

Exploring the *Urs* as a Socio-Spiritual Practice in Sufism

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partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
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Declaration

It is hereby declared that

1. The thesis submitted is my own original work while completing degree at BRAC University.
2. The thesis does not contain material previously published or written by a third party, except where this is appropriately cited through full and accurate referencing.
3. The thesis does not contain material which has been accepted, or submitted, for any other degree or diploma at a university or other institution.
4. I have acknowledged all main sources of help.

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Ethics Statement

To conduct the research all information that is taken is used meticulously. Research should always be done ethically thus during the research all the ethical principles were maintained. Interviewees were informed and briefed beforehand about the objective of the research and gave verbal consent before any interviews or informal conversations took place. For all the interviewees freedom was given if at any point they wanted to skip answering some questions. Without permission, no audio or visuals were recorded. Special care was taken to ensure respect for the special place. Additionally, no religious etiquette limits were crossed. The trust is necessary for fruitful ethnographic participation which was strengthened by these thoughts and boundaries, which also served to uphold ethical integrity.

Abstract

The Sufi beliefs have heavily influenced Bangladesh's religious and cultural environment. Though there is extensive research on Sufism, little is known about its major rite, the Urs. Unanswered questions include who organizes and arranges the events, why it is held, and what its significance.

To fill that gap, this study conducted seven key informant (KII) and thirteen in-person interviews. Where six-day Urs celebration honoring Hazrat Khwaja Moinuddin Chishti, was observed. The result showcases how state participation in the Mazar administration challenges the structures of the establishment, and its legitimacy and spiritual authority are challenged by traditional beliefs.

Moreover, Theories such as Mahmood's concept of embodied piety emphasizes women's devotional roles, Foucault's idea of heterotopia shows how the shrine becomes a sacred space distinct from everyday norms, Asad's theory of discursive tradition explores the contestation of power and religious authority, and Geertz lends insight into the symbolic meaning of ritual acts was analyse.

Keywords: Sufism, Mazar, Urs, Culture, Spirituality, Religious connectivity

Dedication

I dedicate this research to my Ma, Baba, Sister, Uncle and Bleu our pet they have smoothed my path so that I can fulfill my desire without any barriers.

Acknowledgment

First of all, I want to thank all the participants of this study. The entire family where I have attended the *Urs* for my fieldwork. They not only treated me with immense warmth, but their detailed explanation enhanced my work. I also want to thank Forhad uncle who connected me with the focus group and key informant interviews and helped to gain familiarity with a place that initially felt very distant.

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Abbreviations and Acronyms

Zuhd: detachment any pleasure of the world

Ihsaan: Ihsaan act in a perfect manner

Ibada: Worship

Tasawwuf: A spiritual and mystical part of Islam

Karamati: mysticism

Qawali: Spiritual recitation

Hadith: All work and teaching of Prophet Muhammad documented and used beside the Quran as a source of teaching.

Tafsir: Quran expiation and interpretation

Fiqh: One of the Islamic law

Illallah: Except Allah

Silsila: The Sufi spiritual lineage

Sadhok: Devotees who meditate come closer to Allah

Gaddi: Sufi spiritual lineage leadership position

Deoband: follows Hanafi law

Ahl-e-Hadith: Does not follow any school of thought which follows the Quran and Hadith

Shirk: Greater sin in Islam

Wisal: A passing away of a Sufi saint

Tabarruk: Bless food given in the religious event

Milad: An annual gathering and praying

Kidmat Sharif's / Khidmat: An act of devotion and service

Jannati Darwaza: A symbolic gateway at Ajmer

Shedra Khani: A communal meal offered at Sufi shrines to the Khadam

Kalam Sharif, Patch Ponchatoula, Char Pir, and Chodo Kandan: Various Sufi texts follow this tradition

Zikr: Chanting respectively various dua's and Allah 99 names

Sandal Sharif: A ceremony where sandalwood is applied at Kaja Baba's Mazar

Khadam: A person or a group of community who manages the Mazar

Gaddinashīn: A inherits successor of Sufi leadership

Peerzada: A descendant of a Sufi saint

Chapter 1: Introduction

When I was child I always saw how my uncle devotedly follow Sufism. And during the *Urs* time he used stay at his beloved pir's house to celebrated the commemoration. It always spark my curiosity to know about their community and culture. How his believe is different than our majorities believe. I remember he use to bring Tabarruk and always mention how reseving it is Barkat (blissful). Then when I gradually grow up I started to explore this matter and in the course releted to religion I tried to find and learn more about them. But in literature and in the study I always found some gap between what in reality.

However, if we closely look they are the people who spread Islam at the early stage. I felt their community is always stay so inclose and there are not recognize by the majority. But still How do they experience their unique identity? If recent attack put they their belongingness at stake? Since Sufism is so vast thus I have spcificical focs of *Urs* to visualize their cluture from their lens. Simultaneously, I wanted portrayed those voices that where unheard so that I can show the amalgamation of our culture. At the same time, also look how gradually due to political, external and internal influence effect the fundamental essence of their belief.

1.1 Background and Context

A Sufi Mazar is a living space of belief. On the annual commemoration of a Sufi's death, *Urs* thousands of people gather. Their early ascetics due to their simple life, wore a very thick coarse woolen cloth called *Sūf* from which the word Sufi originated([Chakrabarty & Mandal, 2014](#)). It is celebrated as they achieve the ultimate enlightenment after their death it is not a matter of mourning but rather a joyful ritual. It is commemorated in most of the Islamic world, especially in South Asia, and is considered a gathering of brotherhood as people across regions

from diverse backgrounds come together ([Chowdhury, 2024](#)). The space gets filled with emotion, devotion, and spirituality when these Mazar's rituals such as qawwali performances, langar offerings, and prayers unfold.

They delivered the message of faith with their own medium, for example, music, art, and language. As they were a believer in the philosophies of simplicity, humanness, transparency, devotion, and zeal. Core elements of Sufi practices were *Zuhd*, *Ihsaan*, and *ibada*. The main messages that they promote are equality, brotherhood, tolerance, religious harmony, and cultural coexistence ([Mondal, 2024](#)).

However, *Urs* was never solely a religious activity; rather, it is intertwined with political power play, economics, gender norms, and negotiation with legitimacy. This study focuses on *Ur*'s celebration in two places Dhaka organized by the descendants of the Sufi saint and Delhi organized by a Sufi community. Despite there being a lot of studies on Sufism and Mazar in South Asia, research on each ritual that occurs during the commemoration and its importance is overlooked. Believers from every walk of life pay homage, remembering the scent, his teachings, and the believer. Existing literature focuses on the historical importance of Sufism and its practices. But in the modern day, a lot of things have changed, starting with state interference, ideological shifts, and changes in practices. Also, the increasingly politicized nature, gendered lenses of *Urs*, and the lived experiences of devotees and their emotional state are yet to be explored. Most importantly what events are celebrated in *Urs* and what is their significance?

1.2 Research Questions

The research question for this dissertation is as follows:

1. How do ideology, authority, and gender shape the participation of Urs?
2. What role do *Urs* various practices perform?
3. How do internal and external influences affect the organization and continuity of Urs?

1.3 Research Objective

The research objectives for this dissertation are as follows:

1. Analyzing how the Sufi family and the community organize and continue the ritual.
2. Exploring the 6-day ritual to understand spiritual and emotional connection.
3. Investigating the gender norms and how state control and recent attacks impacted the Mazar spiritual sustenance.

1.4 Relevance and Importance of the Research

The goal of this research is to explore the socio-spiritual elements of *Urs* and its interlinked practices, its symbolic and performative aspects by looking into its rituals, the people involved in their community, and its connection with politics and economy.

At the same time, this paper will be portraying the connections *Urs* has with Mazars, as this place is an epicenter of it, which is one of the main reasons why it is not only a spiritual space but also an area where people of the community come together. Hereby, this research will present what rituals are there, why those are celebrated, and what is its significance is. Then again, it reflects how performance and participation vary from gender to gender.

The findings will observe how to foster harmony and mutual respect within the community they have built. Also, it will describe how it is being affected by political and economic matters.

This paper will showcase how they are being attacked and vandalized, which creates a threat to the future continuation of their festival.

1.5 Organization of the Thesis

The thesis studies the Transformation of Faith of *Urs* which is a Socio-Spiritual Practice of Sufism in India and Bangladesh.

