

# Role of Holy Shrines and Spiritual Arts in People's Education about Imam Mahdi

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## Abstract

The idea of education or educating the masses is a vital force in bringing change in any society of a country. In broader perspective education is considered as an essential instrument in transforming the very basis of society in terms of creating opportunities, and awareness among the people. This paper is the first-ever exploration of a unique way that helps people's education about Mahdism faith, and its requirements. That is, construction of *Shabeeh* and *Zareeh Mubarak* (a replica of Imam Husain's shrine of Imam Hussain a.s. Imam Ali a.s and other Aemma a.s) in Khairpur and Hyderabad districts of Sindh, Pakistan. The study uses multiple research methods to collect the data which include review of unpublished data and literature, and photography of the holy shrines and places of spiritual importance. Besides these tools, a questionnaire is administered to collect key information regarding the perceptions, practices and outcomes of the visitors (*zairaan*) of these holy places where any *Zareeh* or *Shabeeh* has been constructed. The study explores how the visitors receive any explicit or implicit education about the 12<sup>th</sup> Imam a.j. when they visit these places. The study also explains how a *Zareeh* or *Shabeeh* or other holy place also acted as institute where a series of lectures and training were provided to both Shias and Sunnis to understand the message of Imams of Ahlebaiyt a.s. and how this serves as formal and informal training center. It is also traced that construction of one *Zareeh* and *Shabeeh* resulted in the creation of many such *Zareehs* and *Shabeehs* through *Zairaan* (visitors).

**Keywords:** Mahdism, Holy Shrines, Spiritual Arts, *Zareeh* , *Shabeeh* , Education

## Introduction

Sindh is a host to a number of religious buildings. Almost every important town and village has holy shrines associated with both Shias and Sunnis. They are frequented by people on a number of occasions to seek the blessings and pray for their wishes being fulfilled. This paper investigates the role of holy shrines to educate people about Imam Mahdi a.s. This research is based on my fieldwork which I conducted in the months of October and November 2014. However, I have been doing research on these holy shrines associated with Shia faith since 2008. Anthropological research tools were used to get information from the respondents regarding the perception, rituals and outcomes of the

visitors to the *Zareeh* and *Shabeeh Mubarak* (holy shrines) in the districts of Khairpur and Hyderabad. *Zareeh* and *Shabeeh* are replica of the holy shrines of Imam Ali a.s, Imam Hussain a.s and other Imams a.s. Prior to discussing the role of these *Zareeh* and *Shabeeh Mubarak* in educating people about the Twelve Imams a.s, It is necessary to have an insight into the historical development of these *Zareeh* and *Shabeeh Mubarak* in Sindh. The first *Zareeh* and *Shabeeh Mubarak* (replica of Imam Husain's shrine at Karbala) was constructed at Tando Agha in Hyderabad. It is believed to have been constructed by Mir Fateh Ali Khan Talpur in 1785. Mir Fateh Ali Khan Talpur was the founder of the Talpur dynasty, a dynasty which followed the Shia faith. Another *Zareeh Mubarak* was constructed at Tando Noor Muhammad in Hyderabad. Apart from these, *Shabeeh Mubarak* of Imam Hussain's a.s shrine was made at Tando Mir Muhammad in Hyderabad which was made of wood (Fig.1). However, *Shabeehs* at Tando Agha and Tando Noor Muhammad were made of gold which were provided by the Talpur rulers of Sindh (Hami 1994: 126).



**Fig. 1 Shabeeh (replica) of Imam Hussain's a.s shrine at Hyderabad, Sindh**

The Talpur rulers of Sindh constructed *Zareehs* and *Shabeehs* for the poor people who could not visit the holy shrines of Imam Hussain at Karbala, Imam Ali at Najaf and Imam Ali Reza at Mashhad. Few People started visiting these shrines at the beginning. But within a few years this number increased to a great extent and few more *Zareeh* and *Shabeeh Mubarak* were constructed by Talpur rulers in other towns of Sindh. These replicas of the holy shrines of Imams a.s served two purposes at the beginning. The first,

