

SOCIO-GEOGRAPHIC FACTORS AFFECTING RELIGIOUS KNOWLEDGE AND AWARENESS IN CHOLISTAN DESERT

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Abstract

Religion has central importance in the life of most of the people in this world. Cholistan is one of the largest deserts of Pakistan where an overwhelming majority of the population is Muslims since centuries. Living with semi nomadic culture, people in Cholistan have poor access to basic human needs such as education, health, housing and drinking water. This ethnographic study aims at exploring various factors affecting religious knowledge and awareness among people of Cholistan. Using qualitative research method, data were collected from 50 participants from both Greater and Lesser Cholistan through protracted qualitative interviews and participants observation. The findings of the study revealed that due to adverse climatic and poor socio-economic conditions, people in the Cholistan were least aware about religious teachings and rituals particularly those living in Greater Cholistan. In the absence of formal ways of religious learning and training, there were number of informal channels such as interaction with people from settled areas, elderly family members, religious gatherings and electronic as well as social media which affect religious knowledge and awareness. The study concludes that social life including religion is affected by environmental conditions and there is less practice of religion in hostile climatic conditions.

Keywords: Religion, religious knowledge, awareness, rituals, Cholistan.

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Introduction

As a human being, all of us are familiar with at least one of the religions, irrespective of our personal affiliation with none of them, that is why it is stated that we are surrounded by religion (Johnstone, 2015). Cholistan, also known as *Rohi*, is second largest desert of Pakistan situated in South West Asia (Mughal, 1994). It has river Sutlej in its north-west and Thar desert of Sindh in its south western part with 0.155 million of population (Khan, 1995). It spreads alongside boundaries of three districts of Bahawalpur Division namely Bahawalnagar, Bahawalpur and Rahim Yar Khan (FAO, 1993). Cholistan spreads over 10399 sq miles. Its total length is 480 KMs whereas width ranges from minimum 32 KMs to maximum 192 KMs (Shahid & Tabbasum, 2016). Based on its topographical features, Cholistan is divided into two parts; Greater Cholistan and Lesser Cholistan (Akbar, Khan, & Arshad, 1996). Southern and bigger part known as Greater Cholistan consists of 70% of the total area whereas Lesser Cholistan constitutes 30% (Cholistan Development Authority, 2009).

People of Cholistan got their introduction with Islam in early 712 A.D when Arab commander Muhammad Bin Qasim defeated Raja Dahir and conquered this area with his army (Din, 2001). Based on this, people of Cholistan are familiar with religion since centuries but their knowledge and understanding of religion remained poor because of hostile climatic conditions and rough terrain along with lack of awareness and sensitivity about gaining religious education. That is why, even obligatory prayers are not being performed regularly in the Cholistan.

Literature Review

Religion, one of the oldest human institutions which includes a system of beliefs and practices and describes relationship of sacred and the mundane (Giddens, Duneier & Applebaum, 2007; Ferris & Stein, 2008). Religion answers questions which are sacred like life, death, faith and calamities (Matson, 2005). The search for finding answers about supernatural happenings creates urge among human beings for knowing about religion to sustain in their life within their environment. As stated by Horton, (1984), “religious beliefs and practices are standard and are widely shared and used as essential and true”. Since beginning of life on the earth, religion has always been an integral part of human society and nomadic societies are no exception. In semi-nomadic culture of Cholistan, religious identity is expressed with pride which reveals affiliation with religion. Their religious sentiments push them for seeking religious knowledge and awareness. Religion performs many significant roles in society such as it unites people, establishes rules of social life and promote conformity (Macionis, 2006).

Effects of topography influence all spheres of life (Martino et al., 2007). Due to geographical conditions of Cholistan, the area is lagging behind in socio economic development and people lead their lives in miserable conditions (Hameed et al., 2011). Changing patterns of social organization over time (Smelser, 1981) or society transformation in institutional and cultural aspects is called social change (Giddens, 2001). It can be caused by culture, technology and population (Merrill, 1969) and also through physical environment (Scott, 2010). Social change affects functioning of social institutions operative in a society (Kakepoto, n.d). Happening of social change is universal and it reshapes all aspects of socio-economic life (Kakepoto & Brohi, 2013). Although religion is mostly divine but its awareness, practices and understanding also change with the passage of time. This also proves true in case of Cholistan where different factors contributing towards religious awareness and knowledge have changed with passage of time.