Chapter 2 talks about the history of Sufism, how this shaped the Eastern Bengal faith, what Sufism and its brotherhood Silsila means, how it is intertwined with Mazar culture, and why *Urs* is celebrated. Later on, we discuss its dispute regarding its authenticity and agency and how it perseveres gender. Lastly, its ends point out the changes in ritual.

Chapter 3 showcases the methodology that where used to conduct the thesis. These are the research area, study population, study approach, data collection methods, demography of the participants, and ethical considerations.

Chapter 4 is a crucial part of the thesis as in this section the funding is discussed. First, I have step by step talk about the activities of the six-day *Urs* event. What motivates them and how do they feel when they join such a holy event? It also addresses the complexity of gender. It also covers how with time the ritual and practice have been changing. Gradually discuss how the Sufi family at Dhaka carries the age-old tradition with the help of the devotees. Then the paper talks about how and from where the program is financed. Later the discourse leads to how state and various political involvement and commercialization is affecting the essence of

spirituality. Chapter 4 ends it is highlighting the debate regarding its authenticity which led to attacks at Mazar which created the fear and uncertainty of future sustenance. Later, it describes how practicing cultural relativity can help different believers to live in the same society. But we are more focused on ethnocentric attitudes judging people through our own beliefs and thinking its the only ideal one.

Chapter 5 is the part where the theory justifies the findings. Here the paper discusses how Mazar creates a special space in our society through Foucault's concept of heteropic space. How *Urs* is not just a cultural matter but has a deep spiritual essence. It tells the story of a generation that stays strong on the principle of brotherhood. While transforming and reinterpreting the principle and the meaning through the lens of Clifford Geertz. Where not everyone gets a chance to achieve the transformation. How gender norms are justified through Saba Mammod's theory. Then it focuses on how religious rituals like *Urs* are increasingly entangled in a web of politics with the help of the theory of Assad. How we can argue that destroying the establishment of Mazar is ethnocentric by the extremists as they do not align their principle with cultural relativity.

Chapter 6 draws the final stage of the thesis, where research gaps and limitations of the research, further research, and recommendations are mentioned. Lastly, a bibliography was prepared referring to all of the materials used in this research. The Appendices section shows images and questionnaires that were captured and used during this study.

Chapter 2.1: Literature Review

In order to conduct this exploratory study, the literature review in this thesis will outline the history of Sufism and its interlinked matter to understand the state of what is Sufism in relation to Mazar and what *Urs* signifies, and Why this is one of the important events. At the same time, in this research, the debate against *Urs* celebration changes and enhancements in the custom are presented. Also, literature analyzing gender norms. Having established the aforementioned points, this thesis connects these points in the analysis with the theory and will try to showcase how with time certain festivals surrounding the *Urs* have changed, and how people deeply feel connected with it but fear due to both external and internal influence and threat.

2.1.1 Sufism and its brotherhood Silsila

Sufism is a branch of Islam known as Muslim philosophy. It is an individual worship to achieve a deeper connection with Allah. This is commonly recognized as a mystic part of Islam, which is not something that a person can attain through only studying or practicing, but rather by becoming a Sufi. A Sufi is a person who must be free from any kind of worldly pleasure, and while being completely honest and truthful ([Chakrabarty & Mandal, 2019](#)).

Sufis oppose any kind of orthodox practices in the name of religion and culture and are in quest of finding the true essence of Islam. Therefore, as the Indian subcontinent is multicultural, if any other nation preaches something new to the inhabitants during that time, cultural and religious assimilation and ruralism automatically occur. Mostly, the lower-class people face hierarchical inequality and discrimination based on caste and creed. But in Sufi's teaching, these differences can be blended, which is why Sufism ended up creating a connection with cultural syncretism ([Mondal, 2024](#)). Thus, these people easily accepted Sufi teaching. They

were drawn by the characteristics' traits, religious righteousness, and devotion toward Allah of the Sufis ([Al Masud et al., 2017](#)). This is why in Sufi culture, the aspect of visiting Mazars or Dargahs is important. Not only to make dua for different purposes but also to pay respect to the Sufi leader (Pir). However, this practice creates a conflict with 'Pure Islam', which is based on Islamic laws and Shariah ([Chakrabarty & Mandal, 2019](#)).

Whereas Silsila is a concept where a certain group of people undergo training in learning innovative methods from people of different eras and geographical backgrounds. This forms a complex with individuals and distant families, which is based on a spiritual bond and guidance from a master ([Díaz, 2021](#)). Later on, it becomes "a chain of authority" which gives birth to the Şufi genealogies, where an Awliya must have a common ancestor. The Sufis' methods of teaching differ from one another's castes, which is why it is divided into many Silsila. Even though the core belief is the same, all have their own spiritual philosophy and disciples. Although there are various Silsila, among them four are very popular (Jaffar, 2022). They are Chistis, Suhrawardis, Qadririyas and Naqshbandis. To make the research a bit more streamlined, we will focus on Chishtia.

Hazrat Khwaja Moinuddin Chishti (RA) (536 AD- 1236 AD) was the founder of Chishtia Tarika. He was born in Iran and served his whole life in the name of God and to fulfill his almighty duty. Thus, he spent his entire life preaching and spreading the teachings of Islam (Islamic Da'wah). Finally, Khwaja Moinuddin Chishti (RA) was introduced to Tarika, and throughout his lifetime, he promoted it.

Since a person cannot be a preacher unless they have reached the peak of spirituality, therefore, they must at least have deeper knowledge of certain elements of Islam, such as Tasawwuf, the

Qur'an, Hadith, Tafsir, and Fiqh. Khwaja Moinuddin Chishti (RA) spread his teaching in the Indian subcontinent, and one of the crucial elements of his teaching is the chanting of the word '*Illallah*'. On the other hand, in this tarika to become a *Murid* (a disciple who is committed to following the guidance of a Sufi who belongs to a tariqa), one must follow certain steps that include praying two extra rakats, learning the names of Allah and visiting the Dargah, and fasting for 40 days ([Momin, 2024](#)).

After discussing what Sufism and silsila mean. While mentioning one of the silsila which is the Chistia Order and talking about its pioneer and how to become one of them we take a deep dive into his history. Where it looks into how it spread in South Asia creating a strong foundation in the Muslim community and later on how it had a great impact on its culture and administrative power.

2.1.2 History of Sufism in Bangladesh

Richard has given a detailed historical grounding on how Sufism spread throughout Bengal, which later on became the core of cultural and administrative power. Bakhtiyar Khalji was the founder of Muslim rule. But when it came into power, it was not for spreading the Islamic religion but for political reasons. Initially, Islam was the religion of the elites. During that time, Eastern and Western Bengal were drastically different. Where the West was urbanized, on the other hand, the East was more of a forest land, which was marginalized and excluded from any political or religious institution.

The author claims that Islam flourished between the time of 1350 and 1600 when new settlements cleared the land of the east for accommodation. Thus, there is no evidence of mass forced conversion, nor did it happen through war. Rather, it happens through peaceful ways by

getting inspired by the lifestyle and beliefs of these settlers. Then again, there was no caste system or religious hierarchies in this new belief system, which was also a reason why Islam was becoming popular. At the same time, for them, economic and social transformations were happening slowly, which is why it was both a collective and individualistic conversion. Interestingly, it was a top-down process as first the elite and then the rural people were converted. Which is why they are refer to cultural mediators as they helped people comprehend Islam in a way that was relevant to their lives ([Roy, 2014](#)).

Mostly, the new settlers during the 14th and seventeenth centuries, Sufi saints, and local, spiritual leaders who were clearing the land for their settlement, transformed East Bengal into an agrarian-based village. Apart from that, they also build khanqahs, mosques, and Mazar to educate the people of their communities. As time passed by, this institution became a hub of community development and religious practices. Thus, it proves that agriculture was the foundation of the spreading of Islam.

Then again, the form of Islam spread in Bengal was not orthodox, as they created a path for the beliefs to blend with the local cultural practices. Thus, it was vernacular Islam as there was a presence of both Islamic teaching and Bengali culture in their ritual, festivals, and beliefs. Which authors refer to as the natural process of cultural adaptation. This is why we see folk tradition still carried on. This flexibility also creates a space for both Muslims and non-Muslims to coexist peacefully. However, it could be because it was a rural environment, and people relied on each other. But Sufi's meticulously construed Islam where there was a blend of both tradition. Thus, this is why Sufi Islam was more humanize ([Roy, 2014](#)).

During the Mughal era in 1576, there was further progress in this sector through developing the village and village life, which indirectly helped Islam's teachings to spread. Thus, in history, during the 18th century, the largest Muslim community was Eastern Bengal in the Indian subcontinent. This led to the establishment of more mosques, madrasas, and shrines, and the creation of a network of Islamic institutions.

