Introduction

Shrine as a Social Form

In the Sufi Islamic tradition, shrines[1] are a physical point for commemorating *awliya*'.[2] Generally constructed around the tombs where these holy persons' bodies lie buried,[3] they are considered sacred and powerful because they are believed to be animated by saintly presence and offer access to their blessings (Ortis 2017). These shrines are a ubiquitous presence in the metropolitan landscape of Pakistan's second-largest city, Lahore. While their exact numbers are unknown, thousands of such shrines dot the city's *mohalla*s,[4] streets, markets, and graveyards. Some of them serve as iconic monuments of the city, featuring grand complexes that draw millions of visitors and pilgrims from across the globe and attract the patronage of governments and elites. On the other end of the spectrum, small, marked-off corners in residential lanes that are only known to a few are also revered as shrines.

While some of these shrines are recognized as historical relics dating as far back as the early years of Islam in India, their numbers are continuously bolstered by the establishment of new ones. The old and dense localities of Lahore, where their concentration is already greatest, are especially fertile grounds for their proliferation. During a conversation with a *pir*[5] and one of his disciples in Ichra,[6] which is one such locality, I asked them to estimate the number of shrines within a 2-kilometer radius of where we were seated. After consulting for around 10 minutes, both threw up their hands in exasperation. Though they came up with an estimated number of two hundred, they seemed frustrated by the futility of this exercise. It was virtually impossible to know all the places where a saint had chosen to distribute their blessings, as some of them could be hidden or even be inside people's homes. In relating this exchange, my purpose is essentially not only to demonstrate the pervasiveness of Sufi shrines in Lahore but also hint at the challenges involved in mapping them to the satisfaction of all concerned.

An Improper Gathering

I began my systematic study of Lahore's shrine worlds with Bodianwale, which is located inside Miani Saheb, the largest graveyard of Lahore. Like many other shrines in the city, Bodianwale routinely hosts a number of gatherings throughout the day. Attended by devotees as well as locals from adjoining neighborhoods, these occasions are mostly about everyday socializing with friends, neighbors, and strangers, rather than formal rituals (Figure I.1). The largest of these daily get-togethers is an all-male affair that takes place in the evening as participants make their way to Bodianwale from different parts of the city. One such evening in September 2018, I found myself in the company of around fifteen men. We were seated on a fraying carpet in an open space on the southern side of the shrine. Baba Umra, an elderly man with a distinctive, deep and raspy voice, was the center of attention as he narrated the history of a thirteenth-century Sufi saint of Sialkot, Imam Sahib. The story recounted the martyrdom of this saint at the hands of a cruel Hindu *raja* of the region.

If we pause here for a second to reflect on this social setting, one could be forgiven for expecting an atmosphere of reverence and respect. After all, we have an elderly man in a sanctified space relating the miraculous life story of a holy figure. The reality, however, was quite the opposite. Rather than

Figure I.1 A typical gathering at Bodianwale

Source: Photo by author.

reverence, the air was suffused with playfulness as the audience continuously interjected and teased Umra with good-natured humor. Saeed, a middle-aged, unemployed man, who had recently started living on this shrine's premises,[7] kept expressing mock astonishment whenever Umra spoke of the miraculous powers of Imam Sahib. Rather than listening with respectful attention, Mohammad Naeem, a resident of the adjacent neighborhood of Mozang, wanted to know the shortcuts to becoming a saint. Other audience members greeted these interventions with laughter and even more banter until Baba Umra finally announced in an annoyed tone that he is done with educating such an ungrateful lot and we can read the rest of the story from a book. Baba Umra, however, was not finished at all. After all, he had not made the 2-hour-long journey from his home in Jandiala Sher Khan[8] so that he could sulk silently. He barely restrained himself for a few minutes before directing the conversation into another story. This was an account of a group of drunk boys from his neighborhood who ended up at his house while trying to escape from the police a few nights ago. By the end of the night, Umra was in his element as the audience finally listened with some attention to his recipe for making potent moonshine with sugarcane, oranges and his secret ingredient, snakes.