these acted as symbolic representations of the original shrines at Karbala, Najaf and Mashhad where people came to visit daily and the second religious lectures were arranged regularly to educate the people about the religion. Therefore, these *Zareehs* served both functions of shrines and to some extent of *madrasa*. This continued up to 1980. After this, a new trend was taking place when *Zareehs*, *Shabeehs* and *madrasa* were separately built. Earlier as discussed above *Zareehs* served both purposes of holy shrines and *madrastas*. This does not mean that special lecture series ceased in these *Zareehs*. A new style of architecture emerged. Earlier a square building mainly comprising two square rooms were built over the *Zareeh* and *Shabeeh Mubarak*. In the first room there was a *Zareeh* and *Shabeeh* and the second contained the valuable gifts given by the Talpur rulers to *Zareeh* and *Shabeeh Mubarak* which were displayed on special occasions of Muharram or on the visit by the foreign guests. These square buildings were replaced by rectangular buildings in which more rooms were added. One such rectangular building over a *Zareeh* and *Shabeeh Mubarak* of Imam Hussain a.s. was constructed at Khairpur (Fig.2 & 3). This *Shabeeh Mubarak* was constructed by the last ruler of Khairpur State. It is believed to have first built in 1953 and later renovated by the same ruler in 1970 (Hami 1994:242).



Fig. 2 An impressive building over Shabeeh and Zareeh of Imam Hussain at Khairpur, Sindh

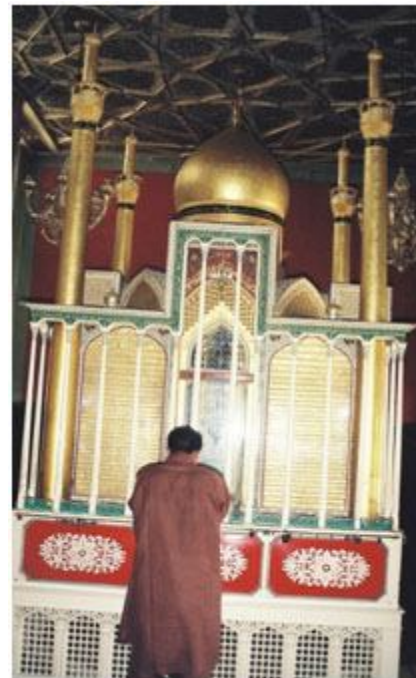


Fig. 3 A devotee at the Shabeeh of Imam Hussain in Khairpur, Sindh

### Holy Zareeh and Shabeeh Mubarak of Imam Hussain's a.s Shrine at Khairpur

This replica of Imam Hussain's shrine is a rectangular building which was constructed by the last Talpur ruler of Khairpur state. There are three elegant porticoes to enter into the building. The main gate which opens to the west is named after Imam Ali (Fig.4). A

beautiful wooden painted gate, known as Imam Hussain Gate, opens to the *Shabeeh* and *Zareeh Mubarak* of Imam Hussain. This is the *Shabeeh* (replica) of Imam Hussain's shrine at Karbala. Near the *Shabeeh Mubarak* is located a hall where sermons and lectures are delivered to the faithful.



Fig. 4 Imam Ali Gate of Shabeeh and Zareeh Mubarak of Imam Hussain at Khairpur

According to the royal family of Talpurs of Khairpur, Mir Murad Ali Talpur, the last ruler of Khairpur State sent two of his masons to Karbala in 1953 to visit the holy shrine and imitate it at Khairpur. It is believed that when they came back after pilgrimage from Karbala, they began constructing the building in the same year. The building and replica was made by these two masons. The façade of the building is flanked by two minarets resembling with the holy shrine of Imam Hussain.

Many people visit *Zareeh* and *Shabeeh Mubarak* daily. Some people come from Khairpur and neighbouring villages and towns and the others come from far-flung villages and towns of different districts of Sindh. This *Shabeeh* and *Zareeh* are greatly venerated by people. They believe that their visit to this holy place redress their everyday problem. This

belief increased their visits to the holy place of *Shabeeh* and *Zareeh Mubarak*. Most of the people bring their ailing children to the holy place of *Zareeh Mubarak* which they believe that their children will heal quickly as soon as they touch the replica of Imam Husain's shrine. Not only the parents of ailing children visit the holy place, but those parents who wish for children also visit the *Zareeh Mubarak*. The main rituals performed at the holy place of *Zareeh Mubarak* are the prayers (*namaz*) *Manat* (wish). In order to their wishes being fulfilled by Imam Hussain a.s, devotees knot the threads at his *Zareeh Mubarak*. Apart from these rituals, or the ritual of *Areezon* is also performed on the auspicious day of 15<sup>th</sup> Sha'ban. On this day people write *Areezon* (pleas or requests) to Imam Mahdi a.s and leave their pleas written on the paper near the replica of Imam Hussain's shrine.

