

## Role of Religion in Social Life of People in Cholistan Desert

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### Abstract

Religious practices are influenced by environmental and cultural factors. Cholistan is second largest desert of Pakistan where people are living with semi nomadic life style. Being a desert area, it lacks basic amenities, that is why life revolves around searching for water and fodder. Due to very low literacy rate in the Cholistan, religious awareness is poor and mostly based on hearsay. The current paper aims at exploring the role of religion in social life of people living in the Cholistan desert. Adopting qualitative approach, data were collected from 50 respondents through participants observation and protracted qualitative interviews. The findings show that people of Cholistan have poor awareness about religious teachings and practices, yet religion has a significant role in their social life. Influence of religion expands on all spheres of life ranging from satisfying religious and spiritual sentiments to settlement of mutual conflicts among community people. Furthermore, spiritual guide (*pīr*) and certain symbols have important role in their day-to-day life. In addition to this, religion has strengthened and enhanced resilience of the people for coping with the adversities of life in the hostile environment of Cholistan. Similarly, Cholistani people follow many superstitions for tackling supernatural powers and perceive them as religion. The study concludes that religion ingrains contentment among its followers which results into resilience in all odd conditions.

**Keywords:** *Religion, religious education, social life, spiritual guide, Cholistan*

### Religion and Society

Religion, society and culture are interrelated and interconnected phenomena<sup>4</sup>. Giddens defined as “Religion is one of the oldest human institutions. Cave drawings suggest that religious beliefs and practices existed more than forty thousand years ago”<sup>5</sup>. Religion fulfills many needs of the society especially in Cholistan where people are more dependent

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<sup>4</sup> Chaudhry, Tehrīm. "Understanding water scarcity in the socio-cultural context in Thar Desert of Pakistan." *Journal of International Development and Cooperation* 23.1 (2017): 15-25.

<sup>5</sup> Giddens, A., Duneier, M., & Applebaum, R. P. (2007). *Essentials of sociology*: WW Norton & Co Inc.p.321

on natural resources. For sociologists “religion includes any institutionalized system of shared beliefs and rituals that identify a relationship between the sacred and the profane”<sup>1</sup>. Religion is social institution that generates connections between people and provides basis for a sense of community and social integration. Besides this, religion provides answers to sacred questions such about life, death, faith and calamities<sup>2</sup>.

Religion performs many important functions in the society. Major roles of religion in the society are stated as “Religion unites people through shared symbolism, values and norms. Religious thoughts and rituals establish rules of fair play, making social life orderly. Every society uses religious ideas to promote conformity. Religious beliefs offer the comforting sense that our life serves some greater purpose”<sup>3</sup>. Similarly, religion provides motivation and movement for social change in the society. Macionis is of the view that religious organizations have also been agents of social justice and cause political change<sup>4</sup>. Summing up above cited definitions, it can be stated that religion has significant importance in the society, and it plays several important roles in the life of individuals and groups.

### **Religion in Cholistan**

The imprint of Islam on everyday life is reflective in the local cultural values and rituals associated with marriage, birth and death. However, overall role of religion is limited and weak. Settlement pattern, village layout and mainstream life style are mainly shaped by climatic, economic and social factors than religion<sup>5</sup>. Religion has a dominant role in Pakistani society, it is an integral part of number of activities of the members of the society, based as it is on the implementation of the ideals and values as emphasized by Islam<sup>6</sup>. In social life of Cholistan, religion is equally existing and influencing choices of local people. Socio-economic and hostile geographic conditions of the Cholistan have deep effects on every aspect of life of people including performing rituals. Here vast majority of population is Muslim by religion, but Hindus are also present as a religious minority. People of Cholistan believe that they are religious, but due to lack of formal and religious education, they have poor knowledge and understanding of the religious beliefs and practices.

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<sup>1</sup> Ferris, K., & Stein, J. (2008). *The real world: An introduction to sociology*: WW Norton.p.365

<sup>2</sup> Matson, R. (2010). *The spirit of sociology*: Pearson Education.p.365

<sup>3</sup>Macionis, J. J. (2006). *Sociology*. Delhi: Dorling Kindersley. p.491

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. p.308

<sup>5</sup> Khan, Mumtaz Kamil. "Rural islam and change: Case study: Cholistan." *Habitat International* 7, no. 3-4 (1983): 165-184.