Then this category of Sufism is popular here because geography must be considered the eastern part of Bengal, as this is the Frontier zone, thus new settlers prefer this area. Also, during that time, the West was part of a long-established Brahman community, which was another reason the East area was preferred, as there was no strong religious group here before, thus they were open to accepting a new social identity. However, there is not much information on how Sufism has changed and is still evolving in this modern era. Also, there are other variants of Sufism, but for this research purpose only this has been highlighted. However, this Sufi community that came to this continent is not known.

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2.1.3 Mazar and its spiritual power

Followers of the Sufi saints build monuments to preserve their memories once they have passed away, which are mainly known as Dargahs or Mazars ([Chakrabarty & Mandal, 2019](#)). There is a belief that the space is blessed with the super spiritual power of the Pir known as 'Karamati' (mysticism), which is not only limited to Muslims but also people from different regions who are deeply rooted in the Sufi philosophy. Sufis are spiritually connected with Allah and are granted the power to bestow luck, prosperity, and a cure to their followers. Apart from that here various Sufi rituals are also practiced ([Hakim Aziz Ul et al., 2024](#)). However, administration of the Dargah is done by both Muslims and non-Muslim followers Click or tap here to enter text.[\(Mondal, 2024\)](#).

The Sufi saints are those people who have obtained spiritual enlightenment. Thus, they follow the path to spread and preach religious doctrine, knowledge, and guidance among the community. It is also built to pay homage to the Sufi-sadhoks who respected them, which is why even after the death of the Sufis when the soul leaves the body, the believers think their spiritual essence still exists. Since the soul is alive, they believe they are immortal. At the same time, this culture is linked with socio-economic, political, and cultural matters of the nation, as the believers offer money and resources to the Mazar in exchange for granting their wishes and desires.

It needs to be understood that they are not any historical figures but rather something that stays real all the time as it can be felt and are blessed with spiritual power. Which is why Mazar is a place of “embodied devotion”. As people even after their death are connected and with passion perform each ritual while showing respect and love. Thus, Mazar is a gateway to Allah, not a tomb ([Majumder et al., 2018](#)).

Then again Roy (2014) founds in Bengail Islam was reconstructed rather consciously. In his he showcased how Islam in Bengal grew through Sufism. They adapted Quranic knowledge, Bengali folklore and poetry. Gradually Mazar culture became popular where people from various background came to pay visit and gradually it became central hub of faith ([Roy, 2014](#)).

Now in the next section, this paper has focused on Sufism rites Urs. How it's not just in religious custom, but it is part of their community's culture. Moreover, it pinpoints some of the elements that as significant importance in this program and how it is not only a blissful event but connected with our soul and spirituality.

2.1.4 Urs and its significance

The term *Urs* in shrine culture is used for the death anniversary of the buried saint and is celebrated every year by the devotees in respect and reverence of the saints ([Raj & Harman, 2012](#)). It is a significant occasion as that day the believers practice spiritual reflection, renewal of faith, and relearn about the saint's life and his preaches (Hakim Aziz Ul et al., 2024). It's a unity of both Hindu-Muslims as people from both religions usually attend in some nations ([Al Masud et al., 2017](#)). It is celebrated because, despite Pir passing away, the relationship between Piri-Muridi is infinite and should be celebrated. Although the believers do visit holy shrines every now for Urs, there is an annual gathering every year. How this day will be observed and celebrated depends on which *Silsalah* (Order) Pir has followed and who is the power holder of the *Gaddi* ([Bhatti & Kamal, 2019](#)). It promotes brotherhood and socio-cultural integration ([Chakrabarty & Mandal, 2019](#)), making the saint's death be considered as achieving the ultimate spiritual goal. The blessing transfers to the believers through the tomb, and the people closer to the pir, including a disciple, a genealogical heir, or a Khadim ([Raj & Harman, 2012](#)).

The activities that usually happen across all Mazars are Qawali, reciting Naat, Darood Sharif, Holy Quran, and Dhamal [spiritual dance] ([Bhatti & Kamal, 2019](#)). During the commemoration, other rituals that are performed, including Sufi and folk poetry, known as “Kawalis”, have contributed a huge significance across the world. In these songs, they praise Allah, His Prophets, and the Sufi saints. Thus, these practices carry a unique spiritual and psychological significance in the lives of the devotees ([Hakim Aziz Ul et al., 2024](#)). Through this, they showcase the expression of emotions and request to grant their Minnat on this holy occasion, which can be both material and non-material needs, as the believers regard the saints as a mediator between them and God ([Raj & Harman, 2012](#)).

Not all are going to believe the same cause but they do because they feel the same way. Therefore, *Urs* is not a superstition old tradition but rather a powerful spiritual and physical experience. To this day people go to Mazar to be part of this scattered environment, to get the blessing of the saints, learn, and relearn about the teacher, and most importantly receive Barkat ([Kugle, 2011](#)).

The next segment highlights the debates and the arguments that are stated regarding Sufism and *Urs* culture. Also highlights how it is debunked and proven wrong in other articles thobyinting out the loopholes and the problems in those understandings.

2.1.5 The Legitimacy of *Urs* in Islamic Debate

Religious scholars have mixed views about the concept of *Urs*, as Deobandi and Ahl-e-Hadith deliberated it as Shirk since the concept is not mentioned in Islamic Sharia. They believe that since people gather together in the Mazar and participate in their religious and sociocultural activities, there is a chance of free mixing, which is not something that Islam would allow.

On the other hand, Shia scholars' thoughts are divided regarding the ritual and are not totally against it. Some of them believe that if we look deep down in history, we will see that there are more than thousands of holy men in the universe, so celebrating some selected persons but not others is a kind of discrimination. However, it's not possible to commemorate every person, as not all of them are known, which is why Shia scholars think it's not a fair practice.

During the Muslim reformist movements mazar were facing attack. Groups such as Tariqa-i Muhammadiyah, Ahl-i hadith started vandalizing and attacking. As they refer to as un-Islamic innovations as it was considered corrupted ([Roy, 2014](#)).

On the contrary, the followers of Brelwi claim that it is a sacred religious activity, which has been happening since the Holy Prophet's life. As it appears to be mentioned in Islam Allah selects his chosen ones based on their religious righteousness and gives them spiritual power. The main reason *Urs* has been celebrated is that on this day the pir achieved his *Wisal*, which means the stage of meeting with Allah. The reason is that the pir who pass away are not considered dead in a spiritual sense ([Bhatti & Kamal, 2019](#)).

Then again, some people do argue that *Urs* is less Islamic only because of music, dancing, and making *mannat*. But Werbner (2003) argues that it's a "Moral and Emotional Community" where each ritual has deeper religious seriousness and meaning. Thus, those who are a part of this belief system are not ignorant or going on the wrong path, but it is something they believe in and participate in ([Werbner, 2003](#)).

In the next part the gender norms are highlighted specifically it's regarding the role of women. Even though they have restrictive access but how it is in itself an agency is discussed.

2.1.6 Gender Norms and Their Agency

Although at *Urs* males have a dominant role and women have a passive role but both genders are crucial signifiers at *Urs*. Women quietly showcase their devotion but at *Urs* participation matters the most. Even though their contribution is not visual but through preparing the shrine and cooking they play many important roles at a *Urs* program. Yes, men do give the sermon and women are the audience, but it does not mean that there is inequality. As everyone has their own interpretation thus women will reflect this word accordingly but also, they can challenge certain things that were shared. Also, they are the carriers of these messages thus the tradition continues. Thus, their quietness should not be overlooked as religion is not about rules and speeches rather it is more about how people absorb and express the message of devotion ([Mcbrien, 2006](#)).

Afterwards, some changes in the rituals are mentioned how throughout the times with modernity and state control with the mixture of politics the light of spirituality is dimming.

2.1.7 Changes in The Rituals

Urs transform with the influences of politics, economy, and cultural engagement. Although Mazar's symbolic and physical appearance is a sacred place but in modern times many things have shifted. Specially its meaning and value. Boivin (2015) examines the *Urs* of Lal Shahbaz Qalandar in Sehwan (Pakistan) which was a hybrid space of rituals and culture. He showcases that *Urs* has become a state-funded event although certain spiritual matters are intact. But this

tells the story of how shine is challenged with state commercial motive which sometimes overshadows the spiritual essences ([Boivin & Delage, 2015](#)). Then again Pnina Werbner (2003) showcases in his paper that the Zindapir Sufi saints have not only been followed in India but widely followed in the United Kingdom by the immigrants. This shows how belief transcends national boundaries and evolves through migration. Thus, over the time shine has not only gained its value as a spiritual place but also a place of surrounded by political and social norms and global influence.

