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## **Socio-Spiritual and Economic Practices of Mazar (Holy Shrine) Culture in Sylhet City, Bangladesh**

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### **Abstract**

*Sylhet is called ‘Spiritual Capital’ of Bangladesh. Many Mazars (holy shrines) are situated in this place. However, Mazar has a distinctive culture, which influences the overall culture of Sylhet. The devotee of Mazar from across the country visits the holy shrines and manages their socio-spiritual and cultural practices for preventing physical and mental disorder as well as development of upcoming good fortune. The study explores the interrelationship of social-cultural and economic practices in terms of the diverse problems of Mazar culture (holy shrine) in Sylhet city. In this study, Hazrat ShahJalal (RA) Mazar is selected as the study area. Researcher has employed in-depth interview and observation methods for understanding the spiritual, cultural and commercial dealing of Mazar. The random sampling method is used and 110 sample sizes are selected for this study. This study shows that Mazar is not only a spiritual space, but also a commercial space with various business activities are running based on it. The devotees offer money, materials and livestock on Mazar to solve the hindrance of life as believe the Mazar has supernatural power. Mazar has a lot of earnings in every day and many families are living depends on it. There is no strict rule of Government for managing Mazar peacefully. Therefore, the respective legal authority should take harmonious and integrated efforts for the benefit of devotees and the purity of Mazar’s environment.*

**Keywords:** *Sylhet city, Holy Shrine, Mazar culture, Socio-spiritual practice, Economic Practices.*

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**Introduction:** People awake their inner enthusiasm, stimulation or inspiration through performing religious rituals. From time immemorial people have been visiting various historical places, sacred places or sacred objects, keep homage and show devotion through various ritual practice. People make a self-peaceful image, and also purifying his mind. As well as they are running to Mazar (holy shrine) for the salvation of social and financial, political and health problems. Such rituals are practiced around religious places, which are very important in social and religious life. In many cases, too much emotion, benevolence, great respect and love have glorified the holy places. Mazar (Shrine) as a religious space is very important in Bangladesh, India, Pakistan, Iran, and Iraq. Through various rituals Mazar (shrine) is being connected to the world with the spiritual world. So, the place becomes attractive and visually appealing to the people.

The Sufi saint, the wise or the religious individual gives religious spirit, religious knowledge and guidance to the people. Generally, people acknowledge them as 'Pir' (guide). They believe them as Pir-Buzurgs (spiritual persons), or Sufis, who preach the religious doctrine or ideology, are called them Sophist. Their ideologies are capitalized by the devotees and the consequences of it have made Khanqah or Dargah (holy shrine) for religious worship. These Khanqahs and Dargahs form a kind of religious space. People think that space has a super spiritual power, which is incarnated to the 'Karamati' (mysticism) of Peer and Buzurg. So, people from different regions are attracted to this Sufi's Karamati and Sufism. People try to understand the mysticism of Dargah or Khanqaha and follow its realms to spread every corner of life for succession. The Sufi-sadhoks (hermit) are respected by the devotees and follows their precepts. Even after the death of religious Sufi and Pir, believers think that the super spiritual power of Pir still exists. People make a tombstone in the burial place of Pirs, Buzurgs, or Sufis as 'Mazar' to memorize and acknowledge their super spiritual power. Generally, people and devotees come to Mazar (shrine) to perform various rituals. The believers or devotees think that the intellectuals or eminent spiritual people never die. Believers believe that these persons can help their followers through their 'Karamat' or superstitions. When people face to worldly and cosmic issues solve their problems – dangers, needs, failures etc, they come to the Mazar (shrine) and hope to meet the needs of the people with the help of Karamat (mysticism) in favor of the blessing of Pir-Bazurg-Olly (saint). As a result, a special culture is formed around the Mazar (shrine). It can be called the culture of Mazar (shrine). The Mazar is not only the pilgrimage place of religious rituals, but also the religious rituals of Mazar have socio-economic, political, and cultural relations. The Mazar should not be seen only from a religious perspective. It should also be considered the economic activities, which is the main subject of this research.