<sup>6</sup>Baqai, D. M. S. (1985). *Social Order in Pakistani Society*. Karachi: MAS Publisher..p.301

It is well documented that no society is completely static because social change keeps on occurring everywhere. Scope of social change expands on all domain of life and religion is not an exception. The institution of religion is under change in the Cholistan, although its pace is slow. There are many factors which play primary role in bringing change anywhere such as education, communication, geographical and climatic conditions and infrastructure. All these causative factors of social change are not favorable in case of Cholistan, that is why process of social change is slow there.

### **Religion and Social Life in Greater Cholistan**

As mentioned earlier, Greater Cholistan is least populated area where human settlements are scattered and located at distance from one another. Here community people are relatively conservative and hardliners in many aspects of social life. Due to its odd geography, it is too difficult to physically access the area, that is why it lacks formal educational institutions and other basic services. Religion is limited to only few ritualistic practices, though apparently people claim to be religious but due to lack of access to religious education, media and semi nomadic lifestyle, there is poor awareness regarding religious commandments and their true implementation. Looking back at history reveals that their knowledge about religion was limited only to congregational prayers and fasting in the month of Ramadan. Forefathers of current generation were even little aware about fasting as one of the important pillars of Islam.

As aforementioned, there are no specialized institutions for religious education in the Greater Cholistan due to its aloofness. In this part of Cholistan, till date there is little awareness about giving *Zakat* which is an important pillar of Islam. Although in the past, interaction of Cholistani people with outer world has been existing on limited level but it was business centered. Till today, social learning of desert people is dependent entirely on listening and observing as a result of interacting with the people of settled communities. Since ages, human being has developed fear of supernatural happenings, but with passage of time through realization of facts, these fears have been controlled and science has helped people know the root cause and origin of many happenings. In case of Greater Cholistan, not to talk about science and modern inventions, imparting formal education is not considered important. That is why, there exist many myths in the Cholistan. Natural happenings and phenomenon are attached different meanings, some as lucky sign and some other as baleful.

Social fabric in Cholistan is very strong and well knitted. It provides foundation for social organization and keeps the individuals and families integrated to their social values. This

social bond is stronger than religion and members can not violate local customs because of social pressure. In some areas of Greater Cholistan, divorce is socially unacceptable although it is permissible in Islam under certain conditions.

Although there is poor knowledge about religion on the part of local people, but religious enthusiasm and sentiments are found here irrespective of financial constraints. In whole of Cholistan, mosques are mostly made of local clay at every *toba*. At some places, the mosques are just symbolic, and no building exists, there are 378 mosques in the Cholistan<sup>1</sup>.

### **Religion and Social Life in Lesser Cholistan**

Lesser Cholistan is near to settled villages and towns and it has fewer sand dunes as compared to Greater Cholistan. As a result of this proximity, people of Lesser Cholistan get opportunity of interaction with people from out of Cholistan. This interaction has increased their awareness level about social life including religious awareness. As a result of this increased awareness, now religion is not limited to knowing about certain rituals rather some of them well aware of religious obligations like recitation of holy Quran and offering congregational prayers, but an ideal practice of religious teachings has not been seen anywhere.

In this part of Cholistan, comparatively there are better opportunities for earning along with higher literacy rate, so resultantly there can be seen little social development. There are roads and paths (no matter unpaved) and there is coverage of telephone, that is why people of this part of Cholistan have developed social contacts with the settled community people, they participate in the social events such as marriage, birth and death, this participation has provided them opportunity to observe various practices on such events by people of settled towns, so people of Lesser Cholistan have adopted these practices including religious ones in their social life.