Chapter:2.2 Theoretical Framework

2.2.1 Heterotopia

According to Michel Foucault, there are some spaces where normal rules do not apply, hence in those circumstances people behave differently. These are considered heterotopia spaces, which are designated areas and also have significant power and control. In this space, the entry is selective and completely different from the outside world. It is referred to as “Other Space”. However, it is not a utopia, rather, it has its uniqueness through which it creates alternative experiences of time and space. This space reflects power, and control, and challenges the mundane life. It’s something unique from ordinary places that has significant meaning and history. In every society, this kind of space exists. In the research, Mazar the place where *Urs* is held aligns with the concept of heterotopia as it’s a place where for a time all the differences disappear. ([Foucault & Miskowiec, 1986](#)).

In my paper, I have connected this concept with Mazarr and showcased how Certain spaces are different and have a unique function to serve society. Because of the spiritual power of the shrine it can never be compared to an ordinary structure it's shown in the analysis section.

2.2.2 Cultural System

Clifford Geertz argues that Religion has a deeply embedded system of symbols and meaning that shapes people's minds. He also agrees that it's not about faith, but how people understand its meaning. Moreover, it's not something people can learn through holy books and formal methods; rather, they can learn through their connecting matters, such as prayers, rituals, myths, and most importantly, their own lived experiences. He has examined Morocco's Sufism, which was not only built by Islam but a mix of both Hinduism and Buddhism. This proves it's not something fixed but fluid as it evolves. Here, ritual is something that is passed down through knowledge. It's not only performance but also a structural form of learning, hence making it a collective matter.

He argues that each ritual, any sacred matter, or mere scripture can carry meaning beyond understanding, which makes the whole thing symbolic. He showcases how the world works and is shaped by people's behavior. Thus, it is both descriptive and perspective. He explains how there is no such thing as "true religion" as it's always changing because of politics, technology, historical-social changes, and most importantly, the changes in values. While studying Indonesia's religious practices, he found out how modernization, colonialism, and nationalism changed the country's core values. Thus, he believes that it is all about creating and sustaining meaning.

Although there are collective prayers, there is the presence of our own personal reflection when we observe certain interpretations. He showcases how in Morocco Sufism, they transmit knowledge through their lineage, which is referred to as Silsila, that is not just done by mere reading but passed down from one generation to another. In Indonesia, there is no hierarchy but more flexibility, hence showcasing adaptability. How this leadership is not only inherited

but it is culturally learned. In the Urs, as this is an age-old tradition thus as it is passed down it evolves with new ideas and innovation ([Geertz, 1971](#)).

While comparing the theory with the findings I have presented how this tradition is passed down through generations and each has their own intake on the tradition. This proves that it's not a set belief but something that depends on the believer and how they are interpreting it. Then again by using the cultural systems theory by Clifford Geertz how it is politicized is also examined.

2.2.3 Discursive Tradition

Talal Asad describes that religion is not something static; rather, it is continuously redefined, since it is not a mere concept of faith and is molded by politics, history, and power. In “The Idea of an Anthropology of Islam,” this concept was introduced. He challenges the Eurocentric concept of religion as he believes that - the modern definition of religion, being a spiritual aspect based on one's belief, is completely wrong. Thus, any rituals and practices surrounding any religion are something that is influenced by the world, and changes as time passes ([Asad, 2009](#)). Which is why it is a conscious engagement that is dynamic and alive.

Thus, religion is not only a matter of spirituality, but through political interference, it is being interpreted, restricted, and reimagined. Asad showcases how modern states try to define true religion. When one chooses another faith, they might face discrimination or challenges. This proves that what the state thinks is useful, dangerous, or compatible is promoted as national faith ([Asad, 2009](#)).

The discursive tradition of Talal Asad further enhances Geertz's concept and explains how these changes may impact favoring some faith were discrediting others. Using this theory I will connect with the destruction that is happening with Mazar and how it is putting a huge scar on the Sufi community and its future sustenance.

2.2.4 Ethnocentrism and Cultural Relativism

Ethnocentrism is considering one own beliefs and customs are the only correct ones a concept of William Graham. Based on some preconceptions they measure or judge others culture. As for them, their own culture is superior which ends up resulting in universalizing their culture ([Sumner, 2007](#)). Whereas Franz Boas has the opposite concept which is Cultural Relativism. Where it is believed that culture should under through the lens of a particular group's historical, social, and environmental influences. Here he that we should call someone uncivilized as without going into the depths for us any unfamiliar culture will look strange. As culture teaches us how to observe a matter thus, we do see how it should be seen ([Boas, 1941](#)).

By using both of theory I would draw an analysis to showcase what could be one of reasonsason why the recent attacks are happening, and how we could stop such action further if cultural relativism is practiced.

2.2.5 Embodied Piety

Saba Mahmood considered religion as something that is deeply connected with the human body. She challenges the Western thought of freedom, resistance, and agency. According to her, agency is not something to resist norms or break free from tradition but though embrace it. Here, women, though engaging in religious practices, shape their inner selves. She argues

submission does not always mean oppression, but in the case of religious practice in cultivating piety, discipline, and becoming closer to Allah ([Mahmood, 2012](#)). Women's silent participation will showcase how it is related to this concept.

By using Saba Mahmood the theory will also showcase my findings while being a woman myself how I was separated but felt equally engaged with the tradition in a unique way. When celebrating a faith any kind of physical separation does not exclude participating or receiving the spiritual blessing. This paper also highlights how aligning with the theory women contribute equally to an event same as men.

Chapter: 3 Research Design and Methods

The objective of this study is to analyze the festival of *Urs* and how its socio-religious space has a huge impact on the Sufi community believers. The specific objective of this research is to find out the types of rituals that occur during the week of the *Urs* and how it is still being operated by the family members of the Sufi clan. Moreover, this study also delves into how this culture is surviving parallelly alongside mainstream Islam and what communities' opinions on the challenges that the Mazar faces regarding celebrating such events, whereas in other places it is more commercialized as a certain authority has control over the Mazar and the way certain rituals are celebrated. The research objective is based on the Chistia Sufiism of Dhaka and India. That is why ethnography is the best study approach to complete the study.

3.1 Research Area

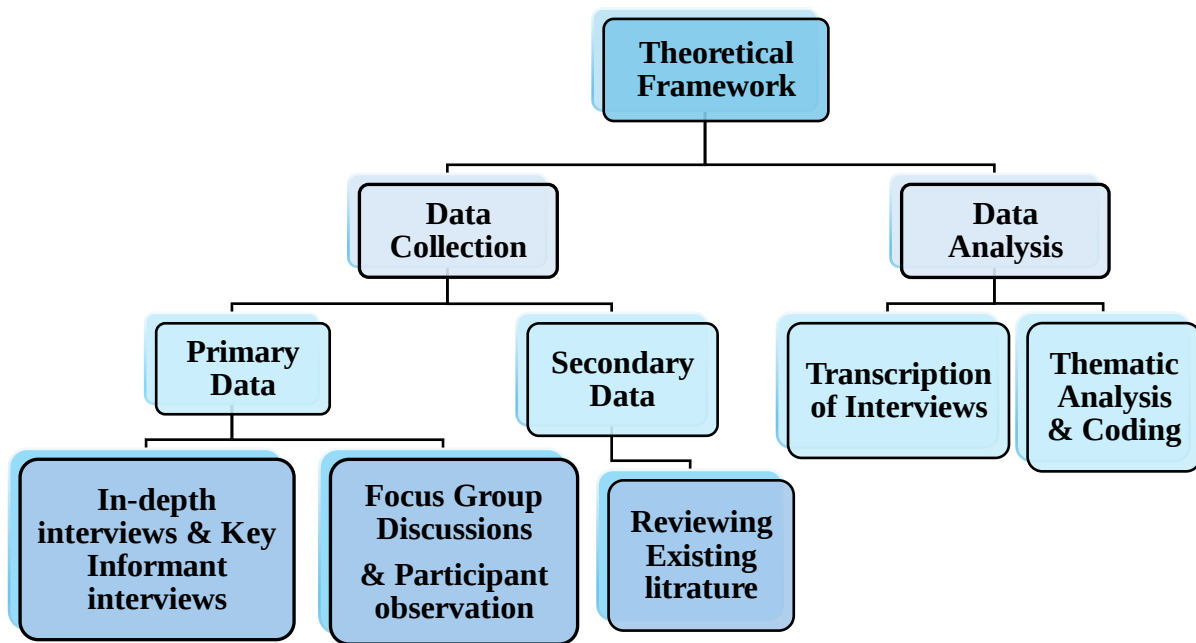
The study was conducted at Sultanganj Rayer Bazar, Dhaka, Bangladesh. The prime objective was to one of the main events of Sufism Urs.

