



## Local Religious Tourism as Agent of Cultural Flow

By Yousuf Saeed

The locality of Nizamuddin shrine has seen in the recent years the emergence of a large number of cheap hotels with very small and cramped rooms for pilgrims, and many travel agents promising attractive tours to places where similar shrines exist. The presence of travel agents and their "devotional tour packages" indicates further travel needs of the middle- or lower-middle class families visiting from far away places. In many cases, Muslim pilgrims coming from places such as south India (Andhra, Tamil Nadu, Karnataka) or Bengal and Assam arrive first in Delhi and wish to travel further within Delhi as well as to places like Ajmer or Agra, and avail the services of these tour agents. Nizamuddin area also has its own railway station nearby, where usual as well as special trains for pilgrims arrive and depart. Thus this shrine and its vicinity is really a unique centre of cultural mobility. One can spot many notices or placards here that read in Bengali suggesting a large number of pilgrims come from West Bengal/Bangladesh.



The tour operators popularize network of shrines and offer modes of transport to suit various pocket sizes, such as by trains, buses or taxis. Since maximum pilgrims belong to lower middle income group they usually prefer buses for long routes as it is economical. Most of the travel agents who run tiny shops here do not own their own buses, taxis or other types of vehicles – they only act as agents between the pilgrims and the bus/taxi owners. They attract the pilgrims/travelers with economical tours and pass them on to the bus owners who actually take them to the places. Often these bus/taxi owners have their own favoured hotels and eating joints on the way or at the destinations and take the pilgrims to such places.

Many groups of pilgrims also come in their own hired buses from Bengal, Odisha, Jharkhand and Bihar as one can see from the number plates of the buses parked outside the Nizamuddin area during the urs seasons. Many of such pilgrims are actually too poor to even rent hotel rooms in Delhi and simply sleep on the seats of their buses.

Their routes are also normally fixed, especially related to the Chishti Sufi saints. When they arrive in north India, they must visit the shrines of three or four major saints in a sequence, besides of course, many other smaller shrines that might come on the way. The following list shows the location of some important saints (in roughly chronological order) that belong to the Chishti order whose shrines the pilgrims are supposed to visit, although at least one of them now falls in Pakistan.



1. Khwaja Moinuddin Chishti (d. 1230) - Ajmer
2. Khwaja Bakhtiyar Ka'ki (d. 1235) - Mehrauli, Delhi
3. Baba Farid (d. 1280) - Pakpattan, Pakistan
4. Nizamuddin Aulia (d. 1325) - Delhi
5. Sabir Pak – Kaliyar (d. 1280) - Roorkee
6. Nasiruddin Chiragh-e Dehli (d. 1356) – Delhi
7. Saleem Chishti (d. 1572) - Fatehpur Sikri, Agra

But for most people arriving in the Delhi/north India region from anywhere, the pattern or sequence of visiting these may vary. According to a tradition (attributed to the Sufi wisdom), you must start by visiting the youngest/newest saint and move on to older/higher saints.

Thus, if they are entering Delhi from east, north or western side, they first visit Kaliyar sharif (#5 in the above list). Interestingly, a large number of Hindu and Sikh pilgrims, especially from Punjab, Jammu and Haryana, visit Kaliyar sharif on their way to the nearby Haridwar for their Hindu pilgrimage. After Kaliyar, the second destination of all pilgrims (especially Muslim) is Delhi where they are able to visit the tombs of Nasiruddin Chiragh-Dehli (#6), Nizamuddin Aulia (#4), and Bakhtiyar Ka'ki (#2). Only after this, they embark on the journey to Ajmer. But since their travel mixes religious pilgrimage with tourism, from Delhi to Ajmer they might as well visit popular tourist destinations like Agra and Jaipur for sightseeing (often spelt in the signboards as 'sign-seen'). Thus, near Agra they are able to visit the tomb of Saleem Chishti (#7), and then move on to Ajmer, Rajasthan for the final destination (#1). Since 1947, they are of course unable to visit Pakpattan in Punjab where Baba Farid (#3) is buried.

This also brings us to the topic of Pakistani pilgrims visiting India to follow more or less the same route. Interestingly, the governments of India and Pakistan have signed pacts to issue special visas and facilitate pilgrimages for the citizens of each other's countries.

The urs festivals of saints like Nizamuddin Aulia, Amir Khusrau, Moinuddin Chishti and Sabir Pak etc. are especially events which see the arrival of large delegations from Pakistan.<sup>1</sup> Their tour arrangements are usually taken care of at more official levels either by their embassy or the Indian government agencies. A large number of pilgrims from Karachi, Pakistan, also visit Lucknow and nearby towns such as Dewa (Barabanki) since they (being original migrants from Awadh region to Karachi in 1947) are devotees of saints like Haji Waris Ali. But an intriguing fact is that there is hardly any movement of Muslim pilgrims from India to Pakistan despite the presence of a large number of Sufi shrines in Pakistan.

Another interesting aspect of the tour business in Nizamuddin area is its catering to not only the pilgrims of Sufi shrine but also to the visitors of the nearby Tableeghi centre, which promotes an orthodox Islam antithetical to the Sufi shrine culture.

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<sup>1</sup> See news item: '462 Pakistani Zaireen leave for Ajmer Sharif,' *One Pakistan News*, 14 June 2010. <http://onepakistan.com/news/national/48592-462-pakistani-zaireen-leave-for-ajmer-sharif.html>  
Also see: <http://pid.gov.pk/press14-06-2010.htm>

The pilgrims in the Tableeghi centre come not only from Indian towns but also from other countries such as Indonesia, Malaysia, the Gulf countries and Africa, and need the services of travel agents who can fulfill their international travel needs. Often such travel shops and cybercafes carry signboards in Arabic besides English, Hindi and Urdu.

During most of the Sufi pilgrimages carried out via buses, an atmosphere of devotion is created by a variety of media (music, videos, literature and ephemera) that is played or recited during the trip. Most buses are what are popularly known as a 'video coaches' – running popular videos on a TV screen via VCRs or DVD players. They naturally play the devotional music videos that are already available in the shrine markets. Such videos prepare the pilgrims for the experience of their visit besides augmenting their general piety. But these videos and sermons are also the agents of a cultural flow for visitors from far-away places. A large number of devotees/pilgrims interviewed during this study mentioned the peace and tranquility they get while listening/watching the videos and songs.

They naturally also purchase these videos besides audio cassettes, posters, chapbooks and other devotional items when visiting the different shrines, to carry back home as souvenirs for others. The visitors are also exposed to hundreds of announcement posters and banners on the walls around the shrine informing them about Sufi ceremonies and events in other locations. Whether they visit the locations (advertised in the posters) or not, there is at least some intake of information about more shrines that exist within or beyond their routes. Thus, the flow of information (visual as well as oral) continues between different places via the pilgrimage routes.

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