### Abstract

In Pakistan, Sufi shrine practices have been considered sources of spiritual healing and more of a cultural and societal practice than purely a religious one. The aim of this research article is to explore the role of Sufi shrines in shaping religious expression and social interactions in contemporary Pakistani society. The purpose of the study is to revisit the ritual practices at the Sufi shrines of Bahauddin Zakariya and Shah Rukn-e-Alam in Multan city, Pakistan, and explore the socio-spatial relationships that make these shrines impactful to society and religion. This research is ethnographic in methodology, focusing on both rural and urban devotees from Southern Punjab. In this qualitative approach, semi-structured interviews with 15 devotees showed that the practices at Sufi shrines provide psychological comfort, spiritual purification, and a connection with God. These results demonstrate that pilgrimages to shrines with special religious rituals, such as the lighting of candles, dam karna (blowing), dhamal (a trance-like dance), cleaning shrines, langer (serving meals), qawwali (spiritual music), mannat (tying pieces of cloth to the latticed walls), laying chadar (cloth sheet), and placing flowers on the graves of Sufi saints, satisfy most of the spiritual, emotional, physical, social, and economic needs of the devotees. Visits to shrines and the performance of such rituals establish a link with God, as devotees feel that the Sufi saints are nearer to God and thus act as mediators. On the contrary, some devotees believe in praying directly to God; they visit the shrines to pray for the souls of the deceased saints to rest in peace. This study concludes that shrine practices are not only religious activities but are also crucially involved in the cultural, economic, and social life of individuals, contributing to their well-being. Future studies may be conducted by incorporating the opinions of non-visitors and religious scholars regarding shrine practices to understand the concept more fully in terms of their function and importance.

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## 1. Introduction

Sufism is the spiritual dimension of understanding, connecting, and being in love with God, which attempts to balance religious deeds with inner devotion. Sufism works through a process of purifying the self to cultivate virtues like peace, love, and humanity. Sufis or *Pirs* are those who practice Sufism. Sufism, through a gradual process, ceased to be an ascetic practice and became a socio-cultural rather than a religious one by the 12th century. In Pakistan, Sufi shrines hold immense significance due to their attribution to saints or spiritual masters [1] known as *Pirs* by Pakistanis. Such shrines provide centers where some social as well as religious practices associated with the shrine are conducted [2-4]. Visitation to Sufi shrines is practiced by both genders; nonetheless, this practice is more common among individuals from rural areas. Individuals from diverse backgrounds view shrines as signs of spiritual cleansing; therefore, they travel from very far distances to such shrines [4]. This regard for the *Pirs* is deep-rooted, wherein the followers believe these figures serve as a connection between them and God. The Sufi shrines serve manifold purposes in Pakistani society since they are conventionally significant; hence, they have a strong influence on the political, social, cultural, religious, and economic aspects of the country [5].

Pakistan's shrines have often been explored by anthropologists to determine their spiritual and economic significance [6, 7]. These shrines are different from other buildings in the world, as domes and towers are essential parts of Islamic architecture and representation [8, 9]. With the expansion of Islam, features such as domes and towers were added for temperature control and acoustics [10, 11]. The shrines, which serve as places for religious ceremonies, community gatherings, and economic activity, are not only religious hubs but also rooted deeply in the cultural and social fabric of Pakistan. The significance and popularity of shrines and rituals highlight their long-term existence in Pakistani society [1]. Bahauddin Zakariya and Shah Rukn-e-Alam are highly respected Sufi saints in Pakistan. They are known for their spiritual teachings and have a strong impact on Punjabi culture. The resources for Sufi shrine rituals include the reciting of prayers, performing a trance-like dance referred to as *dhamal*, and listening to *Qawali* music. These shrines also contribute to gaining access to blessings and thereby act as a coping strategy to deal with life's difficulties for devotees [12, 13]. This spiritual aspect often soothes the devotees against stress, poverty, and family concerns [14, 15]. The shrines have been criticized as un-Islamic by conservative scholars but stand as places of coming together and civilizational bonding that cement cultural identity [16]. Sufi shrines form a substantial part of existence in Multan, famous as the City of Saints in Pakistan. Two more visited shrines, Bahauddin Zakariya and Shah Rukn-e-Alam, were selected from Multan city.