3.2 Study population

For this research, 18 in-depth interviews of Chistia Sufi followers were during the ethnographic fieldwork. thirteenth were the focus group members, and seven key person interviews experts on Sufism and Chistia Silsila. Only quantitative data gathered from the respondents and the KII method helped us to gather a more concrete understanding of Chistia Silsila's Sufi culture.

3.3 Study Approach

To achieve the aim of the research the qualitative research approach has been used during the ethnographic. Methods are data collection, in-depth interviews, key informant interviews (KII), and focus group discussion (FGD) strategies are selected.



3.4 Reason for Selecting the Qualitative Method

A qualitative study is selected as the study aims to investigate the experiences and views of the people. This method is significant for those studies that focus on personal experiences (Flick, 2018). Since this specific area of research topic has not been explored before, a thick description will be used for the reasoning that qualitative research is more appropriate.

3.5 Questionnaire Formation

To complete the qualitative research and to get insights and perspectives on this specific topic, the data is collected through in-depth interviews key-person interviews and focus group discussions. Given the insufficient amount of data, the following dissertation is also an exploratory study. Moreover, specific themes have been selected, and a list of questions was covered in the interview. For each demographic, specific questionnaires were designed, and

themes were selected according to the purpose of the study and the findings ([Saunders et al., 2012](#)). Moreover, specific themes have been selected, and a list of questions was covered in the interview. For each demographic, specific questionnaires were designed, and themes were selected according to the purpose of the study and the findings.

3.6 Methods of Data Collection

For this study, the focus group discussions and key person interviews were recorded after getting permission from all visitors and organizers of the festivals, where follow-up questions were recorded and transcribed through phone calls. Afterwards, they were translated and transcribed. However, intermediaries were contacted to reach out to connect with them. Data for the following study was collected from both primary and secondary sources.

3.6.1 Primary Data

As this research focuses on qualitative methods, the data were collected through mixed-method strategies such as in-depth interviews through Key Informant interviews (KIIs), Focus Group Discussions (FGDs), and participant observations. Here, in-depth interviews and KIIs have given rich data about the *Urs* festival, which were gathered from specific interviewees from the people who were in charge of organizing and managing the event. FGDs were conducted to understand the attendees' perspectives. However, due to the nature of the key person, the question was slightly different from person to person. Therefore, in the key person's one-on-one interviews, the questions were both open-ended and semi-structured.

3.6.1.1 Focus Group Discussions (FGDs)

Table 1: Demographics of The Focus Group Interviews

Name	Age	Gender	Ethnicity
Fatema Anwar	46	Female	Bengali
Mahmuda Momen	45	Female	Bengali
Masud	48	Male	Bengali
Md Ali	65	Male	Bengali
Md Fazrul Karim	38	Male	Bengali
Mohima	66	Female	Bengali
Mohiuddin Mister	40	Male	Bengali
Nasir Ahmed	56	Male	Bengali
Noor-e-reza	65	Female	Bengali
Sana Chisty	56	Male	Bengali
Khatun	50	Female	Bengali
Imran	18	Male	Bengali
Samia (Anonymous)	16	Female	Bengali

In the case of my Mazar community respondents, I conducted focus group discussions (FGDs) at Sultanganj Rayer Bazar, Dhaka, Bangladesh. Since they belong to different socio-economic backgrounds, the interviews gave me crucial insights and mixed opinions of the lived experiences as a Murid of a Sufi Pir, and their observations of their visits to the *Urs* programs. The balance of both enhances the analysis process as it provides more in-depth data collection

by showcasing the objectives, which is a key aspect of FGD, as one can gather a better understanding of what the respondent is thinking or feeling. Moreover, it was a vital tool to gather two different essential pieces of information in a short period and help to avoid repetitive answers.

My FGDs were conducted in person at the programs where the *Urs* are held. Thus, for this study, I divided the demography into two categories - age and gender. In my research, both male and female were my respondents belonged to different economic backgrounds and classes. Due to gender seclusion, I faced limitations while accessing my participation in the focus group data collection. However, eventually, I was able to collect the data with the help of the key informant who was close to the family of Mazar. The questions asked in the interview were standardized and significantly selected while keeping in mind the age and gender of the group.

3.6.1.2 Key Informant Interviews (KIIs)

Table 2: Demographics of The Key Person

Name	Age	Gender	Ethnicity	Nationality
Farhana Chisty	45	Female	Bengali	Bangladeshi
Faruque	64	Male	Bengali	Bangladeshi
Md Forha Hossain Chisti	71	Male	Bengali	Bangladeshi
Md Nadim Reza	55	Male	Bihari	Bangladeshi
Syed Faiz Chishty	25	Male	Indian	Indian
Syed Shujauddin Chishty	75	Male	Indian	Indian
Hossain Chisty	26	Male	Bengali	America-Bangladeshi

In order to resolve the possible gaps and to gather certain valuable information that might not be collected by the visitors, I have also decided to interview some key informants. This method is perfect for research papers as it can resolve unclear queries, profound insights can be retrieved, and it can help to build a relationship with informants as it adds advantages to help to get any further clarification. I have divided my key informants according to the categories of age, gender, and nationality. Although my respondents belong to different nationalities, all interviews were conducted at various Mazar in Dhaka and the places where they are staying. But to focus on the *Urs* aspect, thus I have look at Mazar of Sultanganj, Rayer Bazar, Dhaka, Bangladesh. However, the interviews were conducted in Dhaka. My KIIs were the family members of the Pir and a Murid who are closely linked with the family and were directly involved with ritualistic practices. Additionally, building relationships with the respondents also allowed me the opportunity to contact them later, which would be required if any further clarification were needed while going through my data, and will ease my access to gather information during the field visit.

3.6.2 Secondary Data

The secondary data was collected through relevant literature, such as published academic journal articles, books, newspapers, and similar research studies.

3.7 Data Analysis

3.7.1 Interviews Transcription

Oral interviews were recorded in audio format and later turned into written scripts. Moreover, this was a vital element of qualitative analysis as it allowed responses to be turned into

transcripts with significant quotations. Although to help this study, most of the interviewee's names have been mentioned, however, for some individuals to maintain their privacy, a pseudonym has been used to maintain anonymity.

3.7.2 Thematic Analysis and Coding

Afterward, transcribing, and the coding stage began, where I identified the themes that would be appropriate for the study. The collected data are organized based on the answers to the research questions. Due to this process, overwhelming data became more manageable as the analysis of the data was organized. Lastly, I have divided the findings into certain themes and subthemes. Their thematic arrangements enabled me to establish connections between the various themes and provided a more comprehensive understanding of the issues addressed in this paper. However, due to the nature of the data, for each data point, I have tried to provide a comparison.

Chapter 4: Findings

4.1 Exploring The Ritual of Urs

4.1.1 Urs Rituals

The key informant mentioned that on the first day, when they went to the entire Mazar to attend *Urs*, they felt peaceful, but at the same time, they witnessed a spark in people's eyes. This *Urs* is held for Khwaja Moinuddin Chishti, a prominent Sufi scholar. It was held at Sha Ohab Uddin Chisti's residence and



Figure 1 Devotees gather at the Mazar

Mazar. The air was filled with rosewater sprinkles and the scent of burning incense, along with that rhythmic murmur of prayers that created a sacred ambiance. Started with completing the Quran as it was considered mandatory for a blissful start. All the events every day



Figure 2 Cooks cooking the tabarak

started with Milad and ended with Tabarak distribution, where people gathered in groups and their voices blended into a harmonious hum while reciting the Quran and other holy books.

The third day is a bit different from the other days because on this day, along with other activities, the performance of Qawwali music, which is one of the main attractions of the festival. The tone of the attendees shifted in the evening when the music started, and as the night deepened, the louder the voice seemed. The voice of the singer and some devotees echoed together, accompanied by rhythmic claps and the



Figure 3 Qawwal performing Qawwali

steady beat of Karatalas, Tabla, and Harmonium. Others were listening by closing their eyes to concentrate and were swaying gently. While others were spinning rhythmically in order of submission as if being transported in spiritual ecstasy. Musical influence in these meetings was more than simply a performance, as it was also prayer, passion, and an unspoken link to the divine.

