

Gallup Pakistan History Project - Weekend Read 1 ' Islam Pakistan and Mosques' by Murad Javed (Research Fellow , Gallup Pakistan History Project

The story of Pakistan's inception and its evolution is often narrated via religious vocabulary. Islam is seen as a dominating and instrumental force in the structural design of the country's institutions, as well as their functioning. More crucially, Islam is often understood as the most powerful, singular organizing and uniting force in Pakistan. It is viewed as harmonizing and homogenizing the eclectic and disparate ethno-linguistic (sub)cultures in the country. Similarly, Islam in Pakistan is also viewed as the hegemonic narrative in this state's life. This narrative is often the most recognizable and widely-discussed dialectical instrument in discussions and debates about Pakistan. However, and unfortunately, this dominating and singular religious narrative often ignores the cultural and social subtleties that are operative in Pakistan's diverse and complex sociocultural universe. While Pakistan was indeed conceptualized as an Islamic state for the Muslim populations of the subcontinent, the diversity of the ethno-cultural backgrounds and practices ensures that religion in Pakistan is practiced and enacted in diverse ways.

The mosque is the pivotal institution in the Islamic sociocultural structure. It is the central religious site for the spiritual and social organization and functioning of the Muslim society. The doctrinal injunctions in Islam make the mosque core institutional pillar in the Islamic state. Under its aegis, Muslims are directed to fulfill their fundamental religious duties, and use the site as a deliberative space for social, cultural, economic, religious, and political discourse. This critical significance of the mosque is highly relevant for any discussion about Islam in/and Pakistan – terms often used interchangeably. Given that the mosque is doctrinally ordained as the paramount socio-religious site, it must follow that if Islam is the most crucial sociopolitical and cultural force in Pakistan, the majority of all Pakistani Muslims should frequent the mosque regularly. Does current and historical evidence support this hypothesis?

Gallup Pakistan's longitudinal tracking of the frequency with which Pakistanis visit their local mosques provides revealing insights into Islamic practices and understanding in Pakistan. Pakistan, in 1980, was undergoing an especially significant transformation in national politics

and sociocultural evolution. Two factors were at play in this transformative era. First, the military regime of General Zia-ul-Haq had ousted the popular Zulfikar Ali Bhutto and his PPP from power. In order to overcome political opposition and internal divisions within the country, General Zia-ul-Haq rolled out a deliberate, state-sanctioned and supported program of a complete Islamic overhaul of the country. While Pakistan was a definitively Islamic country to that point, the military regime made Islam the principal formative tool for reorienting national institutions, government functions, and more crucially, sociocultural norms and practices in the country. With this change, Islam became the framework for (re)imagining Pakistan and its identity. While Islam had always been the primary and informal structuring agent of private lives and social relations, under General Zia, religion became the foremost and unitary instrument of nation-building and state-building.

Second, General Zia-ul-Haq's revival and elevation of Islam was aided significantly by changes in the regional and international geostrategic environment. By 1979, the Soviet Union had entered and occupied Afghanistan. This Soviet adventure was perceived and spun as a precursor for the superpower's desire to reach "warm waters" through Pakistan – a notion popularized and substantiated by Zbigniew Brzezinski, President Jimmy Carter's National Security Advisor. With the Soviet armies threatening to enter South Asia, the United States changed its attitude and strategy towards Pakistan; once again brining the country into its orbit. More significantly, an international coalition of Islamic countries was hastily assembled to reignite the concept of armed "Jihad" throughout the Islamic world. This coalition was deployed to create guerilla fighting forces of insurgents, who came to be known as the Afghan Mujahideen. Pakistan became the principal staging ground and launch pad for these groups into Afghanistan. In particular, Middle Eastern Islamic states rallied to the cause of Afghan Jihad and provided material, political, and moral support to Pakistan's Government. In the context of this discussion, this change in the external environment provided the military regime with a fillip to further strengthen and energize the continuing Islamization of Pakistan's society, culture, and politics with external assistance and approval.