Bahauddin Zakariya was a Sufi saint from the Suhrawardi order in the 12th century who spread Islam and Sufism, especially in Multan. He emphasized spiritual discipline, love of God, and ethical living. His shrine in Multan is considered an important place of pilgrimage, although it has a strong influence on Sufi practices, spiritual healing, charity, and education. Another Sufi saint, Shah Rukn-e-Alam, played a vital role in the dissemination of Sufism and Islamic values all over Multan in the 13th century. His iconic tomb, built by the Tughlaq Dynasty, is considered an important place of devotion, representing his long-term impression on mysticism and compassion. These shrines are not only religious hubs of worship but also systems of cultural and social activity [17]; festivals, music, and rituals blend daily life and are integrated with spiritual devotion. *Dhamal*, or rhythmic movements and playing traditional musical instruments, are typical Sufi practices that are essential to these gatherings and culture. During the *Urs* (festival on the death anniversary of a saint), sacred and non-religious activities are combined, as spirituality is intertwined with daily social activities [18]. With their rich traditions and unique architecture, shrines in Multan serve multiple functions: as centers of learning and spirituality, and as sources of cultural identity. This study is an attempt to explore how Sufi shrines' ritual practices meet the physical, economic, and psychological needs of devotees, along with their impact on culture and society. For this purpose, researchers explored the perceptions of Sufi shrine devotees at Bahauddin Zakariya and Shah Rukn-e-Alam shrines from Multan city, Punjab, Pakistan.

## 2. Literature Review

Religion is a complex system of beliefs, culture, and tradition related to spiritual aspects and the principles of morality. Religion has been described by Geertz [19] as a cultural system [19], whereas Asad [20] introduced the concept of religion as an anthropological category. Most religions depict stories, rituals, and symbols that define the origin of life and describe morality [21, 22]. There are approximately 4,200 religions worldwide that have their own ways of practice, for instance, ceremonies, prayers, and public services [23]. The foundation of Islam is based on the singularity of God and the message of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), who perceived the holy Quran as the word of God. After the death of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) in 632 A.D., differences regarding his succession created two main divisions: Sunni and Shiite, the latter being the followers of Ali, Muhammad's son-in-law [24]. Sufism represents the mystic aspect of Islam and has its origins in the teachings of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH); the Prophet's teachings aim toward a personal and direct connection with Allah. The word Sufi is believed to derive from the Arabic word for wool; early Sufis would wear woolen-robed garments. Additional Sufi traits include fasting, meditation, and complete belief in God. Subsequently, love for God was dominant, especially in the form of poetry, music, and dance [25].

Divine love was highlighted through the work of distinguished Sufis like Rabia Al Basri, Rumi, and Hallaj. As opposed to orthodox Islam, Sufism finds spiritual healing in the practice of *qawwali* (spiritual music), *dhamal* (a trance-like dance), and meditation to seek closeness to the Divine [25]. This can be observed and experienced within South Asia, where Sufi shrines, such as those of Bahauddin Zakariya and Shah Rukn-e-Alam in Pakistan, practice these rituals. The anthropology of Islam tries to describe how ordinary Muslims interpret religious texts and practice in everyday life [26]. The anthropology of Islam is the research approach that assists in exploring the understanding of Islamic practices by individuals or groups in the context of culture and society [27]. Anthropologists have disagreements about this approach, whether to explore the everyday practices of Muslims within specific cultural and local contexts or the customs that Muslims relate to religious texts [28-31].

Islam's comprehensive historical and ideological aspects should be considered when exploring Muslim communities at the village or tribal level [32].

According to this approach, every Muslim and non-Muslim should study the fundamental principles of Islam, such as knowledge, tolerance, and humanity. However, different types of anthropology, such as feminist and Marxist, somewhat apply values during investigation and interpretation [20, 26]. The concept of tradition is also helpful in the study of religious practices at shrines. Traditions always change over time, context, and researchers' perspectives. Therefore, there is not a single and definite justification of tradition, as it changes depending on viewpoint and time. The mean age of the respondents was between 19 and 45 years, and the median age was 26 years. Most of the shrine visitors belonged to lower socioeconomic statuses; the majority were illiterate or had only primary schooling. Three had higher education. Most interviewees belonged to rural and urban localities of Southern Punjab, while some shrine visitors from the rural localities came from other provinces. This shows that Sufi shrines are predominantly visited by less-educated people, largely from economically backward classes.