Such social exchanges, which are a common feature of Sufi shrines across urban Pakistan, offer interesting insights into the social world of this institution. The content of the conversations, which jump from theme to theme and oscillate between the sacred and the profane, underlines the unscripted nature of these interactions. Unlike ritual practices, which are largely dictated by prescribed norms and established procedures, these conversations flow from the participants themselves and are shaped by their interpersonal dynamics. There is a pronounced everyday quality to them, characterized as they are by humor, conviviality, and playfulness. Judging by their frankness with each other, it is apparent that these men are well acquainted. In fact, their friendships as well as jealousies and grudges have an indelible presence in these exchanges, which is not surprising since many of them have been meeting with each other in this very place for several years. It is therefore reasonable to conclude that these gatherings are a vital part of these men's everyday social life in Lahore. Simultaneously, it can also be argued that these social interactions draw these men near to symbols of Islam – saints, miracles, martyrdom, and so on. They reveal an organic process for the embedding of Islam in social relations.

In presenting a Sufi shrine as an Islamic social space, I am not claiming to make a novel argument, since the purely social functions of religious institutions, including Islamic ones, have been extensively recognized and

commented on in various contexts.[9] My concern is instead with understanding the specificities of the social form of Sufi shrines. In fact, my argument is precisely that even though Sufi shrines constitute an everyday social space, the sociality they offer is distinctive from other places of socializing in Pakistani cities. It is in part the very novelty of this social life, colored as it is by Islamic sensibilities, discourses, and practices, that explains their appeal for groups from a wide spectrum. In broad terms, this book adopts the method of examining the social form of Sufi shrines to analyze their position and role in the public life of the city. I analyze their social form along three dimensions, namely

(*a*) Associational space – they serve as a physical location for the associational life of several communities and networks in the city, which can take different patterns, such as gatherings and crowds.
(*b*) Symbolic space – they symbolize the sacred presence of saints, therefore inviting prayers and rituals for communicating with them and seeking their intercession with Allah. They also offer a cultural grammar for communicating and making sense of the world.
(*c*) Political role – recognition of their powers makes them a hegemonic institution and a political center that mediates relations within and across communities.

My argument in this book is that it is the intersection of these three dimensions that gives a distinct social form to Sufi shrines and determines their public role in Lahore.

Scholars, who have analyzed Sufi shrines in South Asia from the vantage point of "ordinary" visitors, reveal that besides their spiritual significance, they also serve as spaces of healing (Bellamy 2011; Pfleiderer 2006), ideology (Ewing 1997), charity (Werbner 1998), shelter, community (Bigelow 2010), relationships (Kasmani 2022), leisure, festivity (Mohammad 2014), popular culture (Frembgen 2021), pedagogy (Rozehnal 2007), migration (Werbner 2003), and politics (Ansari 1992; Aziz 2001; Ewing and Corbett 2020; Ewing 1983; Gilmartin 1979, 1988; Philippon 2012).[10] Theoretically, this book differs from these studies by adopting the vantage point of social life to stitch Sufi shrines into the fabric of urban Pakistan. However, I want to dispel the impression that I see these social worlds as the secular part of a binary in which Islamic beliefs and practices make up the other half. On the contrary, I contend that these social worlds are deeply animated by Islam. From drawing upon the Sufi tradition for its vocabulary and practices to using Sufi hierarchies (Bashir 2011) for ordering social position and status, the social life that I investigate is irrevocably stamped by Islam. This is by no means a

one-way street since Islamic beliefs, identities, and practices are also hammered into a distinctive shape in the crucible of these social worlds. Sufi shrines are thus central to the embedding of Islam in the public life of Pakistani cities. However, this process of embedding moves through a series of contradictions, which pose their own questions about Islam. Identifying these contradictions or paradoxes perhaps reveals more about my own assumptions regarding a Sufi shrine than it does about Islam. Therefore, stating them here is as much a window into my own attempts to grapple with questions of religion and secularity as it is an account of Islam in Pakistan's Sufi shrines.