Its common observation that despite having knowledge that they are not absolutely right yet traditions dominate in our daily life and have deep influence on our behavior. There is growing trend about searching for alternate solution of the problems, but amulet usage is prevailing in the lesser Cholistan as it has been practiced since past. They do contact with the spiritual guides for finding solution of the problems being faced. As it has been their practice from many decades, so they also offer costly gifts to spiritual guides just to make them happy. Spiritual guides give them threads, water, honey and sugar balls after holy reading on them for getting relief from pains and problems.

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<sup>1</sup> Cholistan Development Authority (Un-published office document)

Social organization and individual behavior is determined by the local traditions and values, this is also found in Lesser Cholistan. Although religion and traditions are inter-related with each other but sometimes traditions have their roots in social needs. In Lesser Cholistan every day decision making is based on culture whereas religion has nothing to do with it.

Performing pilgrimage is considered a major religious obligation. Though offering prayer five times in a day and giving *Zakat* are also equally important religious obligations but pilgrimage brings popularity and elevates social status, the person who goes to perform it receives more honour and community trust. That is why, local people have more desire of performing pilgrimage than fulfilling other religious duties.

### **Religious Knowledge and Awareness in Cholistan**

In the Greater Cholistan, people were more conservative and hardliners in many aspects of social life. Due to its odd geographic conditions, it was too difficult to access the area for developmental activities by public or private agencies, that there was lack of formal educational institutions and other sources of knowledge and awareness for the local people. That is why religious knowledge was limited to few rituals. These people consider visiting shrines and following spiritual guide's instructions as most important religious duty. On the contrary, in other parts of Pakistan, there is scores of such institutions at village and *mohalla* level. Due to lack of basic amenities of life and being far flung areas with poor transportation facilities and severe weather conditions, no religious teacher from settled areas become willing to stay for leading prayers and imparting religious education to people of Cholistan. Getting born in a Muslim or Hindu family was considered enough and there was least importance of imparting religious education to kids.

### **Religion and Social Status in Cholistan**

People in Cholistan are conscious about their religious identity because there live both Muslims and Hindus. Muslims consider Hindus as minority and inferior whereas for Hindus, common Muslims were not superior rather merely ordinary people. Only saints were respectable for them on the basis of their spiritual power. Hindus dress differently to show their religious identity.

Offering congregational prayer and giving *Zakat* are also equally important religious obligations, however performing pilgrimage was more known religious obligation in Cholistan because it brings popularity. The person who goes to perform it receives more honour and community trust. That was why, even at that time when many Cholistanis were little aware about offering daily prayers, there was trend of performing pilgrimage.

Cholistani people have more desire of going for this holy journey than fulfilling other religious obligations.

There is immense respect for *Sayyeds* (direct descendent of holy prophet) because of their relationship with holy Prophet (ﷺ).

Due to scorching heat, people of Cholistan can hardly observe fasting despite its awareness on their part. In summer season temperature goes around 50 centigrade and it becomes impossible to survive without drinking water when they have to move in the sun for grazing their herds.

Social fabric in Cholistan is profound and well knitted. It provides basis for social organization and keeps the individual integrated to their social customs. The strength of this social fabric is based on family and clan bond. This social bond is stronger than religion and members cannot violate accepted social values. In some areas of Greater Cholistan, divorce is nearly prohibited practice although it is permissible in Islam under certain conditions.

### **Religious Practices in Cholistan**

Although religion and traditions are inter-related with each, traditions have their roots in social needs and environmental condition. In Cholistan social values are more culture driven than religion. Due to semi-nomadic life style and lack of education, so many beliefs are attributed towards religion but actually they are part of their local culture.

In the given scenario, regular performance of congregational prayers was hardly possible for the people of Cholistan. There was rarely any person available in Cholistan who offered congregational prayer in proper way and observed fasting in month of Ramadan.

Religious practices are also influenced by demographic conditions and cultural values. Like offering congregational prayers demand for cleanliness of clothes and body and making ablution which becomes quite difficult due to scarcity of water. Major source of income was raising animal herds, so most of the time males kept on moving with the animal herds and remained out of home.

People of Cholistan are not much aware about religion, that is why they often misunderstand different cultural practices as religious practices. There are different believe and practices which are important to understand happening for sake of religion in Cholistan. Following practices are carried out Cholistan in the name of religion.