### 3. Methods

The study used a qualitative research approach to deeply understand the practices of devotees of Sufi shrines. This method was chosen because spiritual exploration often requires detailed examination and discussion. Researchers adopted an interpretive, mostly inductive stance typical of qualitative studies. However, the study was not entirely inductive; some themes were pre-identified using existing literature and general knowledge before data collection. Data were gathered from two Sufi shrines: Bahauddin Zakariya and Shah Rukn-e-Alam, located in Multan, Punjab. Researchers conducted semi-structured, in-depth interviews with 15 devotees in October 2024. Seven open-ended questions were posed to the respondents during the interview. The interview guide, prepared in both English and Saraiki for ease, contained open-ended questions to facilitate detailed responses. These questions addressed themes such as ritual practices, beliefs, spiritual healing, myths, superstitions, and traditions at the shrines. Using local languages (Saraiki and Urdu) for interviews helped researchers capture the participants' true expressions and context.

### 4. Data Analysis

Data analysis for this study was conducted through progressive phases, involving the transcription of interviews from Saraiki and Urdu, transcribing the actual statements of participants in English, manual coding of data by the researchers, highlighting areas of inconsistency and their discussion, and reviewing recordings and notes for clarification. The final step involved analyzing all themes identified from the collected data, enabling the researchers to gain comprehensive understandings of participants' views. To achieve the objectives of the research, the collected data was categorized into themes and relevant codes. To explore the first research objective, devotees were asked about their visits and the rituals performed at shrines. Various practices were described by the devotees, along with the feelings associated with those specific practices. To achieve the first objective of the research, devotees were asked three questions about Sufi shrine practices, their feelings about the rituals, and the frequency of their visits to the shrine.

**Table 1.**  
Ritual Practices.

Themes	Codes
Rituals	Lighting of candles, <i>dam karna</i> (blowing), <i>dhamal</i> (a trance-like dance), cleaning shrines, <i>langer</i> (serving meals), <i>qawwali</i> (spiritual music), <i>mannat</i> (tying pieces of cloth to the latticed walls), <i>laying chadar</i> (cloth sheet), and flowers on graves.
Feelings about rituals	Emotional relief, optimistic, energetic, closeness to God, releasing stress, gratitude, fulfillment, stronger faith.
Frequency of visit	On special Islamic days, regularly, on <i>Urs</i> (the festival on the death anniversary of a saint).

The data collected from the devotees at the Sufi shrines of Bahauddin Zakariya and Shah Rukn-e-Alam in Multan city, Pakistan, reveal personal experiences and shared evidence associated with these holy places. The evidence collected from devotees adds weight to the point of emotional and spiritual comfort sought from these shrine visits, demonstrating how such holy places provide psychological relief, strength, and hope [33]. For 12 out of 15 devotees, these shrines are sources of memories related to family, society, and tradition.

D7 stated, "I have been coming here since my childhood with my parents, so it has a special value in my heart. It feels like coming home with every visit. The shrine has been a continuous source of peace and comfort for me, especially when I face hard times."

This continuous culture of visiting shrines sustains social cohesion and personal belief. The devotees conveyed the feeling of being guided or protected by the presence of the saint, which provides strong evidence of a common belief in the saint as a mediator who connects humans with God, intensifies their prayers, and provides a sense of divine support [34]. Ritual practices were supposed to produce social and economic benefits, as well as contribute to health and peace. Numerous participants delivered personal narratives that represented the perceived effectiveness of Sufi intervention. A 40-year-old housekeeper related an experience in which a saint appeared in her dream, guiding her to remove a charm from a tree, which later helped her husband recover from disease. However, a minority (2 out of 15) believed that while Sufis were significant figures in spreading Islam, they could no longer negotiate after death, and people should pray directly to God. Devotees also

stated that non-visitors might not realize the spiritual benefits of visiting shrines, as this is a matter of personal belief. Some devotees mentioned that non-visitors sometimes see shrine visits as incorrect or even "Shirk" (associating partners with God), but others believed it was just a different viewpoint. Most of the interviewees (9 out of 15) expressed that Sufis work as negotiators between them and God since they think the Sufis are closer to God [4]. Therefore, devotees use Sufis as references for prayers to God and regard them as mediators between them and God, believing that Sufis understand their troubles and can negotiate on their behalf. A rural devotee mentioned that Sufis have a higher prestige in the kingdom of God, so prayers through them are more effective.