I have already flagged my incredulity (and perhaps even unease) at the proximity between the sacred and profane that repeatedly erupted during my fieldwork. Consider the story of the Sufi saint Imam Sahib. It may be read as a tale of Pakistani nationalist history that pits a cruel Hindu *raja*, solely interested in enhancing his worldly power at any cost, against a pure Muslim saint who sacrifices his life for the cause of Islam and justice.[11] However, Baba Umra struggles to sustain this moral tone of the story in his exchanges with his audience. The continuous flow of quips and witticisms between them drags the saint from his exalted position as a moral ancestor of the Pakistani nation and into a web of relations centered around the Bodianwale shrine. The teasing yet roundabout tone of the audience's interventions reveals that Baba Umra enjoys a somewhat middling status in this gathering. If his position were lower, he might have been dismissed outright and not even gotten the opportunity to relate this story to the entire gathering, whereas if he possessed more clout, he would have greater immunity from this playful mockery. Umra's annoyed reaction suggests that he does not quite approve of the audience's attitude toward Imam Sahib and is attempting to preserve the saint's sanctity. Or perhaps it reflects his attempts to maintain his own standing in this group.[12] The mischievousness of the audience also indicates that they enjoy intimacy and frankness with each other and with Umra, which allows possible religious or other disagreements to be playfully expressed.

In the early days of my fieldwork, I read such playfulness as irreverence. In fact, at that time, my impression of Sufi shrines was of a stifling environment where norms of sanctity and respect had to be strictly observed. This was the result of two initial encounters in which I had been roundly admonished for failing to observe these rules. First I was aggressively accosted by an elderly female devotee for disrespecting the saints by carrying (not wearing) my shoes with me as I made my way across a large courtyard in a shrine. On another occasion, a devotee took umbrage at my casual mention of a saint

and insisted on the requirement of attaching the appropriate Islamic epithet to show reverence when taking their name. As a result of these lessons in observing correct behavior, I became conscious of the demands of observing the proper *adab* and *aadab* (codes of behavior, respectful etiquette) for visiting shrines. Surveying the literature on Sufism confirmed my inclination that these norms were to be strictly observed in the sacred space of Sufi shrines.[13] Baba Umra's audience though appeared to have no such qualms when it came to Imam Sahib's sanctity. However, as I came to understand, this is not because they lacked respect toward him but because he had gotten caught up in the social web that connected these men to each other; he had been dragged into their everyday social reality. By weaving Imam Sahib into a casual social exchange, he had been personalized; he was made "really real" (Orsi 2012; Geertz 1973).[14] Therefore, the jokes about Imam Sahib's miracles are neither questioning his supernatural powers nor are they meant to be disrespectful toward his person. Rather, they are a distinctive cultural style of embedding the saint into a social matrix.[15]

One can then put down the two incidents in which I was rebuked for disrespecting saints to the fact that I was deemed an outsider to this world. Yet the outsider or stranger is very much a part of the social space of Sufi shrines, which is precisely one of their public qualities. In such a world serious offense can also be taken to such irreverence. Therefore, calibrating the distance between the sacred and profane and/or keeping them separate is often a fraught process, which is influenced by reading the gathering's mood as well as Islamically defined ideas about proper etiquette and behavior. At times they pull in the same direction, but on occasions they clash and stir tensions, which can even result in conflict.

In the urban spatial context, the distance between the secular and the sacred manifests itself in terms of a dilemma between the this-worldly and other-worldly orientation of the Sufi shrine. The architecture of most Sufi shrines in Lahore, like sacred sites across many religions, is designed to shut out external stimulation, to act as a shield against the city and encourage visitors to focus on otherworldly concerns. Many shrines are located within graveyards to promote this sense of detachment, but even those that are in the middle of busy neighborhoods or marketplaces share a degree of disconnection from their immediate surroundings. With their dark rooms penetrated by a few beams of light and strategically placed walls, they are designed to focus attention inward, specifically toward the tomb in their inner sanctum, and to block out the outside environment visually and sonically.

