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Religious Dynamics in Southern Balochistan (Makran) during colonial period: A case study of Zikri Sect

Abstract

From its inception to the present, the globe has seen a wide range of religions and religious ideas. There have been and continue to be hundreds of religions on the globe, some of which are conflicting and some of which are to some extent acknowledged. This article is an effort to understand the religious dynamics in Southern Balochistan during the British colonial period in Subcontinent. The Makran region is significant in this regard since it contains a distinct ideological religious sect known as Zikri or Zikirism. This religious pattern has been a part of Makran's life since the late sixteenth century and flourished during the British colonial period. Zikris' religious thoughts and practices differ significantly from those of both orthodox and modern Muslims. They called themselves Muslims, while the others regarded them as unbelievers. Makran society is religiously divided into two groups: the Namazis (Muslims both Sunnis and Shias) and the Zikris, a division that existed even during the colonial era. Because the area was less productive for them, the colonial government did not intervene in the people's social problems. The Zikri community's standing has gone through several ups and downs. Before the arrival of the British in the region, it was the state religion of the Makran state. Furthermore, the political role of the Zikri community is considered, which was quite important throughout the colonial period. There was a big difference in British policy towards Zikris as compare to other Muslims and non-Muslim sects of South Asia. They were more studied and the difference among the religious communities is very clear in colonial literature but about Zikris there is very less division.

Keywords: Southern Balochistan, Religion, Zikrism, Colonialism, diversity.

Introduction

Makran is a territory that has stayed independent in its socio-cultural issues throughout its history, and its people are thought to be open to any faith and philosophy of life.¹ Makran-Baloch-people are said to have come to Makran from Central Asia at an unknown time. Some famous Baloch historians, such as Naseer Dashti, Gulkhan Naseer, Saeed Dewar, and Sardar Khan, assert that the Baloch migrated from Central Asia and lived in this territory for thousands of years.² Other British and South Asian historians, such as Nina Swilder, Hitho Ram, A.W. Huges, and others, believe that the Baloch entered Balochistan at the end of the sixteenth century.³ This subject of Baloch origin and settlement requires additional academic research to investigate it with facts and data from various sources using an analytical manner rather than guesswork. Southern Balochistan (Makran) administratively divided into three districts - Kech district (Turbat the divisional headquater of Makran division), Gwadar district (Epicenter of China Pakistan Economic Corridor) and Panjgur district.⁴ Makran is significant because of its coastal strip and its border with Iran, which supplies a variety of goods and products through trade but has never, had an impact on the socioreligious life of the Baloch in the Makran region. The Sunni sect is still practiced by the majority of the people in this region. Makran's religious beliefs have shifted as a result of forced conversion and slaughter. Massacres were first carried out during the Khanate period in order to grab and control the Makran state's economic riches. The second round of massacres happened during the colonial period in 1930, with the Zikris' antagonist this time being the Iranian group, resulting in a lot of deaths. The third wave of Zikri massacres began in the 1980s, during the reign of Zia-ul-Haq. On the other hand, the Baloch population in Makran usually says that there is harmony in society and in Makran, there is no distinction between Zikri and Namiasi. Religion is a personal issue for each person.⁵

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Origin and development of Zikrism

The rise of Zikrism in Makran, as well as the continuing importance of "folk" religious people, is congruent with the wider history of Islam in the Middle East. Zikri is a branch of the Mehdi Movement in Hindustan. The connection between the Zikris and Mehdavi is evident in all respects the Zikris still claim their leader as Mehdi. This is one of the movements that did not start in Arab-majority countries. This movement was regarded as un-Islamic and contrary to Islamic beliefs. Syed Muhammad Junepuri (1443–1504), the original leader of the New Zikri movement, was considered one of the most honest and brightest minds of his day. He was Sheikh Daniyal Chasti Junepuri's disciple. Syed Muhammad was named as Asad Ul Ullema for his bravery, love for God and for his philosophy of Jihad. Syed Muhammad left his hometown at the age of forty and travelled to the Deccan. When he came to visit, ordinary people and religious intellectuals looked up to him as their Guru. In 1495, he embarked on a pilgrimage to Madina with his three hundred pupils. He disguised himself as Mehdi when in Makkah, the birthplace of Islam. He later developed this movement by sending invitations to all the religious professors and kingdoms of the region. Later, Syed stayed in Sindh Tattah for a year to impart his religious teachings to the people. Later, he travelled to Khurashan, Khandahar, and Farah, three central Asian learning and intellectual centers. On April 23, 1504, he died in Farah.⁶