Anthropological research on Sylhet's Mazar culture has not been enough. Without anthropological perspective has some secondary information, but this work has been done solely by individual initiatives and curiosity. Ali, S. M. (2003) highlighted the arrival of Shahjalal (RA) and the culture of Sylhet. In the book he highlighted that the arrival of the Sufis in Sylhet not only played an important role in the spread of Islam, but also they were

able to make a huge impact on the hearts of public and in the society. But the author did not mention the economic and ritual aspects of this society and mystic event of Hazrat Shah Jalal (RA) or other Sufis in here. Chowdhury, D. N. A. (1997) thinks that the glorious history of Sylhet would not have been written if the Sufis were not in Sylhet. People of Sylhet and whole Bangladesh are still inspired by the ideals and philosophies of Sufi saints. If we look the famous institution and naming of those institutions, then we could find the rituals and practices of people get inspiration through Pir-Bazurg-Oli. The author discussed the positive effects of the religious and social life by the arrival of Sufi saints, but he did not mention the twisted issues of devotees' interest in social, political and economic life.

Karim, A. (1994) presented the doctrines, philosophies, attitudes, practices of Sufi saints. In his book, the author discusses the political, social, and religious influences of Sufi saints by mentioning what purposes the Sufi saints came at different times in Bangladesh. Author gives importance on the process of Islamization in his discussion. Ali, S. M. (2003) mentioned in his book, how people make 'grave' overwhelming and attract people to them more. People come to these Mazars (shrines) or religious establishments with a different purpose. People think that the Awlias or saints know the unseen or have supernatural power, so financially and mentally challenged people expect hope from them. In the exchange of good hope people offer money and resources to the grave, Mazar, Darbar and khanqahs. People believe that Mazars' clay, sand, drought grass and leave have supernatural power and those things demonstrate Mazar rituals. The objectives set out in this study by reviewing the above literature. It is significant to evaluate social, cultural and economic activities surrounding the Mazar (shrine). By observing the devotees' activities with the care taker of Mazar have to find out the contrast, conflict, power and authority of Mazar authority, which is related to earnings of Mazar including distribution process.

**Study Area:** The spiritual capital of Bangladesh is called Sylhet district, which is situated in the northeast part of Bangladesh. In the Sylhet region, there have 360 Oli-Awlia Mazar (graveyards) is located, in which the famous and well-known Mazar (shrine) is Hazrat ShahJalal (RA) and the shrine of Shahparan (RA). Religious people, those are devoted to Mazar come to Sylhet to visit these two Mazar (shrines) from different parts of Bangladesh. Besides, the importance of these two shrines in Sylhet's socio-economic, cultural, religious and political life is immense. The history and tradition of Sylhet region are mixed with Sufi-saints, religious personality's dedication and self-sacrifice. In this study Hazrat Shahjalal (RA) Mazar is chosen for study, because it is situated in the middle of Sylhet city. The city dwellers, caretakers of Mazar and visitor interaction make it more festive in the field of social, economical, cultural and commercial dealings, though it has some internal discrepancy of the managerial system. It is said that Hazrat Shahjalal (RA) Mazar (shrine) has more spiritual power (hot) according to believers that's why visitors and devotees always gathered here. The study area is a religious and spiritual place as well as places of tourism, which has great importance to devotees and general visitors equally.

**Methodology:** In order to gather information this study has employed qualitative approach through observation and in-depth interview method. To make interview for this study has

selected some informants such as the Mazars’ inspectors, visitors, businessmen and Mazar operators/employees around the shrine. Oral life history also followed to collect information from the Mazar operators/employees. The simple Random Sampling method has been chosen for the selection of samples in this research. To collect data from the Mazar (shrine) 110 people have been selected as samples following probability sampling method. The research work has been done using the anthropological methods, including researcher disciplinary knowledge and understanding with group discussion and interviewing the informants. The collected data have been analyzed through the inductive approach. The information are thematized and categorized as research objectives narrow downing the details information of the participants.