Major sources of socio-economic changes in Cholistan are changing arrangements of land use from grazing to cultivation (Raziq, de Verdier, & Younas, 2011) and increasing education (Khalid & Gilani, 2009). Similarly, establishment of Cholistan Development Authority (henceforth CDA) in 1976 has played important role for provision of water supply, construction of roads, animal sheds and milk collection centers in whole of Cholistan area. These developmental initiatives have helped the local people in undertaking certain new economic activities which lead to overall social change with the passage of time. Shahid,

Shafique & Tabassam (2016) found that due to illiteracy, people of Cholistan are not familiar with major religions, that is why they follow whatever knowledge of religion they have. An overwhelming majority of people are Sunni Muslims. The authors also maintained that there were no mosques in the Cholistan area before 1947. Majority of people in Cholistan do not offer regularly offer obligatory prayers.

Capturing true picture of religious awareness and knowledge on the part of people in Cholistan is possible by contextualizing its environmental and geographical conditions. Being desert area, geographical and environmental factors are particularly influential in daily life in the Cholistan area. In Cholistan, Religious knowledge and awareness depend upon various interrelated factors. For studying religious awareness, knowledge and practices, it seems important to understand the role of certain factors which affect raising religious awareness and knowledge in Cholistan. The current paper focused on these factors and their effectiveness in changing religious awareness and knowledge on the part of people living in the hostile environment of Cholistan.

Methodology

The current study aims at exploring geo-social factors contributing towards raising religious knowledge and awareness in Cholistan desert. Using ethno methodology, purposive sampling strategy was adopted, and data were collected from 50 elderly participants having age 50 years and more. The study participants were recruited through experience survey of the area. Interview guide was used as a data collection tool. Selection of participants having age 50 years or above was made on the account of purpose of study. Likewise, they also had freedom to talk in semi-nomadic culture of Cholistan with deeper understanding of social conditions. This study was conducted through gate keepers, as it was an overt study. Data collection was done through two sources; protracted qualitative interviews and participants' observation. Data were analyzed by content analysis technique. Member checking technique was used for ensuring reliability and validity of the data. Published and unpublished documents about the study area were also used as secondary source of data.

Findings and Discussion

The findings of the study have been presented in following sections.

Formal Educational Institutions

Major part of Cholistan desert lacks formal educational institutions mainly due to its inaccessibility and hot weather conditions. Although CDA has taken several concrete initiatives for provision of amenities of life to the people of Cholistan such as water supply, formal and informal schools, milk collection centers, mobile veterinary hospitals and metallic roads, however, still literacy rate is very poor in the area especially in Greater Cholistan. In case of Lesser, Cholistan, there are formal educational institutions which impart religious education along with general school education. The role of formal educational institutions in raising religious knowledge was substantiated by one of the study participants:

Here in the Rohi, there are no madrassas like they are found in settled areas. That is why our children cannot get religious education and learn rituals. They learn about religion from books (school books), but due to seasonal migration, they cannot complete studies and quiet somewhere at the beginning or middle.

There is an emerging trend in Lesser Cholistan for sending male children to nearby *madrasas*, where learners are imparted free religious education along with food and accommodation. Learners of these

madrasas are also bringing religious awareness and knowledge to their respective families. These learners and their families are one of the sources for observation and learning for their respective community people. In addition, formal education schools have been established by government in some areas of Lesser Cholistan where students are also getting religion education as a part of curriculum. Similarly, with the establishment of few *masjid maktab* school (a school up to primary classes established in mosque building), it has become a formal source of religious knowledge and education for children. This situation is also evident of very poor literacy rate among inhabitants in Cholistan. Being illiterate, people of Cholistan were unable to enhance their religious knowledge by published religious literature in the form of books and magazines. That is why, the people who could recite holy Quran were unable to comprehend its meaning. They do just read Arabic texts for the sake of blessing virtues. However, due to lack of formal educational institutions in Greater Cholistan, there is poor awareness about religion and its significance.

Interaction with People of Settled Areas

Among elderly people of Cholistan, religious learning and awareness was result of interaction with people of settled areas. Due to better education and access to connectivity sources, people from settled areas have better religious understanding which is one of the sources of learning for people in Cholistan. One of the interviewees expressed this as follows:

One of the sources of our knowhow about religious teachings and rites is our interaction with people from settled areas. We meet them in gathering especially on ceremonies where prayer leaders speak and preach. Sometimes, we also learn many things while participation in Rasm e Qollkhani, Chaleeswaan and/or other such gatherings. Sometimes, our friends from settled areas happened to be prayer leader, so they do guide us about religious matters.