Entering the space of a shrine is akin to crossing a threshold. Most visitors mark their arrival with certain physical gestures – saying a prayer, touching the saints' tomb and grave with their hands or forehand, or offering a respectful greeting. These gestures acknowledge the sacredness of space and signal entry into a different spatial order and semiotic zone. Shrines thus straddle a contrasting position within Lahore's urban milieu. On the one hand, they are very much central to the fabric of urban life and serve important social and political functions in the city, but on the other, they promote a distance from the world. This location allows the emergence of a sociality that is very much a part of the urban fabric but also quite distinctive from other spheres of urban life. As an urban public, shrines not only invite various groups in the city to connect, but they also promote exchanges of an intimate and contemplative character.

From a Sufi perspective, the resolution to the dilemma of simultaneously engaging with the city while also maintaining a distance from it can be found in a conversation I had with Nawaz Ali Naz in the summer of 2013. A *pir* as well as *gaddi nashin*[16] of his father's shrine, located close to his residence in Ichra, Nawaz at the time was struggling to establish this shrine and fashion himself as a spiritual leader in his neighborhood. We were discussing the challenges faced by a spiritual seeker when he explained:

> I grew up hearing stories of seekers of truth who disappeared into the forests and spent years honing their spiritual capacities in the wilderness. Today, the world we live in is very different; now we need to develop our spirituality in the middle of the crowd. God needs his friends to be with his people, not to escape them.

One could read Nawaz's musings as a justification for his own decision to be actively involved in the affairs of his neighborhood, but he also points to a fundamental reality of our world. It is a world without wilderness; there is no escape from society. Even more importantly, it underlines the fundamental challenge for a mystic in modernity – to renunciate the world while entangled in it.

The Sufi shrine in the middle of the city thus is not an anomaly but the paradigmatic form of this institution in our time. The choice between embracing and rejecting the world is then not a choice at all (if it ever was one). Instead, my concern is with how these orientations enmesh with each other to produce the lived reality of this institution. More specifically, how does the coming together of these contrasting ideals of embracing and rejecting the

world shape the distinct sociality of urban Sufi shrines and ultimately their public life? This book addresses this question in two different registers. The first examines the shrines' social position and political role in urban contexts, while the second explores the micro-textures of their social space – rhythm temporality, sensibility, ritual, grammar of interaction, and so on.

Public Space: Commons and Contestations

It is clear from the discussion on the distinctiveness of Sufi shrines that their publicity is very much connected to their location in urban space (Mitchell 1996, 2010). Susan Ruddick (1996) claims that since space is "an active medium through which new identities are created or contested" (135), it is critical to the inclusivity of publics. As with any urban space, Sufi shrines in Lahore display several contrasting elements of publicness (Johnson and Glover 2013). For one, they provide a shared social space, which has become the center of the associational life of a wide variety of communities in Lahore (Figure I.2). They offer a much-needed site for leisure and relaxation in dense urban neighborhoods where open space is at a premium. Small street shrines, for example, serve as social hubs for neighborhoods where

Figure I.2 Devotees and visitors from different parts of the city assembling in Bodianwale

Source: Photo by author.

residents and other locals regularly gather and socialize. Rural migrants to the city and homeless folks live in and around the larger shrines, which also serve as meeting points for multiple groups across the city. Especially during festival occasions, shrines draw large crowds of visitors. This makes them an important space for strangers to meet, interact, exchange, and, at times, forge relationships. While frequented by a diverse range of social groups, the vast majority of their visitors belong to the lower rungs of the economic ladder, and a significant number hail from socially marginalized castes and gender-variant communities. With limited access to common or private spaces for socializing, Sufi shrines have become an important urban common for these groups.[17]