**Discussion:**

**Socio- economic background in Mazar (shrine):** The Mazar (shrine) of Hazrat Shah Jalal (RA) is seen, different regions people, people of different age, profession with different purposes. As the Muslims come to the Mazar (shrine), the Hindus or other people of religion also came to pay homage. Some people come to fulfill their vow (Manat) and offer money, to fulfill their desires, to pray for Dargah, to get treatment for jinn-ghosts (evil-spirit); someone comes to visit only, and some people come to visit in the time of their dealings of different kind of trade and commerce. Table 1 demonstrates below the demographic analysis of people coming to the shrine. It provides information that, in the gender basis, men come into Mazar more than female. There is no number of women coming out alone. Because of social, cultural, religious beliefs and restrictions women cannot go to single religious establishments alone. On the basis of age, two-thirds of the total arrivals in the 21-40 age groups are expected to come to the shrine. In this case, only half of the people came to visit the shrine, the rest people purpose is to visit the shrine as well as other tourist destinations in Sylhet. From this it can say, as far as religious views people are coming in the Mazar, the same way people (45%) are coming to the Mazar as a place to go.

Demographic analysis of Table-1 graveyard visitors (Akhtar, 2016)

Charateristic	Percentage	Charateristic	Percentage
<b>Gender</b>		marriage status	
male	63.33	married	56.67
female	36.67	unmarried	43.33
<b>age</b>		<b>area</b>	
21-30	35.83	Barisal	09.17
31-40	32.46	chittagong	19.19
41-50	20.83	dhaka	25.83
51-60	13.33	khulna	18.33
<b>purpose</b>		Rajshahi	14.17

travel	45.84	Rangpur	07.50
Visit to the mazar	43.56	others	05.83
others	10.60	<b>travel type</b>	
		Group/Education	61.66
		personal/family	38.34

Among the places from where people come to the shrine of Sylhet, Dhaka (25.83%) and Chittagong (19.17%). In this case, the medium of communication and distance is an important reason. Road and rail communications from Dhaka and Chittagong to Sylhet are very good, and for this there are more people coming from these two areas because they have direct transport and communication. Besides, the shrines in Sylhet have also been equally significant for them because in Chittagong have the Darbar Sharif of Hazrat Bayezid Bostami (RA) with this image here also have the shrine culture. Likewise, because of the tomb of Khan Jahan Ali (RA) in Khulna, a large number of Khulna region people also come in Sylhet to graveyard visit. People of Rangpur and Barisal not come as like as Chittagong or Khulna, these two regions not developed any significant Mazar (shrine) and distance also a big reason. Traveling to Sylhet Mazar (shrine) is the highest percentage (61.66%) of the group travel than family or solo travelers. Generally, 30-40 people of the same region and men-women groupwise or in a body came to Sylhet by hiring the bus. As a result the travel becomes much cheaper than, as well as security is more available. Besides, it is easy to go to other tourist places. There is more number of families and individual trips seen in the Sylhet region.

**Mazar (shrine) centric trade and commerce:** In the Mazar (shrine) of Hazrat Shahjalal (RA) has many people from all over the country daily. As a result, business and commercial establishments have been developed around the shrine. Usually where people meet or gather in this place develop much economic activity. And for this way, a special business or trade is operated around the Mazar (shrine). These businesses based on the shrine have brought economic change of one class of people in the Sylhet city. Hotel business is one of the most prominent businesses which developed through the Mazar. Hotel business has been developed to accommodate those people who are getting to visit in the shrine from different regions of the country. Most of Sylhet's hotels are located around the shrine of Hazrat Shahjalal (RA). Another big business around the shrine is the meal hotel or restaurant business. The visitors or tourist in the shrine, they are essentially the main consumer of these restaurants. From general quality hotels and restaurants up to good quality hotels and Chinese restaurants have emerged which provide quality residential and food to the boarder around the shrine area. Sylheti is famous in the restaurant business in abroad. The cosmetic impact of this is seen in Sylhet town. However, the hotels of Sylhet have been built mainly around the shrine. That is because of the shrine the hotel business in Sylhet has developed and makes economic growth. The hotel business around the shrine has created employment for many people, improving the quality of life. Various types of hand and cottage industries, shops have been built around the shrines of Hazrat Shahjalal (RA) in Sylhet. Various types