### **Religious Celebrations in Cholistan**

In the Cholistan, Muslims celebrate *Eid ul Azha* and *Eid ul Fitr* but in different way with respect to settled areas. Due to lack of facilities of shopping and tailoring, there was no

trend of wearing new clothes on such special events. Mostly Cholistani people washed already used clothes and put on Eid day. However, trend of slaughtering animals on *Eid ul Azha* was present in all parts of the Cholistan because fulfilment of this religious obligation suits them due to possession of large animal herds. Religious festivals provide an opportunity to the followers for sharing happiness and show adherence to their religion and same is true in case of Cholistan.

Another important celebration considered as religious activity in Lesser Cholistan was participation in *mela* (carnival). Local people participate in these celebrations especially male with the intension of fulfilling religious obligation. Men slaughter animals, make vows and celebrate by participating in local games and folk dance. Women only go there to make vows or fulfill their wishes and wants.

### **Belief in Supernatural Happenings**

For the people of Cholistan, religion consists of supernatural power and happenings, that is why they had developed deep feelings of fear from natural happenings which lead them to find protection and safeguards to avoid such happenings. This fear in the unconscious of people of Cholistan compels them for making efforts to overcome uncontrolled and unforeseen fears through religion. For them, religion is a source of protection and shelter against such uncertainties. Religion in Cholistan was more symbolic and limited to small set of beliefs and practices like amulet taking and giving gifts to *spiritual guides* for seeking their happiness. However, this practice is on decrease in Lesser Cholistan while still deep rooted in Greater Cholistan. As educational and awareness level in Lesser Cholistan is comparatively high, so they do not blindly believe in supernatural powers and are more realistic towards practical solution of problems. Women in Cholistan have more belief in superstitions and supernatural powers due to poor knowledge and fearful nature.

### **Religious Places in Cholistan**

In the Cholistan, religion revolves around sacred places and people. "The sacred includes everything that is regarded as extraordinary and that inspires believer's deep and absorbing sentiments of awe, respect, mystery, and reverence. These sentiments motivate people to safeguard what is sacred from contamination or defilement"<sup>1</sup>.

People of Cholistan satisfy their religious sentiments by visiting shrines, tying up clothes with sacred trees and paying gratitude to spiritual guides. People tied up pieces of cloths with the branches of a specific tree near shrine of spiritual guide. Although Islam is a

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<sup>1</sup>. Ferrante, J. (2006). Sociology. Belmont: Thomson Wadsworth.p.524

prophetic religion “in which the sacredness revolves around things that symbolized significant historical events or around the lives, teaching and writings of great people <sup>1</sup>, it is different from mystical religions, in which “followers seek the sacred in states of being that, at their peak, can exclude all awareness of one’s existence, sensations, thoughts, and surroundings <sup>2</sup>. People vow for their needs and upon their fulfillment, they return with certain gifts including animals such as cows and goats.

### **Religious Personalities in Cholistan**

People of Cholistan have deep affiliation and concern with not only religion but also with religious personalities (*ulma imam, pir*). It was evident from love and firm belief in two spiritual personalities of the area known as Channan Pir and Khawaja Ghulam Fareed. There is deep religious respect and regard for both, and people memorize poetry of Khawaja Ghulam Fareed and sing in social gatherings. The focus of his poetry was *Rohi* (Cholistan) As Zahoor Ahmad Dharija (one of the descendants of Khawaja Ghulam Farid) described that Khawaja Fareed was in love with silence and beauty of *Rohī*. He was truly admirer of *Rohī*

Currently, this trend is on decrease as now local people are becoming more materialistic and are engaged in economic activities.