It is important to mention that all the people living in settled areas are not having high religious knowledge and its implementation in their lives. But despite it, they are source of religious awareness for people of Cholistan as they are lagging behind in awareness than people from settled areas. In the past, this source was effective but frequency of interaction with people from settled areas was quite limited. Few people used to visit settled areas for buying essentials of life and selling livestock products. While staying in Cholistan, their focus was always on arranging drinking water and doing some livelihood activity for buying food for survival. Their purpose of visit limited their concern about religious learning. It is also believed that Cholistanis came to know about basic religious practices

like obligatory prayers and fasting through interaction with people from settled areas.

Presently, people of Cholistan have frequent interaction with people of settled areas than past. Now there are more means of transportation in Cholistan areas than past. Yet the interaction is limited, purpose oriented and also gender centered. As Cholistanis migrate from one place to another in search of water and usually men travel to sell and buy goods, so their interaction is limited to fulfill basic needs rather than religious learning. Even in case of seasonal migration, they prefer to stay with their family members who always discouraged interaction with people of area where they stay. This reveals that most of the religious learning is unconscious which they learn from people who practice it and they do not adopt it as learning.

Elderly Family and Tribe Members

In joint family system, family and tribe members are effective source of religious learning for the children in Cholistan. Generally, elderly family and tribe members had little religious knowledge and awareness, that is why they could transfer their little knowledge and learned practices to next generation. As a result, these informal sources of learning (family and clan members, neighbors) were less effectiveness in imparting religious knowledge to the children. Since past, elder members of Cholistan are performing this job of imparting knowledge (whatever they knew) to younger ones.

We, elder family member share religious knowledge with our children. We inform them about our Holy Prophet (ﷺ) Kalma, obligatory prayers and other rites. We make our children conscious about day of judgement and life hereafter. There is no specific time and schedule for this teaching, we keep telling our children off and on.

This practice has been and still continuing in case of Cholistan where children get religious knowledge and awareness from their parents and elder members of the community. At present, the status of family and tribe members has undergone social change. That is why, parents are responsible for delivering religious knowledge and understanding to children whatever they have on their part.

Mosques and Madrassa

Mosque and *madrassa* are two major formal sources for imparting religious education to everyone beyond age and gender in the settled areas. But in case of Cholistan, there were no formal *madrassas*, schools or

prayer leaders especially in the past to perform this role, if there was any, it was as an exception. Although a small number of mosques was found in the Cholistan area, but they were just symbolic at many places. Since centuries, people of Cholistan are following religion as symbols and mosque has become strong source of religious affiliation for them. One of the participants explained as following:

As a result of interaction with prayer leader, we listen and learn many things about religion (Islam). On day of Juma, prayer leaders make speech and guide us about religious matters. They do tell us about Allah, Quran, Holy Prophet (ﷺ) and life hereafter.

At present, there are near about 378 mosques in Cholistan[‡] of different structure including constructed with mud bricks and many having symbolic demarcation as being mosque area. Mostly these mosques are without prayer leader who educate to people who come to mosque. In Lesser Cholistan, if prayer leader was available, knowledge transferred to people was limited to teaching how to offer obligatory prayers and recite holy Quran.

Religious Gatherings

In case of Cholistan, several informal sources of religious learning, like religious gathering, are different as compared to settled area. The most important religious gathering in Cholistan is *mela* (carnival) and *urs*[§] on shrine of Chanan Pir. People visit the shrine and attend *urs* with religious sentiments which makes it a grand religious activity for them. Though, such visits and participation in religion centered activity did not make any notable addition in their religious awareness and knowledge. This gathering was more for making vows, slaughtering animals, shopping, eating food, enjoying games and music. Mainly, it was a cultural event and source of entertainment than a religious activity. That is why, the *mela* of Chanan Pir is one of the popular events of Cholistan area.

Other sources like *Ijtima* (religious gathering), *Daras* (sermon) and *Melad* (Gathering on birthday of holy Prophet (ﷺ) serve as source of religious learning and training. In Cholistan, people's relation with religion is dependent on religious personalities like Khawaja Ghulam-Fareed, Chanan Pir, etc. These personalities are source of religious inspiration and motivation for them. Shrine of Chanan Pir has become sacred place to fulfill wishes and his religious preaching is full of stories of certain miracles. Khawaja-Ghulam-Fareed, a sufi poet preached- goodness through his poetry which is also mostly memorized rather than

[‡] Cholistan Development Authority (Office Record)

[§] Celebration on death anniversary of religious mentor mostly saints

understanding its meaning and philosophy. His preaching focused on offering obligatory prayers, fasting, performing Haj, giving *Zakat* and observance of the mutual right of human being. He followed *Sunnah* (way of life) of Holy Prophet (ﷺ) and took great care of feelings of others (Mughal & Ahamd, 2006). Although, with the passage of time, people of Cholistan give less attention to his poetry and sayings yet he is important religious motivational factor especially in Greater Cholistan.