of cane-made items, Manipuri indigenous cloths, wood and stone showpiece and various types of jewelry are also sold here. It is to be believed that the shops around the shrine were not developed only from religious perspective; these shops have been developed considering the interest of tourists and purchasers. Tourists also visit the shrine or pray as well as to collect the traditional items of Sylhet as a memory, to give gifts to others make shopping from the Mazar market. Transportation business has been developed to ease the journey of visitors to the shrine. From directly Dargah (shrines of Hazrat Shahjalal (RA)) to the tomb of Shah Paran (RA), there is a transportation service like four-stroke, leguna etc. Besides, there are all types of transport ticket counters in different areas of the country. Ticketing counters opened in the minds of tourists ticket cutting and transportation facilities. As the transportation business benefited, along with from the hotel business to it has a positive impact on all businesses. As a result, everyone gets the benefit. Hotel businesses, restaurants, transport sectors, handicrafts business etc, are indirectly related to the shrine (Holy place) activities. There is also some established business directly related to Mazar culture, directly related to Mazar rituals. Tasbie (counting chain), hats, agarbati (incense), candle, halua (sweet), batasa (lollipop) etc. are seen in this business cycle. These are called Mazar's material culture.

**Mazar's own income, expenditure and allocation:** Countless devotees and visitors who come regularly visit the shrine, their vows (Manat), donations and grants are basically income of the shrine. The devotees of Mazar and other people, donate in Mazar in blind faith. It is found in the study that all the items that have Hazrat Shahjalal's touch, people pay homage on it and make a donation to those things and hope that it will help to fulfill their desires. Many people even donate money directly to the shrine. The water that comes out from the shallow well of Hazrat Shahjalal (RA) on the two sides of it, the devotees of Mazar and other religious people keep money on it. In this way five places were found by visiting the shrine (Figure 1), where people donate money without count. Basically the shrine's massive source of income is from here. The findings showed that the earned money of the Mazar is shared among the family members of the shrine who are the Khadem (custodian) of the shrine. They claim that they are the legal successor of the "Bari" property. According to the Khadem family, this 'Bari' tradition is coming from the time of Hazrat Shahjalal (RA.). During the lifetime of Hazrat Shahjalal (RA), his gifts and offerings of the devotees and ashaks (worshipper) used to come and how they were distributed, in the continuation of it the Mazar "Bari" is distributed nowadays also. Currently there have 250 members in the Khadem family. These Khadem families live in the neighborhood of the shrine. This area is known as Dargah Mahalla (Khadem family's house). The accumulated profits from the Mazar are distributed among the members of this Mahalla (family area). Every year a list is prepared for distribution of money. According to the Bengali year, the money raised from Boishakh to Chaitra month is distributed among the scheduled members every month.



Figure 1: Collect money from different places of the Mazar and the picture of donated money.

However, deposited 'Bari' does not distribute among khadem family, few selected days per month. It is deposited in the shrine fund. With this money the expenses incurred in the maintenance of the Mazar are payable to the employee including the salaries. Though Khadem family has own logical demand of taking 'Bari' but there has not any historical evidence to prove their statements.

Through keen investigation, it is known that the people around the shrine, many of the Khadem family members have become very wealthy by getting 'Bari'(donated money) property. The devotees remember Oli-Auliya's Mazar (shrine) and Khanqahs during their crisis moments. Common people or devotees do free hand donation (money or wealth) to

Mazar (shrine), but Khadem family uses this money or wealth for their own needs. It is said that many people of Khadem family have become a millionaire by using this money. Khadem family has hundreds and crores properties of monies in Sylhet city such as hospitals, hotel business and different shopping malls, even some families have an apartment or flat-house in the elite areas of Dhaka city. Some of them also have home and business establishments in Britain. It is known that, all of these properties come from the devotee's donation of Mazar. Visitors of the shrine or devotees also give livestock every day in the shrine. 'Life rather than life' many people go to the shrine with this thinking and donate these animals. Sometimes Khadem (custodian) member of the Mazar cuts throat of those animals and cook meat for feeding destitute, bagger and general people in Mazar langarkhana (kitchen). When gather large quantities of livestock then sometimes they sell those animals for Mazar maintenance, and also their private purpose. Besides this, everyday candles, Agarbati (incense), golapazal (perfume water) etc are given by devotees in the shrine. However, items that were donated as a donation and those items are sold by Khadem family members at some low prices in the Mazar gate stores. This way a profitable business has been developed at the Mazar Gate. The Khadem family members believe that there is no injustice in selling the donated gifts in this shrine campus. According to their statement, "In earlier days Mazar has not electric power supply, and then they use donated candles or lamps as light. Now electricity has come, it is needed to sell 'Batti' (lamp) and required to pay electricity bills. Though, the tiny rose water is sprinkled on the father's (Hazrat Shahjalal (RA) shrine and Agorbatti (Perfume) burned around the Mazar".