The fourth day was more earnest as devotees recited – “Surah Yunus” and “Surah Ikhlas” in a circle one hundred twenty-five thousand times each. The repetition in unison of each verse created a meditative rhythm, which felt as if they transcended time. People describe this feeling as if all the devotees during that time became a unit, there was a sense of contribution to



Figure 4 Reciting surahs

something greater through strengthening faith. However, calm inner discipline was also seen on the other nights, which was rather a melodic passion.

On the fifth day, it was a mirror of the previous days. As *Urs* was coming to an end, the energy shift was also shifted, where an environment of spiritual intoxication was noticed due to prayers, music, and devotion. The day I visited the Mazar observed quite interesting things, which included the sights of



Figure 5 Devotees praying at the tomb

people praising the Pir and praying to Allah all day at the Mazar. Some people shed tears, and others felt joyful to attend such a holy event. Since there were a lot of people who were staying over, thus three-time meals were being prepared and distributed throughout the Festival of Urs. However, the main rituals started after Asr prayer with a *Milad*, which lasted until the call for Isha prayer, while taking a break during Maghrib prayer. During this break, dinner was served among the people. After Isha, an intellectual ceremony was held, and on that specific day, a person from Shah Ali’s Mazar came and talked about various issues regarding Islam and contemporary matters. Then Qawwali started, which was a surreal spiritual experience. Everyone was singing in unison, and it was harmonious and melodious. Some people were trembling and crying, and it felt like they had gone into another world.

On the final day, it was an emotional climax. This time by noon, the last Milad was held, after that it was the time for the grand Lagar (food) distribution to the poor, which was the highlight of the day. As the day went by, the final prayers began, where the environment was very heavy as it was a sad day since the *Urs*



Figure 6 Reciting surahs through seeds

was ending. People were crying throughout the night as they prayed and completely surrendered themselves to Allah. Interestingly, they allocated seeds to keep a count of how many verses each devotee recited so that later they could do a total count. This is one of the traditions they have been following for years. With the last Fajr prayer at the first light of dawn, the *Urs* was ended.

4.1.2 Experiences of The Believers

Urs is such an event where people feel tearful and emotional, as through the chanting and reciting, they gain the ability to open mystic stages of the soul. For others, it is a day of happiness as on this day they can get a chance to meet their favorite Pir and at the same time connect to Allah and the Wali and Awliya. Some found it inspirational, as it is believed that through the festival of the *Urs*, a spiritual door opens. Sana believes that those who are attending this event can feel their soul illuminated by a light at the end of the tunnel. This road is shown by the Pir, the road of knowing oneself. She describes that one needs a mirror to see oneself, and to see their soul, one needs the help of a spiritual person, like the Pir. Thus, Mazar is a place where logic or rationality does not apply.

Moreover, while attending the program, they also get a chance to share their problems, inner thoughts, needs, and complaints with the Pir. Noor-e-Reza expresses that in her land, there was

not enough harvest this year; thus, to find a solution, she attended the *Urs* and prayed to Mannat.

For Fatema, “It's food for my soul and where I feel so much lighter as if I can tackle the world. So, it is a sort of that dopamine effect”. Then some believed that people need a medium to reach Allah and Rasul, and thus Auliya and Wali help with that.

4.2 Motivations for joining the *Urs*

4.2.1 Religious Devotion

Pir never dies and will live infinitely, which is why in Sufism it is referred to as the time of *Khuda Milon*. Thus, there is a huge difference between us and them. In Surah Yunus 62 verse, it is written that “do not call them dead it is sinful to say that”. When Pir leaves this world and goes to the next stage to meet Allah, that day is referred to as *Urs*. But we refer to *Urs* as *Urfat* not as dead, which means transform. Fatema addresses that “*Urs*” also refers as “Mawlid”, which is why the people who have achieved *Hakikat* in life, for them death is actually the most pleasurable event of merging into oneness and meeting the creator, and therefore it is a matter of celebration, not mourning. Basically, it means the meeting with the beloved, and it is an analogy in the same way that death for Sufi is actually a beginning. Katun said, “My devotion to the Pir is so strong I believe that his spiritual capability has kept my family in a good shelter with enough food and education for my children and also given me the power to come here every year even if I am sick.”

4.2.2 Spiritual Transformation

Sufism is at the bottom of Islam, which is a category itself. Thus, Shia and Sunni or any other can be a follower of it. Only if someone can complete all 4 stages of Sufism, they can be a true Sufi. These are *Shariat*, *Tariqat*, *Haqeeqat*, and *Maarifat*. First, one has to follow the law of Shariat. The second part is to go towards the mystic stage of the soul's reunion with Allah, the Tarkat. The third path is the only way to find the road is by having deep knowledge, Maarifat, and lastly, the fourth part is being truthful at any cost which is Haqeeqat. *Urs* is a place where someone does not only get a chance to meet their beloved pir and the community but also, it's a place of learning for the newcomers. From my experiences, I learned a lot of new philosophies, teachings, and practices. This is the reason why many devotees come here every year to be a part of the spiritual transformation of Sufism.

Knowledge and intellectual association are a big part of *Urs*, as the knowledge the believers gain also encourages them to attend. As Masud believes *Urs* is a gathering like in a classroom or a seminar where people learn about certain topics, which is why people desperately wait for this day to hear the wholesome story of the story of Abu Bakar and read Kalam Sharif, Patch Ponchatoula, char pir, and Chodo Kandan. Also, there is an arrangement of milad where zikr and sama qawwali happen. After Asr's prayer, every time scholars are invited from different Mazar and from other countries to give khutbah, they talk about many contemporary matters. From where people learn and reflect on certain perspectives and scenarios, which is why *Urs* is considered a space for learning and spiritual enlightenment.

Moreover, it is also an event where new devotees become Murid through bayth. It's not just a belief but also a lifelong commitment since when someone takes the oath that he has to be connected to the Silsila forever and obey certain rules.

4.2.3 Singing Through Devotion

Among other devotees Qawwali singers not only attend *Urs* because of their profession but for them, *Urs* also creates a path of deep spiritual persuasion. They consider performance as a form of prayer. While interviewing the Qawwali singers I have grasped the understanding that for them *Urs* is not only about personal faith but also a responsibility inherited from their ancestors. Nadim shares “From 739 to 800 years, my family has followed this tradition, which has been passed down from our ancestors. Thus, I am just another medium continuing it.” This highlights that it is not a mere profession but a sacred duty that runs through bloodlines. He also adds, “As music transports devotion to higher states, it also helps people to concentrate.

4.2.4 Devotion Through Work

While attending the *Urs* program, I have noticed that there are people who came from far places not only for their love for the Pir and devotion towards Sufism but also to attend the program and help the organizers with any kind of work. As they believe devotion can be shown through labor. Also, certain works can only be done by an expert. Moreover, the festival *Urs* has a lot of elements, for example, singing qawwali, cooking, cleaning, security, etc. However, in the Dhaka-based *Urs*, the family does most of the work rather than hiring anyone. Moreover, since the other Muridans are also members of Sufism they have the right to contribute here. Farhana addresses that “those who know how to cook usually cook, and who are good at singing perform the qawwali”. People from far districts come here from various classes and occupations.

4.2.5 Family Traditions

The *Urs* I have attended and examined both are a part of family traditions. In Dhaka, the whole program is run and managed by the family members. Hossain, Suma, and Farhana, all are part of Chishti silsila which is like a brotherhood. Hossain mentioned that although he was raised in America, every year his grandfather, when he was alive, used to encourage him and his siblings to join the *Urs*, which has now become a habit. He said “Although I do fulfill my duty of practicing the 5 pillars of Islam and donate whenever I can, everything I am doing is for myself. I also follow Hadith and the prophet's teachings. But I have to also practice the elements of Sufism in the hope of achieving what I want ultimately, which is meeting Allah (A core belief of Sufism)”. Although he mentions that his grandfather had other disciples called *muridan* outside the family therefore if one of their family at any moment decides to end the family Silsila that would mean the *Urs* would end. These *muridan of Pir* outside have the right to continue the legacy forever.

Thus, for them, it is not just a matter of spirituality but also a matter of huge responsibility. For believers also it's a generational matter as Alia mentions, “For 40 years we have been coming here. Since my generation is holding toward this belief thus, we are continuing to carry it”.