D6 (government employee) shared, "*Pirs (Saints) were chosen by Allah for their devotion and purity. I feel that when they leave this world, their link with Allah continues and never ends. I have strong faith that when I please the Saints by performing dhamal and lighting candles, they make my prayers stronger.*"

D4 (student) shared, "*I believe the Sufi saints are like a bridge between us and Allah. They were pure souls in their lives, and even now, their presence helps us connect with Allah more intensely.*"

It is commonly believed that Sufis are closer to God, so the prayers through them are more likely to be accepted. More importantly, evidence collected from the respondents also highlights the multi-dimensional religious, psychological, and social roles played by Sufi shrines. The belief in the shrine as a place of miracles, spiritual power, and divine involvement creates a link between faith and ritual practice. These shrines provide an environment that allows devotees to feel emotionally relieved, receive guidance, and gain community support. Practicing rituals together demonstrates how these practices strengthen communal bonds and reinforce cultural heritage [17].

D10 commented, "*For me, this shrine is not just a visit; it's about people and bonding. Sometimes I meet people facing the same struggles, and we share our worries and encourage each other.*"



**Figure 1.**  
Spiritual healing at Sufi shrines.

Ritual practices at Sufi shrines are sources of both personal and communal relief [33]. The responses from the devotees emphasize the strong spiritual and emotional impact of these practices on individuals. Ritual practices, such as lighting candles, tying cloths to the lattice wall, dhamal (spiritual dance performance), reciting dhikr (remembrance of God), and lengar (serving meals), are sources of resilience and personal relief, demonstrating the deep devotion of the devotees.

D15 (village woman) remarked, "*I perform dhamal, (spiritual dance) and I feel almost stunned by emotion. It makes me let go of my worries and feel really attached with Pir's presence here.*"

D2 (farmer) pointed out; "*I usually sit in the corner quietly and do dhikr (remembrance of God). The musical reciting calms my mind and helps me feel as if I am covered and protected by divine power.*"

The testimonies stress that practicing these rituals helps devotees feel spiritually uplifted and emotionally supported, providing them with a sense of hope, peace, and connection to their God. Continuous dhikr and the social service of distributing meals provide emotional relief, increase personal faith, and create a sense of community bond among the devotees. Furthermore, the practice of tying cloths and showering flowers points out the physical representation of prayers and wishes, showing the devotees' belief in shrines as a source through which their prayers reach their God. The practice of giving and receiving supports the social bonds and increases the shrine's holy atmosphere, which exemplifies the Sufi values of service, humility, and love [33]. These rituals not only strengthen personal faith but also contribute to a shared religious identity that is profoundly rooted in spiritual and cultural traditions. The collected data confirm that the shrines provide strength and power to deal with ordeals in life and increase emotional well-being.

Visiting shrines and participating in rituals strengthen faith and lift the spirit, bringing feelings of hope, a strong connection to God, psychological comfort, and relief, as reported by Ewing [2]; Manzo [5]; Mathur [6]; Kahraman [9]; Al Hamad [11] and Levin [15]. They believe that Sufi shrines support well-being, self-realization, and enlightenment. For instance, a Bahawalpur merchant aged 29 years expressed that shrines relieved him of tension and provided peace. Sufi shrines are highly respected in Pakistani culture [1], where visitors believe these sites fulfill their social, economic,

psychological, and spiritual needs. Levin [15] and Malik [16] found that visiting shrines helps people tackle psychological and social challenges, offering peace and mental relief. Devotees' responses also highlighted the significance of rituals at shrines, which were associated with themes of community building, cultural identity, boosting local commerce, and strengthening faith.