Historians and religious critics have presented a number of traditions about entrance of Zikri ideology and sect to Balochistan through distinctive ways but none they are considerable. One of the notions is that the leader of the Zikri sect himself came to Koh-e-Murad and preached his new idea of religion; this is far behind behind truth according to facts and historical records. However, some of the sources also show that the groundbreaker of Zikri sect was led down by Abdullah Naizi. He was from Afghanistan and there are traces in history that he meet with a reknowned Zikri first scholar or the from Buleda (a town in Kech district of Makran division) Wabu Syed. The name Zikri was introduced instead of Mehdavi because of great emphasis by Abdullah Naizi on philosophy of "Zikr" and due to this the movement in Makran was named as Zikri. The basic belief of the Mehdavi movement and its prayers were a philosophy to have closer contact with God or Allah and to devise love for Allah to take human more nearer to Allah. The first notion of prayer for Mehdavis was Zikr which was performed in groups and by the individuals.⁷

The Zikris of Makran practice the same teachings and prayers as the Mehdavis of Hindustan. Unlike other religions and sects, as they migrate from one place to another, they adopt local cultural features. The Zikri community adopted the same method by merging local cultural trends into the Mehdavi movement. With this, a variety of Baloch cultural elements from Makran were included into the Zikris prayer system.⁸ With such doctrines and beliefs, some experts question whether the Zikris are Muslims or adhere to a different religion. Religious critics have expressed varying views on this critical issue. Some academics who believe in the orthodox teachings of Islam regard them as non-Muslims who have departed from the path of religion and deny them any place within the sphere of Islam. Some academics are lenient in this regard, referring to them as Sufi saints or another set of Muslims who have performed the same action in a different way.⁹

Total population of Makran division according to the census report of 2017 is 1,484,788. Other than the Christians and Hindus the other population is counted as Muslims and Zikris are not considered as non-Muslims or others. The total population of the Zikri community is not counted officially but the total estimated population of Makran is approximately 40% of the total population of Makran and there a number of people living in other parts of Pakistan, Iran and Oman. With which the estimated population of Zikri community is not more than 1,300,000 lakh.¹⁰ This was because of the migrations to different parts of the world and during the colonial period the last migration of the Zikri community was they were killed and threatened by Abdullah Sarbazi and declared Jihad against the sect.¹¹

The fundamental belief of the Zikris is that Allah is one. The Holy Quran is the most recent revealed book, and Muhammad is the most recent prophet. There will be no more books or prophets after this. Zikris defines a non-Muslim as someone who denies the existence of God or Allah that Muhammad is the final prophet, and other fundamental Islamic ideas. Zikri ideology and doctrine is more identical with Hanfi Fiqa. They follow the sharait or the laws of this particular doctrine. For Zikris the quranic teachings are of four types:truth, prayer, daily human activities and affairs and deliverance.¹³According to some of the Muslims residing in Turbat, Zikri have a different

initial confession of faith words which are totally different from the Muhammdon confession of faith is a wrong idea promoted by some of the Muslim extremists. The only difference which is to be understood is of "Kalma" or the first confession of faith, "La ala la Allah Al Mulk Al Haq Al Mubeen Noor Pak Noor Muhammad Mehdi Rasool Allah Al-Sadiq Al Wahid Al Ameen". This Kalma also has the same meaning what Muslims recite as key for their faith and every Muslim has to recite it for being a Muslim. Hazart Muhammad the last prophet is equally important for the Zikris as it is for other Muslims. As Sheikh Muhammad Rakshan has receited Hazrat Muhammad name Haddi and Mehdi.¹⁴

Islam and its teachings alter with space and time, now Islam as a religion is more than fourteen century old and a number of new ideologies have entered within the domain of Islam. There is a delima that the entire sect rejects each other on some minor differences. For example the major purpose of prayers for all the Muslims has to praise Allah and ask for repentance. The prayers of the Zikris are similar with the Muslim sect Shias, they pray the early morning and Noon and night prayers in congregation but prayer before and after sunset are offered with the alone.¹⁵These all the actions and prayers are the same which are followed by the Muslim the time of prayers does not make a big difference. Another claim of the Muslims of the region and the world is that Zikris have their own place (Ziarat) for prayer which is equal to Hajj. This notion is rejected by most of the Zikri leaders that this is just a place where the first leader of Zikris and Mehdi had offered prayers that's why it is important for the sect and its followers. For them this is just a place where the Zikris pray to Allah and recite names of Allah and Muhammad.¹⁶ This is much similar to the Sufi patterns of prayers. While orthodox versions of Islam emphasise legal interpretation and reliance on obedience, devotion, and worship, non-orthodox and local interpretations of Islam have attempted to impact personal communication with God. In May 1998, the UNHCR endorsed this view; Zikris is classified as a Muslim sect, a "Muslim offshoot sect." These ambiguities, which are prevalent in society, are founded on a lack of knowledge of the Zikri sect's basic nature and beliefs, and the majority of them are power-based. Some factions have manufactured hostility among the Makran people and a schism between Zikris and Namazis throughout history in order to gain religious and political domination.¹⁷ In this polarized and divided world it is very crucial to confirm the things which are part of the faith are the cause for the rift between the people, nations, and religious communities and between the nations. Although there is no major activity or religious conflict in the Makran region at the moment, the younger generation must be aware of the realities in order to understand the key disparities in society.¹⁸