By 1980, Pakistan was in the thick of a wave of Islamic revivalism and its formal institutionalization. One could reasonably predict that under this national wave of religious rejuvenation, most Pakistanis would have made the cardinal religious institution – the mosque, a

site of frequent assembly and social congregation. Gallup's data from that year, gleaned from a nationally representative study, shows that 60% Pakistanis claimed to have visited their mosque for Friday prayers. Similarly, 29% respondents claimed to have visited their local mosque daily.

This data shows that Pakistan in 1980 was undergoing a religious revival, where the majority of all Pakistanis went to their local mosque for the Friday congregation; and nearly one-third claimed to have visited their local mosque daily. In addition to the aforementioned context for understanding Pakistan in 1980, it is also important to add that the state actively encouraged the large network of religious scholars, clerics, and local-level Imam's to become active agents in the effort to incarnate Islam in Pakistan; and redefine Pakistan in a purely religious vocabulary. The data from 1980 can be understood as the immediate manifestation of the effects of the state's social policy under General Zia.

Several interesting dimensions need to be kept in mind when analyzing and interpreting this data. If religious revivalism was the most dominant narrative in Pakistan, then it could be expected that the majority of Pakistanis (larger than what was discovered and reported) would have flocked to their mosques regularly – especially for Friday prayers. One possible explanation for this is that religious revival in Pakistan under General Zia was primarily orchestrated in sectarian terms. Sectarian divisions within Islam, and differences in different schools of thought became more pronounced under General Zia's military regime. This meant that mosques and religious institutions had begun diverging along sectarian and ideological cleavages. In this environment of increasing sectarian segregation, it could be argued that the local mosque in each neighbourhood was not the primary site for religious-spiritual rites for all residents in the neighbourhood. Increasingly, more Pakistanis might have begun traveling outside their neighbourhoods to pray in mosques aligned with their sectarian identity.

Another caveat that must be placed here is that the Pakistani mosque has become a male domain. Men in Pakistan offer prayers in mosques, while the overwhelming majority of women are either unable or unwilling to offer their prayer in their local mosque. This gendered dimension in religious practices is widely prevalent in Pakistan where public spaces for religious expression are primarily male-centric. Religion for women in Pakistan is restricted inside the boundaries of their homes. The religious-cultural aspects of this normative interpretation and practice of religion requires its own analysis and exposition elsewhere. In the context of this discussion, the

proportion of Pakistanis reporting the frequency of their visits to the local mosques is perhaps mostly male.

In 2012, the same question was repeated in a nationwide study, to assess how this religious practice had changed in Pakistan after 32 years. Data from that year shows that 30% Pakistanis now claim to visit their local mosques daily – a negligible increase over the figure in 1980. However, only 24% Pakistanis claimed to have visited their local/village mosque on Friday. This number shows a remarkable dip from 60% in 1980, and problematizes the interpretation of religious practices their societal implications in Pakistan. Within and outside Pakistan, the country is conceived and interpreted in religious terms. Anecdotal evidence and observations suggest that religion in Pakistan has become more significant, diffuse, and powerful in shaping the lives of ordinary Pakistanis. However, nationwide data shows that most Pakistanis do not visit their local mosque for the most important prayer congregation in a week.

The explanation provided earlier – the salience of sectarian-based mosques and congregations – could offer one explanation for this number. This requires additional probing in another nationwide survey to test this hypothesis. However, the numbers available here suggest that perhaps the dominant religious connotations attached with Pakistan need to be unpacked and analyzed to understand how Pakistanis practice their religion. Nearly 12% Pakistanis reported in the 2012 wave that they never go their local mosque. Crucially, 17% Pakistanis claim to visit their local mosque occasionally. While Pakistanis register their religious identity with fervour, their practical association with religious rites and duties is a fascinating subject that requires in-depth deconstruction and analysis.