Henri Lefebvre (1991) has argued for understanding space as a dynamic and contested process rather than a pre-given entity. While critical of certain forces that shape space, he identifies the crafting of "absolute space" to satisfy the needs of everyday life as a desirable mode for the production of space. One example of this production is "autoconstruction," which denotes a process of urbanization on the peripheries of cities in the Global South. It entails the urban poor's incremental construction of their own homes and neighborhoods to meet their needs, without state support and outside its regulation (Caldeira 2017; Holston and Caldeira 2008; Holston 1991). While urban theorists have used autoconstruction to highlight the agency of the poor in making livable spaces, I want to extend it to the production of space in Sufi shrines. My contention is that devotees and visitors, who pour their own resources and energies into organizing various activities and even sustaining their physical infrastructures, are key players in this process. Even though many of these shrines are formally under the ownership and control of the Pakistani state, or *pir*s, devotees and visitors are crucial to producing this space and giving it its distinctive character.

The daily routine life of shrines is autoconstructed with various participants making different contributions to it. Many offer financial resources or material items for the shrine's upkeep or for organizing activities. Others provide labor – washing dishes, fetching and serving food and tea, cleaning the space, and so on. During my own visits to Bodianwale, I became the designated supplier of fresh fruit. Routinely on my way to the shrine, I stopped at a roadside vendor, and purchased a few kilograms of fresh fruit. Upon arriving, I handed over my purchase to one of the men responsible for distributing it among everyone present. This autoconstruction is not just limited to consumables, but even the pedestal fans and light bulbs installed in shrine premises are often provided by different devotees. I was surprised to learn that even the electricity bill for many shrines is paid in this manner.

Thus, ordinary individuals and groups give life to this institution (Kalra and Purewal 2020) by contributing from their meager material resources and by offering labor, energy, and imagination to it.

Take the example of *urs*, the annual celebration of a saint's passing, which is the biggest and most important event in shrines.[18] What I found striking about almost every *urs* that I attended, from neighborhood affairs to nation-wide mega events, is that they were the result of collective efforts by several individuals and groups. One devotee sponsors a meal, while another takes charge of lighting and decorations. A family takes the responsibility for arranging *qawwali* while another procures a sound system. While the coordination of these activities is more centralized in smaller events, as they expand, the power of any single authority to manage them diminishes. The biggest *urs* in Pakistan, that of Shahbaz Qalandar, is not only celebrated at the shrine of Qalandar in Sehwan but at thousands of events in homes, streets, film studios, and even concert venues all over the country and beyond its borders (Jaffer 2018). Even though Qalandar's shrine is formally under the control of the Pakistani state, it is only one of several thousand actors (and perhaps not even the most significant one) that organize his *urs*.

My characterization of Sufi shrines as autoconstructed may suggest that I view them as a democratic public space in the city. However, given their hierarchical structure and hereditary leadership, it is difficult to go too far with such a reading. While the publicness of shrines is rooted in their ability to allow different social networks and groups, including marginalized ones, to participate in urban life, I do not consider them a subaltern counterpublic, "where members of subordinated social groups invent and circulate counter discourses, that in turn permit them to formulate oppositional interpretations of their identities, interests and needs" (Fraser 1990: 67). The Sufi shrines that I examine are rather an urban node – that is, a public constituted by interactions and "communicative sites that emerge at the intersections of social and/or cognitive networks" (Ikegami 2000: 997). In Ikegami's (2005) public, the temporary suspension of cognitive and social networks makes them a potential transformative source for shaping selves, feelings, opinions, perceptions, and identities. Importantly, the structural position of Sufi shrines as an urban hub of Lahore bestows a certain political power on this institution as it becomes a site for forging and mediating relations between different groups in the city. In many neighborhoods, for example, Sufi shrines are the seat of local power and influence (Figure I.3). They are recognized as a legitimate authority both in the spiritual and worldly realm, and affiliation with them becomes central to acquiring influence. In contradistinction to its