Spiritualism and Zikris of Makran

Sufism is a new cultural feature promoted in Makran by the Zikris. The system was devised by Zikri academics, which performed acts similar to Sufis of other Muslim sects, but with a different interpretation. The Zikri saints and disciples have no Mehdi's tomb or body. The Zikri saints and disciples do not have a tomb or body of their Mehdi. and all of their attributes are symbolic. Fakirs dress traditionally and mingle with the general public in city and village bazaars. The people of Makran divided the fikaris into three groups: Wali, Kotubi, and Abdal.¹⁹ Like other Sufis understanding Wali is believed to be touched by God and is often an obviously mentally and physically aberrant individual. Kotubi are more normal in their behavior and conform strictly to orthodox religious practices such as regular prayer. Among the notable Makrani kotubi are the Hajji of Zahui and the Fakir. Thirdly, the abdal is a holy fool, often a once normal individual who received a dramatic mystical experience which there after altered his behavior. One well known abdal was Hajji Nur of Mand. According to some local traditions he lived fourteen months at some unknown places as a nomad to attain divine power. With again inclusion to society Abdal Hajji Nur was considered as a man with wisdom and reputed to have manifestation divine power. It is very crucial for becoming a Zikri to take oath with a scholar having high status among the Zikris and also this system is family based, there had been and still have some families on whose hands most of the Zikris take oath such as Kulachi Mullai family, Essazai Mullai family, Keyazai Mullai and the Sheikh family. The man of these families is considered to be the man of wisdom and descendants of the Mehdi.²⁰Some of new groups also emerged with in Zikris due to economic wellbeing and getting name and fame among the community.

Religious Practices and Performances

Zikri, therefore, have some differences in their practices and religious performances such as fasting other Muslims observe fast during the month of Ramadan and Zikris observe fast one week before the Eid –Ul-Azha. This is a big

difference for the orthodox Muslims, is one of the reasons that some of the scholars and historians has not accepted them as Muslims. Muslims have a site for pilgrimage in Makkah and every year Muslim performs pilgrimage. Zirkris have a place called Ziarat (Koh-e-Murad) where they annually visit and some of the Muslims have the opinion that this is equal to the pilgrimage to Makkah which is an unacceptable and a great sin. Zikris perform the annual visit every year on 27th of Ramadan.²¹ There is no limit to visit Koh-e-Murad but approximately every year 50000 thousand people come to this place for performs religious duties where they recite the verses of Quran in groups. This practice is performed without gender discrimination. They claim the mountain after going around it in circle. Another performance which is very popular in Makran and among the Zikris is Chogan which is also performed during the annual visit to Koh-e-Murad. This activity is done with making a circle where a Zikri women set in the center with a melodious and strong voice who sing melodiously in Balochi and the other in circles reply the women with the same Balochi verses while the people in circle perform a dance which includes the traditional Balochi dance. Similarly, the Zikris have another ritual which is called as Kishti which is performed every month on fourteenth and fifteenth of each month of full night. Verily, the same activity is followed and performed during the first 10 days of the month of Zil Hijjah. This tradition of Kishti is performed on the several occasions such as on births, circumcision, marriage and the time of a good happening. All these religious and cultural activities are still part of the Zikri community and performed by the community with zeal and courage.²² Verily, these practices and performances do not declare the community or the sect non-Muslim because there are a number of other groups who have deviated from the main stream orthodox Islamic agenda and practices.