The timings of *Ziarat* of *Shabeeh* and *Zareeh Mubarak* are from 8:00 a.m to 5:00 pm. usually, there is a lecture in the evening on different aspects of religion. Both Shias and Sunnis attend these lectures. On every Thursday and Friday evenings, especial lectures are arranged on the Twelve Imams a.s for which religious scholar is always invited to give a talk on the lives of the Twelve Imams a.s. The basic idea behind these lectures is to educate the people who do not know much about their religion. In this age of globalization, many people are more prone to entertainment programmes on the electronic media. In order to create awareness among the people, the caretakers of *Shabeeh* and *Zareeh* hold lectures on different aspects of religion.

The lecture series has left a positive impact on both sects Shias and Sunnis. The first important thing is the tolerance. Both tolerate each other and share the same space discussing the host of issues on the Twelve Imams a.s. Interestingly, some people who are poets have composed poetry on the twelve Imams a.s. This is unpublished literature that a very few people are familiar with. In the past during the reign of the Talpurs these *Zareeh* and *Shabeeh Mubaraks* provided a space to the poets who after attending the series of lectures which were then arranged by the royal family of the Talpurs, composed poetry on the Imams a.s. Themes of this poetry were Imam Husain a.s and Karbala, Imam Ali a.s and his bravery, and Imam Mahdi a.s and his appearance.

This tradition still continues but is not organized or systematic as it was during the reign of the Talpurs and even in the British period. The poetry on the Imams a.s is still being composed. These holy places of *Zareeh* and *Shabeeh* play dual roles, 1) it provides a space to the visitors for *Ziarat* and 2) and at the same time, it educates people about the religion which is peculiarly of holy spaces in Sindh only. Normally, this only takes place in the *Madrassa* where religious education is imparted to the students but it also being taught through a series of lectures at the holy places of *Zareeh* and *Shabeeh Mubarak* in different towns of Sindh.

### **Explicit and implicit Education about Imam Mahdi a.s at Zareeh and Shabeeh Mubarak**

Those who visit the *Zareeh* and *Shabeeh Mubarak* of Khairpur and Hyderabad also get educated about Imam Mahdi a.s. Usually people go to the caretaker of the *Zareeh* and

*Shabeeh* (shrine) who is also a very knowledgeable person. If anyone interested to know more about Imam Mahdi a.s, he/she is educated about Imam Mahdi a.s. Moreover, interested people are given booklets to read them. He/she is also told about the lecture series on the twelfth Imam a.s which is arranged by the caretaker of *Zareeh Mubarak*. The basic idea of arranging lectures on religion especially on the Twelfth Imam is to educate the young generation who are more prone to entertainment like movies etc. The audience comprises both Sunnis and Shias. Another idea is also to educate the Sunnis who do not know much about Imam Mahdi a.s. Every Sunni visiting the *Zareeh* and *Shabeeh Mubarak* has a very inadequate knowledge about Imam Mahdi a.s. In a religiously tolerant society of Sindh both Shias and Sunnis attend the lectures together. Therefore, holy spaces act as both a shrine and an institute. This identity of the shrine as institute led to a growth of many small and large *Zareeh* and *Shabeeh Mubarak*s in different towns of Sindh. However, a large number of *Shabeeh* and *Zareeh Mubarak*s were constructed in Khairpur, Sukkur and Hyderabad districts. These replicas of holy shrines educate people about *Ahlebaiyt* a.s. Moreover, people also get an education about Imam Madhi as at various shrines of sacred prints of Imam Ali a.s (Qadimgah Imam Ali a.s). The prominent Qadimgah Imam Ali a.s is located at Hyderabad. These footprints were brought from Iran to Hyderabad during the reign of Mir Fateh Ali Khan Talpur who was a friend of Fateh Ali Qajar of Iran. According to family history of the Talpurs, sacred foot prints of Imam Ali a.s was given by the Iranian King to Mir Fateh Ali Talpur (1783-1795). Mir Fateh Ali Talpur kept them at Hyderabad and built an impressive building over them.