Religious Personalities

Since centuries, the role of religious personalities especially that of *pir* (spiritual healer/guide) remained very important in the lives of people of Cholistan. *Pirs* are religious avatar for them, people follow their instructions dogmatically and perceive them as ultimate solution of their socio-economic and spiritual problems. As *pir* is considered as authority on religious affairs and his personality is considered as a source of blessing, that is why they have central role in raising religious awareness among their devotees. People of Cholistan follow one of the *pirs* and get spiritual strength from them. Keeping in view the influence of *pir* in Cholistan, they contribute in enhancing religious knowledge and understanding among their followers. Their role includes giving amulet, sooth saying for solution of health and spiritual problems of men, women and children. Sometimes, *Pirs* also preach many superstitions among their followers in the name of religion as many *pirs* forbid their followers not to trade on Tuesday which is not forbidden in Islam.

Popular religious scholars neither come in Cholistan nor do people of Cholistan have direct interaction with them. One important source of religious learning in Cholistan is *imam masjid* (prayer leader) locally also called as *molvi*. He is a person who has some religious learning, although he is not religious scholar but having basic religious knowledge. He makes *azan* (call for obligatory prayer), leads prayers and trains how to offer daily prayers and reciting holy Quran. There are also some exceptions in Greater Cholistan where community people collectively make arrangements for prayer leader for getting education of holy Quran and other basics of Islam. It is reflection of desire on the part of parents in Cholistan to give religious awareness and knowledge to their children irrespective of gender. It is important to mention that people in Cholistan believed that learning obligatory prayer and reciting Holy Quran was enough rather than getting its meaning, understanding and implementing it in their real life.

Electronic and Social Media

In the past, there was no electronic or social media in Cholistan due to its tough geographical conditions and least population density. People of Cholistan were socially isolated from rest of the world. Currently, there are T.V and CD players in Lesser Cholistan which serve not only as source of entertainment but also learning about religion. One of interviewees reported as follows:

Now, we know more about religion through TV and mobile phone. Since there have been installed mobile phone towers and we are connected with outer world, we can listen speeches of religious scholars on mobile phone. Similarly, we can watch TV because of availability of solar system for electricity. We can also watch how to perform rites, children do listen recitation of Holy Quran.

Few people in greater Cholistan have radio sets which broadcasts religious programmes along with other broadcastings. However, with the access to mobile phone and connectivity with internet has caused social change including adding to their knowledge and awareness about Islam. Introduction of solar system has made life easier as people in Cholistan can re-charge their mobile phones easily and can watch TV. However, major usage of these devices remains for connectivity and entertainment.

Conclusion

Topography and climatic conditions of the Cholistan have profound influence on the social life of people in Cholistan and religion is no exception. Since the people of Cholistan are living with overall socio-economic backwardness, that is why they have poor awareness and knowledge about religion. Physical and geographical conditions of Cholistan influence effectiveness of different sources of religious awareness and knowledge. For people of Cholistan, religion is miraculous and source of problem-solving rather than complete code of life to be followed. Difficulty in accessibility and severe weather conditions of Cholistan are hurdles for both formal and informal means of religious learning. Due to mass illiteracy, *pirs*, sacred places and sacred trees are more important for people of Cholistan for satisfaction of religious sentiments. These practices have shifted focus from paying attention on acquiring authentic knowledge about Islam, that is why people become satisfied by expressing and displaying emotional affiliation with their religion. They did not feel deficiency about not having proper religious awareness and knowledge. They are ready and willing to accept many cultural practices as part of religion.

However, with the passage of time, there is an increase in religious awareness on the part of people living specially in Lesser Cholistan as it is adjacent to settled towns and irrigated areas, but this change is minor in case of Greater Cholistan. Where most of their religious awareness and learning are result of informal interaction with people of settled and irrigated areas. Elderly members of family and clan are one of the sources for religious learning in case of Cholistan, however, they themselves do not have proper and authentic knowledge on their part. Arrangement of prayer leader is relatively new practice in Cholistan area because previously there was no concept of having prayer leader in the mosques both in Lesser as well as Greater Cholistan. Similarly, with the prevalence of mass illiteracy in Cholistan, literature and print media are also ineffective for spreading religious awareness and making the people educated about religion. Religious knowledge is limited to reciting Quran and offering obligatory prayers without understanding meaning and philosophy. Although, Cholistanis express profound affiliation with religion but do not pay needed attention towards learning it as their local practices of worshiping places, people and trees satisfy their religious sentiments making them satisfied.

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