4.2.6 Food Distribution Tradition of *Urs*

Tabarak is considered as blessed food, and somewhat a reward after such a tiring yet spiritual day. Anyone received it with open hands, and some consumed it immediately, while others took it home. In Dhaka, 800 to 10000 devotees attended. All the work was done harmoniously and timelessly. They arrange the food in a specific way with the



Figure 7 Devotees cooks cooking the Tabarak

help of their past experiences. They have distributed the food without missing a single person while having enough to give to any other needy people. Fatema expresses “It is a huge gathering of people where they pray but we have good food, which is also important. In Sufism, it is very important to have good food and hospitality, to serve people, and to look after people, as it removes the segregation of classes. Nasir mentioned that in Sufi belief the pir does not die and is believed that all Pir and Awliya get food in Jannath from Allah two times. Thus, cooking food is a crucial matter. They prefer cooking tahari with beef as it is a healthy meal. Cooks make them, and the woman of the family distributes the food.



Figure 10 designated area at Sultanganj

4.3 Gender Dynamics

In the case of Dhaka, both genders are allowed to exist, however, it is separated. At Mazar, there is more rush than usual due to *Urs*, which is why both genders enter the *Urs* at separate times and in separate ways. As Hossain mentions, not only in *Urs* but in his family they allow women to enter the Mazar and say their mannat rather than confining them in a room and seeing the tomb through a window. However, no free mixing is allowed at all, even if they are husband and wife; every gender must be separated. However, during *Urs*, since it is a huge gathering, they are given a designated area to sit and pray. It is not segregation but for their own privacy and comfort. While observing other Mazars such as Hazrat Shah Ali Baghdadi (R) Mazar Sharif, allow women to access through only windows. Whereas, in Hajat Alhaji Mohammed Mahmud Shah Mazar, it was prohibited.

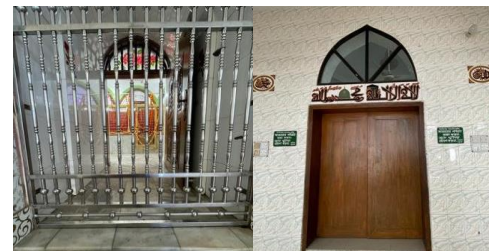


Figure 9 Access through the window at Baghdadi (R) Mazar

Figure 8 No access at Hajat Alhaji Mazar

4.4 Urs's Organizational Framework and Administration

In the Dhaka-based *Urs*, the family is the main authority. Despite the current pir who has been passed down the responsibility through Gadinishan. He and his family return annually from abroad to reinforce administrative authority alongside other family members. Moreover, along with them, they invite the local community and all the believers to help them. It can be either by doing some work or through donation. However, decision-making remains within Pir's lineage. It is not lineage-based authority, which is why the whole experience feels wholesome and righteous.

4.5 Funding of the Program

In Dhaka, the *Urs* is celebrated at the deceased's Pir's home. Only on his and Kaja Baba's *Urs*, and certain Islamic events, a large food arrangement is organized. Apart from that, the community and the other Murids also contribute by funding through donations. In the case of Dhaka, Forhad mentioned that an entire village this year decided to donate cows, and other people donated rice". However, the rest of the arrangement was done by the family members.

4.6 Evolution of Rituals and Practices

Urs is an old tradition but with time it has undergone a lot of changes. Although core spiritual essence remains intact only in the ways of certain ritual practices, how it is organized and how it is experienced has significantly evolved. Hossian addresses "Whoever is in charge of the silsila follows each step done by the previous generation but still has the flexibility to make some changes that are appropriate in today's time, which is why there are some differences in how my grandfather and my father host things, and in future when I will be given the responsibility, there will be changes."

Although throughout time, there have been some significant changes, many have become more selective regarding which *Urs* to attend. Participants have shown concerns about how certain Mazars have become commercialized, which is why the core belief has been somewhat at risk. As Fatema mentions “I have recently limited going to *Urs*, because in Bangladesh the kind of prayer and practice that I see for the last 15, 20 years, is not something that we grew up with. I mean, the kind of meditation, the kind of inner reflections that you are supposed to have in a zikir, and deeds that you're supposed to be doing are missing. So, I do attend some, but it is selective.” Where a teenager had mixed opinions as some participants attended due to family pressure whereas others attended to learn about the brotherhood.

4.7 Practices and Doctrine Debate

When you are continuously chanting, you might lose track of time; thus, when there is music, it helps you to focus. As Hossain mentioned, people who are involved in zikr at certain times or in any religious events may use it due to the fact it creates a rhythm. You must follow Sharia, but it is a pact of law, so how it is interpreted depends on the time and the place. Then again, doing sama, which is mandatory in Chishti silsila to achieve Allah is done through qawali. People are involved in sujud, but that is subjective as it is based solely on people's preferences. It does not depend on the people who are hosting the program. Sujud is not acceptable, which is why it is even written at the entrance of our Pir tomb; however, if someone still does that, they cannot go and stop them. They must understand that the Pir is not dead, so due to being emotional, some people hallucinate and start saying they have seen the Pir, which leads to Sajdah. Everything counts as a blessing. Yes, we can memorize the Quran and become a Hafiz, but the point is that rather than memorizing the verses without understanding deeply, it wouldn't benefit one. Also, sometimes we can lose track and have to restart. Whereas when we read in rhythm and when there is music, it helps us to focus. It will even sound melodious.

Hazrat Muhammad recited it so well, and since he had a good voice, even animals used to gather to hear it. Moreover, what I have learned is that if you sing for Rizq, only then is it permitted.

Chapter 5 Analyses

With the help of the literature in the findings section will support the information that was found during the fieldwork. Here, all the necessary theories and academic literature have been applied, which were mentioned in the theoretical framework.

Urs is held at Mazar, which is a heterotopic space, a different world in this ordinary world, where worldly rule does not work as spirituality takes over., where everyone becomes one soul as they engage in receiving spiritual enlightenment. In my research, we found that devotees also have similar experiences during the *Urs* as they do not feel any difference between the classes or castes, rich or poor. People become one entity in these five days, as they are more focused on devotion, they forget who they are, as their soul has emerged in a deep connection. It is a holy moment when our social hierarchies disappear temporarily, as no one here carries their social identity. They are the seekers of divine blessing. Foucault expresses this happens, as emerging spiritually is important here people behave differently. Thus, here people do have a rush and how time goes by is not felt ([Foucault & Miskowiec, 1986](#)). This concept can be compare it with Linus Strothmann study on Data Ganj Bukhsh, at Pakistan how although shine belongs to a public but has a different representation. Due to fact of it preserve as holy and and pure ([Desplat & Schulz, 2012](#)).

Interviewed devotees and organizers showcase that it is not just a mere ritual but is also a platform for learning through body and mind. It was a moment of mixed emotions, where some were weeping, and others were joyful. However, to understand, I need to learn about their interlinked aspects, which is why I have visited other Mazars. People came to the *Urs* due to their belief in Sufism and love for the pir of Dhaka. Whereas others came together to simply follow their family traditions. They even traveled across the country to perform this as a part of their duty. Which Clifford Geertz defines referring it as a deeply spiritual matter rather than just a gathering. Thus, it is a cultural system, which is not at all individualistic but something collective that interprets and transmits through historical and institutionalized processes ([Geertz, 1971](#)).

In this case, *Urs* is still happening even though the Sufi scholar who lived there is no longer, but his family is following his teaching through the ways they inherited the knowledge and his doctrine, which taught them how to engage with people in this festival. Yes, there's a division between men and women while celebrating this festival, but this is a religious matter and not only a cultural matter, which others believe is not static as it was mention by Geertz. It goes the same for the *Urs* events, as it is not only a spiritual matter but it continue its ritual.

This is also simlilar with the Morocco Sufiism which Geertz studied ([Geertz, 1971](#)). As there are certain traditions that they follow throughout the generations, however, we have to understand that with time, the structure of how the program is held will continue in the future to be continuously interpreted and reinterpreted. But even if it is inherited but certain aspect is cultural learned as it has an heavy influence. It can be both influence by global and local as Dhaka Pir's son and siblings lives abroad they way can evolved and even spread sufi beliefs

just as mention Pnina study on Zinda Pir of Pakistan mention in the literature review([Werbner, 2003](#)).

Talal Assad said that ritual is a discursive tradition, which is not a mere concept of faith that is preserved in religious text, but rather it is molded by politics, history, and power ([Asad, 2009](#)).