The ruler built a special room inside *Pakka Qilla* (fort) for these holy foot prints beside a mosque for *Ziyarat*. After *namaz* (prayers) on Thursday night the women of the Talpur family used to worship these footprints. The common people had no chance to see them except on *Eid of Noroz* .



**Fig. 5** View of under construction shrine of footprints of Imam Ali at Hyderabad

The last ruler of the Talpur dynasty in Sindh Mir Naseer Khan Talpur (1829-1843), on the request of the people, built a shrine of footprints of Imam Ali a.s and kept these stones in

it, where people could see them. This shrine was open for the general public. Before the partition of Indo-Pak, this place was known as “Shah ja Qadam” (footprints of Shah) but with the passage of time it became known as “Qadamgah Imam Ali a.s”.

The visitors and devotees come not only from Pakistan but from India, Afghanistan and many other countries, for paying tribute to the hero of Islam. All the devotees come to pray and to seek their heartily wishes. Their wishes are based on their devoted beliefs about Qadamgah (Fig.5 & 6).



Fig. 6 Interior view of Qadamgah (footprints) Imam Ali at Hyderabad

There are many sacred places at Qadamgah Imam Ali a.s which include: shrine of the footprints of Imam Ali a.s, *Alam Pak*, *Shabeeh* of shrine of Hazrat Ghazi Abbas Alamdar a.s (Fig.7). All these sacred places are crowded with people who come to pray. Apart from these holy spaces, relics donated by different influential people have also been kept in one of the halls of the shrine which is open for the devotees. These relics include the glazed tiles, coverings of the shrines of Imams a.s and many others things.



Fig. 7 A devotee at Zareeh Mubarak of Hazrat Abbas Alamdar in Qadamgah Imam Ali shrine, Hyderabad

This is also a holy shrine for both Shias and Sunnis where they also get educated about various aspects of religion including the twelfth Imam, Imam Mahdi a.s. Today, this is one of the holiest shrines in Sindh where not only Muslim but also Hindus and Christians visit the shrine. The Hindus and Christians believe that Imam Ali is Wali (friend) of Allah and he would solve their problem that they visit the shrine regularly. This is one of the peculiarities of Sindhi society where people of different religion caste and creed visit the footprint shrine of Imam Ali a.s. The visitors tie pieces of cloth as *Manat* (plea) at the *Zareeh Mubarak* of Hazrat Abbas Alamdar. People also tie pieces of cloth at the *Zareeh Mubarak* and pray at *Zareeh Mubarak*. These people also attend the lectures which often are held at the Qadamgah Imam Ali a.s. According to the caretaker of the shrine through these lectures, many people have converted to Islam. The lectures include various topics on Islam. Some lectures on the twelve Imams a.s have also been held at the shrine. These Hindu and Christians believe that imam Mahdi a.s is real Messiah who will appear soon and will solve their problems. This has drawn many people to shrine to attend the lectures and subsequently convert them to Islam.

It was at this holy shrine of Qadamgah Imam Ali a.s that many eminent poets of Talpur period (1783-1843) composed poetry on *Ahlebaiyt* a.s. One finds a large number of poems being composed by Talpur period poets. Even in the British period (1843-1947), one finds several poets composing poetry on Imam Mahdi a.s.



