



Islamic Devotional Ephemera: Religious Capitalism across Borders

By Yousuf Saeed

The most important space outside or along with any religious pilgrimage site is the market catering to the visitors and pilgrims. For many pilgrims, especially those coming with their families from small towns, villages or suburbs of big towns in India, a visit to a Sufi shrine is probably the only 'outing' they can afford outside their home or hometown, where they can make some purchases that are over and above their basic needs. The objects purchased here are not the essential items (such as food, clothes, utensils, shoes, or other domestic items), which they need on a daily basis. Rather, one finds here ephemera that are either of religious value or decorative items for their home, and often a combination of the two. Since this outing is supposed to present them with sights and sounds that are beyond their daily mundane life, it should make available objects that are seen as 'novelty' or 'spectacular' both audio-visually as well as conceptually. Of course, some ephemera such as the colourful chadurs, incense sticks and rose petals are purchased outside the shrine simply to offer at the tomb of the saint, and seldom taken back home.



Thus, the producers and sellers of such objects also have to keep that in mind and bring ephemera that will always be considered innovative. In that regard, being 'imported' also plays a big role in the value of objects – the buyers are already used to the objects manufactured by the 'local' producers and want to try things that come from abroad, with labels like Made in China.

Hence a large number of the ephemera available in the shrine market are either imported from the Gulf countries or Southeast Asian countries such as China, Taiwan or Malaysia. This is actually not restricted only to the objects meant for Muslim devotees. Devotional objects for all other religions, especially Hinduism, are also being manufactured and imported from China.¹

So, what are the specific objects available in the Indian Muslim niche market that fascinates the pilgrims?

¹ See these links:

'Popular Indian idols sport "Made in China" tags,' *The Economic Times*, New Delhi, 23 Oct, 2006, <http://economictimes.indiatimes.com/popular-indian-idols-sport-made-in-china-tags/articleshow/2230031.cms>

Singh, Gajinder, 'Gods, now made in China - Idols from communist neighbour flood India', *The Telegraph*, Calcutta, Aug. 14, 2005,

http://telegraphindia.com/1050814/asp/frontpage/story_5113622.asp

'Jagran Special: India's god factory thriving in China,' *Jagran Post*, Una, 15 May 2011,

<http://post.jagran.com/jagran-special-indias-god-factory-thriving-in-china-1305431891>

'Fancy "Made in China" festive items pushing out local products,' *India Post (Voice of Indians Worldwide)*, New Delhi, November 3, 2010,

<http://indiapost.com/fancy-made-in-china-festive-items-pushing-out-local-products/>

Tej Kumar, Ashmit, 'A Diwali made in China,' *NDTV-Hindu*, 29 October 2010,

<http://ndtv-hindu.com/news/business/2010/oct/29/615/a-diwali-made-in-china>

In general, these are either (1) items of utility required for prayers and rituals including prayer beads, utensils, *ta'viz* (talisman), prayer books and copies of the Qur'an, (2) literature of moral reforms, biographies of saints and chapbooks of devotional songs, or (3) images in the form of posters, calendars, announcements, and street banners, in addition to the objects for decoration. While there may be grey areas between these 3 categories, each of these plays a different role for the buyers, as well as for the manufacturers and sellers

Since it is a small locality with a large and fast growing population, the use of space for homes, markets and mosques (including many historical monuments) is quite chaotic, often making it impossible to distinguish between institution buildings or shops selling/promoting material for different ideologies. In fact, some shops do not differentiate between the ephemera they sell for either of the institutions. A shop near the Sufi centre for instance sells the sermon CDs of the Indian TV-orator Dr.Zakir Naik (who actually speaks against the Sufi shrines), while a shop near the *tableeghi* mosque sells CDs of Sufi miracles, and so on. But some shopkeepers are certainly aware of the ideological difference, and strictly promote literature of only their sect. Some materials such as prayers mats, caps, and beads etc. are in any case common utility items required by all irrespective of their differences. Here is a detailed list of the materials that are sold here, some imported while a lot manufactured within India:

- Objects like chadurs, incense-sticks, flowers and sugar-coated rice to be offered at the Sufi shrine (usually not taken back home, except for rice)
- Lamps, clocks, show-pieces and electronic items with religious images
- *Ta'viz* (amulet) and similar items with printed duas (supplications) or Quranic *ayat* (excerpts)
- Useful items like *tasbeeh* (rosary), caps, prayer mats with printed art
- Books, booklets (chapbooks) of devotional songs, stories, biographies of saints and the Prophet
- Religious literature, with titles such as 'How to pray', 'How to be a good Muslim wife' etc.
- Literature of religious propaganda such as *tableeghi*, Wahhabi ideology
- Audio cassettes and CDs of Sufi saints and dargahs; also of religious reform
- Posters of dargahs and saints, Mecca/Medina etc.
- Small framed images (of the above)
- Calendars (with both Islamic and Hindu/Christian dates)
- Urdu/Hindi Newspapers and magazines catering to Muslim community
- Handicrafts or fancy brass utensils from the local industry
- Objects of beauty for women: bangles, fake jewelry, kohl, perfume
- While each of the above materials cater to, or play different roles for, different people (especially those coming from rural and urban areas), there are some commonalities as well.

The common idea for the average pilgrims or buyers is to connect with that which is beyond their reach in their home/hometown, conceptually as well as visually. It should also be an object that can be purchased and gifted to the loved ones back home, who would appreciate its novelty and religious significance. 'Nai cheez' (a

new object or concept) is the buzzword for their purchase – something the buyers or their relatives back home haven't seen yet. Since they are coming from under-developed areas of the country, there is also an emphasis on the objects that connect them with 'modernity' – thus gadgets such as clocks, electronic calendars and alarm-machines which help in their becoming 'punctual' and with the time are very favourite. A clock with an image of Mecca/Medina shrine serves double the purpose. (The subject of video CD discourses is a different subject - being dealt with in a separate presentation). Since the industries in countries like China, Taiwan and Malaysia are well equipped and competitive to supply inexpensive items for Indian market, they flood the shops with all the latest gizmos.² Many framed pictures such as those of the Mecca and Medina shrines, are also being imported from the Southeast Asian countries.³

But obviously, for producer countries like China, Indian Sufi shrine market is not the only place for their clientele – their objects go all over the world, from Bangladesh, Pakistan and Gulf countries to the UK, USA and Canada. While the products of this industry manages to create many transcultural flows in the larger Islamic world, it may also be helping in the process of homogenising of the Islamic culture by imposing on everyone standardised icons like the machine-knitted white skullcaps (for men) and abaya (headscarf for women) which have become the global identity of Muslims even though they probably didn't exist so universally before the 1950s.⁴ Interestingly, the Chinese producers have not yet started producing images of the local Sufi shrines of India, since such images may not be perceived by them as a large enough or profitable market, even though their industry already invokes the Sai Baba of Shirdi with its related products.⁵

The only 'foreign' production of the images of Indian Sufi shrine such as that of Ajmer could be taking place in Pakistan⁶ or Bangladesh (or to some extent in the UK) where there is a sizable population of the its devotees, although such 'foreign' images of Ajmer never come back to India. (Please see the presentation about Islamic devotional objects being used by Muslim Diasporas in Canada). In a way, the hold of local industry for Sufi-shrine related ephemera in north India is the only factor that still keeps the diversity of popular visual culture of Indian shrine markets still vibrant and away from a homogenization.

Back to Visual Pilgrim website
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2 Quran Read Pen (a Made-in-China digital device that scans and reads the Quran in several languages) http://everychina.com/sp-z405ead/supplier-quran_read_pen-5772.html?gclid=CK3wl7bF2qoCFUIb6wod6HBk7A

3 Made-in-China Islamic picture frame http://tradekey.com/product_view/id/1236863.htm

4 Reverend Antonio Hernández, *My Kingdom for a Crown: An Around-the-World History of the Skullcap and its Modern Socio-Political Significance*, <http://hatsuk.com/skullcaps.pdf>

5 "3D Shirdi Sai Baba Photos" the dragon captures Mumbai, <http://shirdisaibabanews.blogspot.com/2010/12/3d-shirdi-sai-baba-photos-dragon.html>

6 Frembgen, Jurgen Wasim, *The Friends of God — Sufi Saints in Islam: Popular Poster Art from Pakistan*, Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2006.