This is why the internal politics between the two countries became a barrier to people's faith.

Due to the political unrest in Bangladesh, people who follow a different kind of faith that does not align with the orthodox belief system are facing a lot of issues. As various Mazars faced demolition and even burnt out, which raised a concern to every participant I talked with. Even the Global Sufi Organization claimed 80 shrines had been attacked since August ([Sarkar, 2025](#)). Although they have hope that the legacy will continue but seeing the vast challenges and future difficulties, they still live their life in fear. Because too many external forces can lead to huge chaos in this community and their beliefs. Though it can an example of William Ethnocentrism where extremist groups where for them the sharia based Islam is considered Pure Islam than Sufi believes. Rather practicing cultural relativism the theory Franz Boas by giving space of both cultures to coexisting. By help of learning there cultural thought by exploring long historical footsteps and their social context.

Yet in this spiritual moment, I have observed that women are not direct participants as they were seen in a separate room. They quietly try to grasp and understand through observing the ritual, but they are physically distanced from the main event. While asking the current pir's son, he raised the matter of comfort and security, which the woman devotees address, so that they also feel comfort in solace. This raises a question, of whether Ur's participation only matters or whether is it an act of agency. However, as Saba explains religious agency is not only expressed through vocal participation but can also be through patience, silent prayer, and

personal reflection. This, though, traditional agency is shaped thus at *Urs* women are not only observant, but they are also practitioners of a spiritual tradition, but through their own unique way.

Furthermore, it's the Sufi leaders and their guide that connects the generations to attend *Urs*. Anyone who is a disciple can be a Pir, but even if you get the responsibility, you do not become a Sufi because only those are Sufi who can reach the higher state. Thus, whoever becomes a Sufi preacher does not get the title through any inheritance. Rather, it was their lifelong training through spiritually transforming their personality. Through devotion, they achieved this stage, and *Urs* is its proof. When they die that day, they finally meet their Allah as they complete their transformation (*Urfat*). The Sufi does not go through this transformation alone, as they preach to others to follow their path, by which the education is passed down and a silsila is created. When forming the silsila after the leader dies, the responsibility is passed down.

Based on the findings what I was looking forward was partially met as I mention that how the being Sufi is generational but why only certain people does become Sufi none of the theory justifies it. More than Clifford Geertz theory Tala Asad theory matches although he has mentioned how history, cultural and political influence, and even technology impact the core values but does not showcase what is the impact. Whereas Asad's theory enhances it by showing how changes can both be helpful and distractive. Graham and Boas help the research by showing how cultural biases can hamper other cultures and that would not occur if there is a space of understanding.

Chapter 6 Conclusion

Although this paper has justified its research by exploring the Sufi culture and its *Urs* customs by presenting their community to a broader audience. While mentioning the key findings along with the research gap and future recommendations and limitations this paper has to come to an end as there are limitations to an undergraduate thesis.

4.8 Key Findings

This thesis was organized to understand Sufism and *Urs* ritual practices. While I began to research how Mazar is linked with Sufism, later, I focused on its ritualistic practices, especially *Urs*. While exploring and inquiring about the six-day festival focusing on its ritual how it is organized and its significance, I have realized that it's not only a religious event but also a very complex and intertwined social and spiritual phenomenon. It's not only shaped by someone's feelings but their cultural tradition and political realities. From spiritual gathering, reciting and reading whole books, and learning from the Sufi lineage to the food distribution, and musical performance, it showed how grand the event was. At the same time, the finding indicates that attacks on other religious beliefs in Bangladesh raise fear and concern and create a barrier in the path of continuing such traditions. Although there is a hope that the spiritual essence of Sufism will continue to flourish but sociopolitical and transnational factors make the future of such a holy and vibrant tradition into a future of uncertainty.

When I investing *Urs* I also saw how *Urs* is happening at India. Chishti's family celebrated the largest *Urs* at Ajmer. The day before the event *jhandas* (flag) is raised by the devotees who bring them by walking 400 kilometers on foot from Baba Qutab-ud-din Bakhtiyar



Figure 12 Jannati Darwaza



Figure 11 Gathering at Ajmer Dargah

Qaher-al-Mutala's Mazar. The *Urs* starts on the 5th of Rajab, moonlit night. In the morning, the ritual starts when people recite the *Shedra Khani*. That time, *Jannati Darwaza* (the West door) opens, which refers to the great path from which Baba 1st came. People believe that if they pass through the door, their sins will get washed away and they will get an opportunity to go to the hajj. On the 5th, the door gets closed as it's only open four times a year. The *Tabarak* distribution, the second phrase starts. Here, the organizers cook "Firni", which is a kind of sweet made from rice and milk. As Faiz mentioned, "Allaha ke wali Allah Koro Milne chale", which is the main cause why *Urs* is celebrated. At 11 am, the attendees recite *Surah Fatiha*. On the 9th, the last *kul* took place as it marked the end, and during that time, people performed "tawaf", which means to encircle the Mazar. People all day donate flowers and chadar to Baba after *Ziarat*.

4.9 Research Gap

I have focused on a Dhaka-based *Urs* that has a modern outlook, which might be different from a rural one, but those events are not covered in my research. Also, this study is only Dhaka and India-based and does not showcase other regions of Bangladesh, South Asia, or globally. Also, *Urs* is an annual event, and I have visited at a specific time. This is why there was no way through which I could understand the dynamic aspect of the shift of the rituals and practices

which was mentioned by the interviewees. What were the things that used to happen in the past but have not continued recently will take a longer time to analyze.

Then again, I have talked about how they fear if they can organize *Urs* in the future and if that hampers its sustain. However, they are mainly accusing the orthodox or the traditionalist believers, whom I did not have a chance to interview to learn their perspective.

Then again, time and availability were constrained since the Pir family had a crucial role to play during *Urs*. Also, language was a barrier as most of the Interviews were taken in Bangla and English, which is why I needed to take the help of an interpreter, as some of them only spoke Hindi and Urdu. Where certain Sufi terminology does not have a direct translation, which may have affected how I have presented certain aspects of their belief.

4.10 Further Research and Limitations

This research has showcased that apart from the historical importance of Sufism and Mazar and debate regarding if really part of Islam any aspect is not borderly researched. Although Sufsim has various lenses to research. Even if there are many but some are fragmented and not easily accessible. In the context of Bangladesh Sufism has been around for a very long time however and does exist even today but it is within its own circle and its own culture and community. However, we should not forget its existence as a lot of cultural and religious understanding stems from existing cultural groups such as these. Since it is not widely known by people I believe misconception occurs. Apart from that, we need to remember that religion is not a static matter with time changes thought processes, and beliefs it's bound to evolve and create new meaning. Therefore, research needs to be done to find out what exactly changed, if there are changes, why they are in the first place, and how the new ways are helping those

rituals of a religion. Then again since we study anthropology which is examining the human and its culture it's our sort of duty to be a part of the cultural preservation through showcasing by researching endangered groups of any faith or belief. Which I have tried to achieve while also showcasing in detail what their culture is and how and why it is celebrated. It is a reminder to let us know that they are part of our culture and because of that our worldview does get influenced but we just do not recognize it too much as it is not a widespread practice.

Because of this influence, it inspired me to research about them and their culture so that I can know more broadly about them. At the same time, Bangladesh is a multicultural and multi-faith country, where Sufism and its practices were something that mesmerized me and led to this research. As by reading the existing paper I always felt a void between what is written and how it is in reality. This led to this paper as while visiting them not only I have learned about them but through their lens, I have understood their community and their belief in in depth. This led to the urge to write this paper so that I could remind the people that apart from the majority they exist, and we need to know about them and also take a deep dive into their rituals. Most importantly express their fear and their strategy of surviving with the majority.

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Appendix: 1 Questionnaire

1. What is Sufism in your thoughts?
2. What inspired you to follow the path of Sufism?
3. How does this silsila work?
4. What stream does Sufism fall under?
5. How does someone become a Sufi?
6. What is urs?
7. When does *urs* happen?
8. How do you feel about joining Urs?
9. Is the use of instruments and music forbidden in Sharia?
10. If sajdah is Harm then why are people still involved in that? Why does the authority of Mazar not stop them?
11. Can you describe the event happening during urs?
12. Can both genders attend Urs?
13. From where do the funds come to run the program?
14. What inspired you to follow the path of Sufism?
15. Why do you think Urs's celebration is being attacked?
16. What is qawwali?
17. Why did you decide to become a Qawali singer?

Appendix: 2 Photos