**Table 2.**  
Significance of Sufi shrine practices.

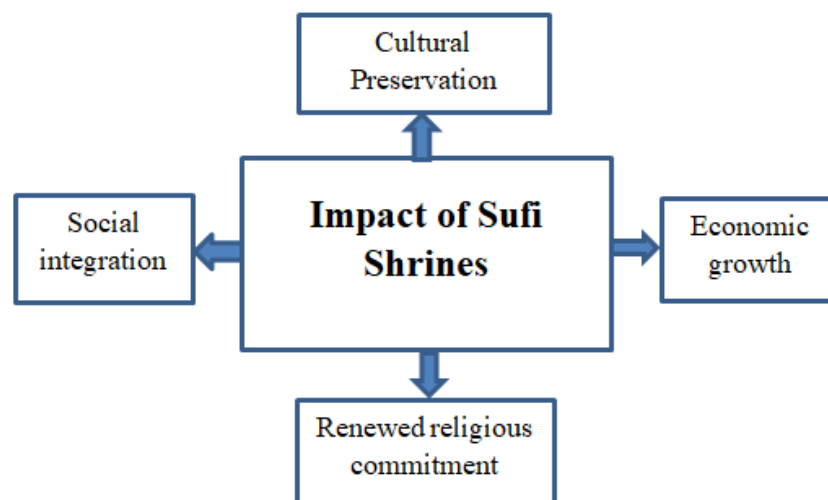
Themes	Codes
Community building	Support, collective prayers, group ritual practices, equality, respect for minorities, shared identity, and togetherness.
Cultural identity	Maintaining tradition through rituals, cultural identity, morality, guidance, and art promotion.
Boosting local commerce	Boosting income, creating new jobs, enhancing tourism, securing funds, and supporting charity.
Strengthening faith	Consistency in prayers, conscious of God's presence, deep commitment, spiritual healing.

Devotees' responses demonstrate that ritual practices have a significant influence on culture, society, emotions, and the economy. These shrines are gathering points for people from diverse backgrounds, which promote community building by enhancing support and developing shared experiences. Nine out of fifteen devotees mentioned that shared prayers and ritual practices create a sense of unity among them. People of all genders and ages participate in rituals equally to fade the concept of minority. This inclusiveness brings harmony and peace to society by developing a common identity and unity [33]. Sufi shrines also help create strong community bonds by bringing people together culturally and socially [17]. People from diverse backgrounds participate in shrine rituals together while breaking social barriers, promoting tolerance, and increasing acceptance. Devotees respect each other, form social attachments, and become part of a close community through these gatherings and rituals. They develop a sense of equality and empathy in such events of shared worship and Urs celebrations. As mentioned by a devotee in the same thread:

D3 (business owner) shared, *"I get community support that is comforting for me. When I see people are doing the same practices, it makes me realize that I am not alone in worldly problems. This attachment and unity give me satisfaction and comfort."*

D13 reflected, *"It's like I'm part of a bigger family where everyone is equally respected, as shared activities make us support each other."*

Thousands of devotees visit shrines during the annual *Urs* celebration. Shrines are decorated with lights and flowers for three days and nights. Many devotees visit from far places to perform ritual activities. Besides religious activities, people eat and shop at shrines, increasing socialization. In such *Urs*, different religious and non-religious activities are carried out in shrines linked with the concept of sacred and profane spaces introduced by Eliade [18] and Geertz [19]. This annual festival, which brings thousands of people together, also serves as a source of economic growth. Economically, Sufi shrines support small businesses. Sufi shrines help sellers and artists boost their local economy and also serve as a source of funds through charity. Devotees spend money on food, handmade goods, lodging, and religious items. This increases sales for local sellers, artists, and small trades. The financial benefits for all those connected to the shrine who earn their living from it help keep the community stable and strong.



**Figure 2.**  
Different impact of Sufi shrines.

Rituals and practices at Sufi shrines are the source of cultural identity [17]. These shrines are not only places of worship but also cultural hubs that reflect traditional art and music. People stay connected with their identity and history through ritual practices such as *dhamal*, *qawwali*, *langar*, and *mannat*, which keep culture alive traditionally. Ritual practices are criticized



by many religious scholars; however, devotees perceive these practices as expressions of their devotion and sources of spiritual healing [33]. Regular visits to the shrine and involvement in ritual performances uplift the spirit and renew the religious beliefs of the devotees. Devotees feel more energetic and hopeful when they sense the presence of God through the renewal of their faith.