### **5.5 Spiritual Guides in Cholistan**

In the Subcontinent, Islam spread through *sufīs*, that is why they hold high respect and religious honor. Their role is not merely limited to religion related matters, but it extends to whole of social life of their devotees. Social change resulting from increase in literacy and education, access to media and communication sources and ever-increasing materialism has changed mind set of local people, that is why old values are being replaced with new ones. Education and rise in awareness level has made people rational and critical in thinking. But despite of all this, religious mentors has a central role in social life of people throughout the country. No doubt their role has shifted from preaching and teaching of religion to fulfillment of material and social need of the area. This trend has direct relationship with literacy and awareness, so in those areas where there is illiteracy, religious mentors are more influential and powerful. Cholistan is characterized by illiteracy and massive ignorance, so religious mentors are considered more important.

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<sup>1</sup>. Ferrante, J. (2006). Sociology. Belmont: Thomson Wadsworth, p.525

<sup>2</sup>ibid. p.526



This situation is more pathetic in case of Cholistan, due to lack of educational facilities and other opportunities of interacting with the outer world, Cholistani people blindly worship the religious guides. As they are unable to seek any other solution of the problems appearing in their social life, so they consider their religious guides as 'saviours' and contact them in the time of all sorts of difficulty.

People in Cholistan seek help and guidance from religious guides in nearly all aspects of life. That is why intervention of religious guides covers all aspects of social life of their devotees. Due to lack of religious education and awareness in general, people of Cholistan are superstitious. From snake biting to fatal diseases, solution of everything is being sought from religious guides. Local people share each and every thing with religious guides with a view of finding solution of their problems. Local people have unshakeable trust in them and do not hesitate to share personal and family secrets.

Spiritual guides are highly respected and honored everywhere in Cholistan. Sometimes, when there is possibility of rejection of proposal for marriage, then services of spiritual guide are sought. He is sent to the family of girl, and it becomes hardly possible to deny to him. Local people think that if they will refuse to religious guides, then they will be misfortunate and there is some level of social exclusion for that family which do not honor spiritual guide in anyway.

People of Cholistan consider spiritual guide near and dear to Allah and think that they can get anything done from Almighty Allah through spiritual power of religious guide. As a result of this belief, role of spiritual guide is not limited to this life but life hereafter as well.

It is deemed necessary to gift ordinary things of common usage of the dead one to the spiritual guide which are mostly bought new. Locally, it is believed that in its return, dead one would be forgiven for worldly sins. Miracles and supernatural happenings of spiritual guide are more important than religious knowledge and its self-implementation by him.

Current generation of spiritual guides is not of practicing Muslims but they are equally given respect and honor with the belief that spiritual power of forefathers has been transferred to them and their annoyance will cause harms. People in Cholistan believed that saints were beloved persons of Allah and they could get their problem solved from Him. People of Cholistan were blind devotees of social traditions like there was more worth of spiritual guide than prayer leader because introduction of the role of prayer leader was newer as compared to spiritual guide. Local people were acquainted spiritual guides

and their roles from centuries, so they respected them more than a person who taught them religion teachings and its practices.

In the absence of awareness, religious education and personalities is considered authentic than books and other sources of knowledge, this trend popular the whole area and people of Cholistan perceive that spiritual guides are nearest to Allah and they will get their problem solved through their spiritual power. People who are aware about not even basics of religion, their confirmation about any belief is out of question. Most important thing is their lack of access to facilities which has strengthened their stickiness with supernatural things. Spiritual guides are ultimate authority about religion related matters. Due to perception of spiritual guides as a 'friends of Allah' people want to make them happy to get close to Allah that is why they are also extremely afraid of their anger and annoyance. They offer them animals and much more as a gift just to make them pleased.

Cholistani people use amulet for the solution of and relief from many problems and pains. There are almost no health facilities in Cholistan, that is why local people depended on locally available sources for getting relief from various sufferings. In addition to it, local people also take amulet to avoid any disease or bad omen in future. In some parts of Cholistan, majority of woman and child wear amulet for one or the other reason. Local people used amulet for the cure of serious ailment. Children are make worn more than one amulet, because they were considered more vulnerable and to keep them protected from any health problem in future.