**Integrated Remarks of Participants and Researcher:** In fact, how many people are coming every day in the Mazar of Sylhet, there has not accurate statistics. Besides it, there is no account of how much money is being given every day. How, on what basis and who is looking after and managing the Mazar and it is very important to set it up and appoint a manager of the Mazar accordingly. Mazar could be a State property and also it could be a historic and Islamic monument and heritage. However, Hazrad Shahjalal (RA.) Mazar is considered one of the most important holy places in the subcontinent. There have many legends, folk tales about this shrine. So the shrine needs proper government protection and takes care of. Due to lack of government observation the development of the shrine and its adjacent arrangement is not adequate that's why it is remaining fragile and archaic condition.

As holy place the Mazar compound is treated as a safe zone. Therefore, some greedy and unscrupulous individuals involve in anti-social and subversive activities into the Mazar. Some of them are selling gaza, yaba, and heroin (drugs materials) and so on. Some are also stealing, hijacking regularly. Due to the overwhelming presence of beggars, the shrine's ritual environment is contaminated every day. Without it, due to various reasons for earning extra money, the crime trend in the shrine area is increasing and for this law and order is deteriorating. Religious people, visitors and devotees of Mazar are getting negative effects on their minds. It can affect Sylhet's overall tourism and in overall circulation of money and

economy. In this case the Government's initiative and law enforcement agencies can play a strong and effective role.

Hazrat Shahjalal (RA) used sword, sword cover, his used clogs (sandal wood) and some utensils are known to have belonged Khadem family members. All of these are very important as archaeological artifacts. But any kind of step or initiative was not taken to properly preserve these historical materials. Therefore, it is important to preserve these artifacts through proper legal authorities.

In fact, Mazar is not a personal wealth. It is a bigger irregularity to abuse Mazar's material resources. There are some corruptions which are made by Khadem family through consuming Mazar's wealth. Some people are making millions of money by adopting unfair means in the distribution of Mazar's properties. All of these categories of corruptions must be suppressed in a harsh way and also have the provision of punishment for corrupter. Government should take the responsibility of controlling the monetary activities and management of the shrine. It also observes that some hotels and shops have been built and developed in the shrine premises. Government needs monitoring and supervising of these areas. Above all, it is necessary to make effective policies about these issues to protect the purity and prestige of Mazar. In addition, it is essential to take care of visitors and devotees of Mazar with shrine structure and premises.

**Conclusion:** Mazar Sharif (holy shrine) is one of the famous and well known holy places for the Muslims. The people of the Muslim countries, including other people have deep respect, devotion and religious beliefs to Mazar. Therefore, Hazrat Shahjalal (RA) Mazar is considered one of the most important religious holy places in Bangladesh. Thousands of visitors come in Sylhet to visit this Mazar to offer Fateha (Quranic Verses) every year for divine peace. Many of them also enthusiastically donate offerings as their vows (Manat) to Mazar to fulfill their desires. People get one kind of mental peace through these offerings. However, some people are manipulating different types of business for making money by using the feeling of common people. In the name of religious rituals, some businesses are going on and the Khadem of Mazar earning millions of money in a month. On the other hand, the marginal people earn the lowest wages with dealing local potential business man for their livelihood. The local elites, businessman, Mazar's Khadems are dominating on the Mazar area by adopting unfair means. There is no monetary transparency of Mazar incomes. As there is no legal authority and liability, who do what, and how the donated money will be used with purpose. Therefore, the devotees and visitors of Mazar movement and security are not protected. The local (Mazar) elites and governing committee of Mazar claims the maximum income of Mazar as their traditional management system during the period of Hazrat Shahjalal (RA). However, it could be changed by reforming the traditional system, thinking on local governmental system considering the visitors and the devotees interest of Mazar. However, it could be mentioned that the study of Mazar culture is very difficult due to the respective Mazar's Khatems noncooperation and suspicion to the researcher. It is necessary to observe a deep anthropological observation and study for further understanding the shrine culture of Mazar.

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