D12 (laborer) responded, *"My faith is renewed and strengthened when I see the energy of devotees in ritual performance and listen to the miracle stories of people. I can literally feel the existence of Allah near me."*

D9 (housekeeper) expressed, *"I feel pleasure and satisfaction in dhamal to show my faith traditionally, but many people think that activities like dhamal and qawali are not religious. They don't believe in culture and tradition, and I call them extremists."*

People from all backgrounds, such as business owners, students, government employees, housekeepers, daily laborers, shopkeepers, and housewives, visit Sufi shrines. Men and women generally have similar views on the beliefs associated with these shrines. However, there is a noticeable difference in how highly educated and less-educated people perceive these places and the associated rituals. Sufi shrines in Multan, such as those of *Bahauddin Zakariya* and *Shah Rukn-e-Alam*, attract visitors for various reasons. People come seeking spiritual healing, relief from mental stress, inner peace, satisfaction, or to show their devotion to the saints [19]. The shrines serve as sites that meet both spiritual and emotional needs, linking different divisions of society through shared cultural and religious practices [17].

## 5. Discussion

The research on the ritual practices of Bahauddin Zakariya and Shah Rukn-e-Alam shrines in Multan, Pakistan, uses thematic analysis following the Braun and Clarke [35] framework to present a detailed understanding of the shrines' impacts and significance from cultural and religious perspectives. Results drawn from the collected data align with past literature about the multidimensional impacts of ritual practices in Sufi shrines [1]. This concept of cultural identity aligns with Asad's [20] study, which argues that shrines are a combination of religious and cultural activities; therefore, they should be explored from individuals' perspectives. Cultural identity and the preservation of tradition enlighten today's devotees about past customs, giving them a sense of connection and shared history, as discussed by Werbner [36]. Economic impacts of Sufi shrine practices reported by devotees align with the investigations in previous studies that highlight the role of religious places in promoting local markets [37, 38].

The responses from the devotees underscored that the shrines support local merchants, artists, and small business owners through festivals and other shrine activities by creating jobs and promoting economic stability. This finding confirms that Sufi shrines are not only religious hubs but also centers of economic flourishing that enhance local incomes. It also demonstrates that economic sustainability is linked with religious practice at Bahauddin Zakariya and Shah Rukn-e-Alam shrines.

Ritual practices, *dhamal* performances, *dhikr* recitations, and *langer* services heal spiritually and emotionally, as reported by devotees, which aligns with the previous study by Moin [39], who emphasized emotional and spiritual healing through shrine practices. However, in the current study, devotees highlighted that the sense of God's existence renews their religious commitment and belief. These shrines are represented as active social centers that strengthen a shared sense of belonging and community bonding, consistent with the findings of authors Sanyal [17] and Charan, et al. [40], which increase our understanding of the cultural and social aspects of Pakistani Sufi shrines. However, further exploration may be needed to understand the underlying tensions in ritual practices. According to researcher observation, some educated devotees believe in direct prayers to God and visit shrines only to pay respects to the saints without believing in the superstitions and myths popular about these shrines. The majority of the devotees who trust that Pirs can fulfill their needs and believe in myths belong to poor and uneducated backgrounds. This suggests a connection between educational, social, and economic background and the beliefs of shrine visitors.

## 6. Conclusion

This study was conducted at Bahauddin Zakariya and Shah Rukn-e-Alam shrines in Multan to explore the impact of these shrines on society and religion. It is concluded that these shrines have a strong influence on the religion, society, culture, and economy of Pakistan. These shrines are a source of spiritual healing for devotees as they release their stress and uplift their souls by practicing rituals there. While the main function of shrines is to facilitate religious activities, they also boost the local economy, preserve cultural heritage, and foster community building as more visited central hubs. Ritual activities and the annual *Urs* celebrations are primary sources of increasing small businesses nearby the shrines. The shrines are significant for Pakistan's socio-economic structure as they have the ability to maintain cultural traditions while addressing modern challenges. To enhance the religious and economic impact of shrines, best religious practices should be implemented through planned religious training, and tourism should also be promoted. Policymakers and government authorities should educate and train the public about shrine practices in accordance with Islamic teachings and work collaboratively to preserve Pakistani culture appropriately. Further research may explore the perspectives of non-visitors to shrines and Islamic scholars to provide a better understanding of shrine practices.

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