### **Superstitiousness in Cholistan**

Since the ages, human being have developed fear of supernatural happenings, but with passage of time through realization of facts, these fears have been controlled and science has helped people know the root cause and origin of many happenings. In case of greater Cholistan, not to talk about science and modern inventions, concept of formal and general education is not still prevailing there. So there exist many myths in the Cholistan. Natural happenings and phenomenon are attached different meanings and sign, some as lucky sign and some other as baleful which are prevailing from the history of Cholistan.

In Cholistan mostly people believe in superstitions because they were more in contact and dependent on nature and knew human helplessness in front of natural forces. They were also lacking resources to encounter even their basic problems like health and economic problems etc. Lack of facilities and resources for the solution of problem led them to be like this. So in case of any problem they searched for remedies within their circumstances and tried to take precautions to avoid any hard time. That was why they were very

superstitious about evil-eye, bad effect and doings of supernatural powers and enemies. They were also insecure mentally from any forthcoming troubles, so for their mental satisfaction, they believe in superstitions.

### **Common Superstitious Beliefs**

Their belief in supernatural powers compelled them to believe in reality of good or bad signs of things, human and events and so they protected themselves from those bad signs. They did not have any concern with those things were related with their religion or not they blindly followed them because they did not have any religious knowledge. They follow many strong myths about good or bad signs of different days. They strongly believed in precautions to avoid bad luck. Although in lesser Cholistan some people were not strict in following these superstitions but because of long attachment with superstitions, they still have some influence of doubts related with these superstitions. They believed different things like:

They did not go for condolence on Sundays

They did not sell animals or Jewelry on Wednesday

On Wednesday they avoid exchange of money

If any person was leaving for an important task, they did not ask reason of his travel

If a person was leaving, they did not call him from back

If mustard oil flows down they become happy and considered it as a good gesture

If milk got waste, they considered it very bad sign

In case of wind storm, they put broom under cart

If wind was not blowing and they wanted it to blow, they count name of seven bald men with holding breath they tie up a knot with each name of bald person and after completing seven knots they opened these knots.

If anybody got died in room, they did not bring dead body out of room they break the wall opposite the door and brought dead body out

They removed bangles and Jewelry of widow on death of her husband

They did not celebrate three marriages in a single day especially of three brothers and sisters they thought that one of them will remain issueless

After which daughter baby boy born they thought her as lucky and made her wear many gold ornaments

If anybody went out of home they did not sweep after him

They avoid sweeping home in last part of after noon (Asar prayer) as it was considered extremely bad.

At time of evening prayer (Maghrib) open their windows and doors

If black wasp came inside the room, they thought that this was thirsty soul of any dead man and sprinkled water on that.

If any men got two marriages, they thought that if he would get married third time he would die.

In lesser superstitions strictly but in case of violation of these superstitions they also remain doubtful.

Hindu also wear amulet and were more superstitious about different days about sound of donkey. They kept waiting for good sign and afraid of bad sign. They made vows of slathering animals in front of their gods.

They perceived it a sign for bad fortune if any animal crossed wedding procession from left side

They considered uttering of animal behind a person who was going for any task good for accomplishment of that person's task

If animal utter in front of any person who is going for any task, they consider it bad for accomplishment of their work

If animal utter from right side of the person who was going for work, they thought that concerned person of that man will not be available.

They consider lunar-eclipse punishment of moon due to its sin. They worshiped cow to remove bad effect of that. If in any home cow got died, they thought it as baleful one

As they both Muslim and Hindu thought that groom can be victim of supernatural powers, so they kept any iron made thing especially knife in days of marriage. Religion for them was just a shelter to save themselves from evil and difficulties and nothing else.

### **Conclusion:**

It's natural behavior of human being, to seek protection from supernatural and beyond his/her control things. To save themselves for supernatural powers they seek safety from religion. They consult with *peers* as mode of solid solution for their problems. So In Cholistan, people visited *peers* to find solutions of their problems, they followed the instructions strictly given by *peer*, they used sugar balls, threads and water or honey with holy reading as they were asked to do because according to their believe, it would not function if taken otherwise against the instructions. This showed the intensity of fears on their part about supernatural things. Some of the Hindus living with Muslims were also following the same practices as they worshipped any seen object. They visited shrines and made vows.