Fig. 8 Jhoola (cradle) of Shahzada Ali Asghar at Qadamgah Imam Ali shrine, Hyderabad

Many sacred things associated with holy shrines of Imam Ali a.s, Imam Hussain a.s, Hazrat Abbas a.s are kept in the separate rooms at the holy shrine of Qadamgah Imam Ali a.s. Some pebble stones of Samarra are also kept in the shrine. These things are venerated by people who visit Qadamgah. Apart from the footprints of Imam Ali a.s, replica of his *Shabeeh Mubarak* has also been kept in the shrine where people come to pay homage and pray at the *Zareeh Mubarak*. They come to get the blessings of Imam Ali a.s. Close to the *Zareeh* is kept *jhoola* (cradle) of Ali Asghar a.s (Fig. 8) which is made of metal. The



wooden cradle of Ali Aghar a.s (Fig.9) is kept in the Zareeh (Fig.10) and *Shabeeh Mubarak* of Imam Hussain a.s at Kot Diji (Fig.11) which was made by the Mir Faiz Muhammad, the ruler of Khairpur State (Hami 1994: 245). There are some valuable objects kept at this *Zareeh* and *Shabeeh Mubarak* which were donated by the royal family of Talpurs. This is the second largest *Zareeh Mubarak* in Sindh after Khairpur. The *Zareeh Mubarak* and *Shabeeh* of Kot Diji are only visited by the royal family members of Talpur dynasty. This *Zareeh Mubarak* is close to the royal palace of the Talpurs. Due to security issues of the royal family, only the royal family members have access to visit the shrine. The general public can only visit the *Zareeh* and *Shabeeh Mubarak* at Khairpur which was also built by the Talpur ruler.



Fig. 9 Jhoola (cradle) of Shahzada Ali Asghar at Shabeeh of Imam Hussain, Kot Diji, Khairpur



Fig. 10 Zareeh Mubarak of Imam Hussain at Kot Diji, Khairpur



**Fig.11 Shabeeh (replica) of Imam Hussain's Roza at Kot Diji, Khairpur**

All these *Zareehs*, *Shabeehs* and sacred spaces associated with footprints of Imam Ali a.s served as informal training centres to the *Zaireen* (visitors). Over a period of time, these holy places of *Zareeh* resulted into numerous small and large *Zareehs* at various places in Sindh. These *Zareehs* and *Shabeehs* of Imam Husain's a.s shrine provided spiritual links between Imams a.s and his followers. Through his *Zareeh* and *Shabeeh*, *Zaireen* spiritually felt to be at holy shrines of Imam Ali a.s at Najaf, Imam Hussain's a.s shrine at Karbala and Imam Reza a.s at Mashhad.

The art of painting holy shrines also influenced the artists of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries that they painted the holy shrines on walls of the tombs and mosques. The earliest mosque that depicts the holy shrines of Imams a.s is located at

Qubo Shahdad in Sanghar district of Sindh. Apart from the mosque, one finds a number of tombs with the representations of the holy cities of Makkah, Madina, Karbala and Najaf in Kalhora (1700-1783) and Talpur period (1783-1843) tombs. This art of painting of holy shrines still continues. The more recent tomb, built in 2007 is that of Shadi Shaheed in Khairpur district which depicts important holy shrines and mosques of Islam. There are two rows of depictions of holy shrines and mosques on the domed ceiling of the tomb. The first row depicts the holy Kaaba, Masjid Nabawi etc. The second row depicts the shrines of Imam Ali a.s (Fig.12), Imam Hussain a.s etc.



Fig. 12 Painting of Imam Ali's Roza in the tomb of Shadi Shaheed (built in 2007) in Khairpur, Sindh

## Conclusion

It is important to note that Shabeeh and Zareeh Mubaraks played a significant role in educating the people about the holy shrines of Imams a.s. Moreover, these holy places also serve as institutions where lectures are given on the different topics of religion. People get motivated by a series of lectures at these places. They get educated about the Twelve Imam a.s too. The institutes like Zareeh and Shabeeh are conduits for spreading the messages of Islam. The education element in these holy places has seen unprecedented construction of Zareeh and Shabeeh Mubaraks in small and large towns of Sindh. Almost every Imam Bara in upper Sindh houses a Zareeh and Shabeeh Mubarak. There are two main factors that led to growth of these holy shrines. Firstly, the greater

Iranian influence on Shia community in Sindh has resulted into construction of more Zareeh and Shabeeh Mubaraks. The structures over these holy relics also resemble the Iranian architecture. The secondly, the rich Shia businessmen has also been contributing to this growth of the holy shrines in Sindh. The apparent motive behind these sponsorships is to build more holy shrines to impart religious education and subsequently convert non-Shia population.

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