British era: development of Zikrism

Along with the cultural and religious affairs, the connection between the rise of Zikrism and political events are very limpid and clear from the historical accounts. With the growth and development of the Zikrism a new political class emerged in Makran with the name of Buledis but at the mid-eighteenth century the Buledi rulers of the Kech district left the Zikri faith with retaining the political supremacy.²³ Like other religions of the world, Zikri religion was flourished with the help of the state apparatus and assistance. Inavatullah Baloch has mentioned that Zikrism spread through Makran with the rise of Buldei dynasty and the ruling elite of Makran.²⁴ Similarly, the Ahmedzai Khan in eighteenth century also played a great role for the transformation of the Zikris to be Muslims. Historians are on the same point on the religious change after intervention of Nasir Khan the Khan of Kalat. One of the examples is the transformation of Son of Malik Dinar Gichki to Sunnni Islam. This change and transformation was not confined to the ruling elites but this influenced the common people at large. These trends of transformation were also done local level by the Mulla's and the Namazi's.²⁵ On the other hand, the Zikris also stop preaching with which the transformation from Muslim or other religious sects to Zikris. Hameed Baloch while writing on "History of Makran" that when the army of Khan of Kalat attacked the first neighboring area of Panjgur three brothers Noor Muhammad, Wali Muhammad and Muhammad Shafi who wanted to take the revenge of their father from the ruler of Makran Malik Dinar, told Naseer Khan about the Zikris and their deviation from the path and faith of Islam. Hameed Baloch believes that in reality this attack was to overcome the economic resources of Makran rather it was given a religious cover.26

The gazetteer of Makran has traced the history of Zikri's and mentioned that "Under the existing administration the Zikris suffer from various disabilities and many of their rites have to be carried out by stealth. No attempts are made at proselytization, and there are signs that the faith is under decline. The reason appears to lie partly in general progress of the people in knowledge and a proportionate diminution in the influence of the mulla's, partly in more frequent contact with the orthodox tenets of Islam and partly in marriages with Sunni women. In South Asia, a discourse on the Hindu Muslim differences is still going on that the rift in society was created by the British authorities but in case of Makran there were already differences in society at state level.²⁷ Like the Kalat State initiate a war on Makran with the intention to change the faith of the people.

In imperial Gazetteer of India Provincial Series Balochistan "About half of the people are Sunni Muhammadans and the other half Zikris, a curious sect whose alleged incestuous and other immoral practices appear to have been much exaggerated".²⁸ A similar approach has also adopted by A. W. Hughes, F.R.G.S a civil servant wrote a book on "*The Country of Balochistan: its Geography, Topography, Ethnology and Histroy*" has mentioned about the Zikris as not the same as Muslims and considered them morally the lowest and debasing description.²⁹

These all the statement are the evidence of the British non-response to the cultural and religious life of the people of Makran. This is one theory promoted by the indigenous and foreign historians and the religious scholars. With the advent of the British to Makran State the political supremacy was not checked and considered on the basis of religion rather than it was based on the families' reputation and fame. British like other regions of the South Asia devised some elite families and individuals and appoint them as the Nazim of Makran region.³⁰Some of the literature which has been claimed by the Zirkri community for having records of the development of the Zikri faith a book "*Dur-e-sadaf*" and many others were destroyed after the Nasir Khan invasion of Makran. On the other hand, after the invasion of Nasir Khan, the Zikris of Makran fought war along with the decedents of the Nasir Khan against the British forces.³¹

During the British colonial rule the zirkris were the most active group to promote the movement of Baloch nationalism in the first half twentieth century. Historians have given to reasons for this activeness. Firstly, they were the oppressed class and their ruling powers were snatched. Secondly, it was because of the religious pattern of Zikris promotion of equality and justice. Therefore, among the Baloch leaders being a Zikri was not an issue from that time all were agree with the concept of individual religious belief. During that time there are no traces of sectarianism in Makran. These all the sources have discussed the political and religious aspects Zikris and Zikrism during the colonial period and ignored the most important element as their role in Baloch society.

Colonial sources on Zikris are not in abundant because the British had given them less importance this was not in the religious sense but they were considered as same with other masses of Makran on the political and social fronts. This can be traced from the officials' documents available on the British Kalat and Makran. A book has been published on "*Makran Affairs*" by Hameed Baloch contains the official discussions and records of the Makran by the British authority on the government records also have very less references and records about the affairs of Zikris of Makran.³²

Conclusion

Religious practices and religious beliefs have been very crucial for the development of society from ancient times. The region has given importance to religion more than other elements of the society. Human status was determined by religious class or practise, for example, among Hindus, Brahmins were considered to be of high class due to religious knowledge and highness in religious highness. Some world events, particularly the arrival of modern ideas, have transformed this notion of religiously based society construction. When the British colonised South Asia, they created and wrote about the religious diversity in South Asia and the adjoining areas that came under British control from the eighteenth to the nineteenth centuries. After the war of 1839 between Baloch and British forces, Balochistan, then known as the Kalat State, came under British Supremacy. Makran region was a part of the Kalat State and directly became a part of British controlled region. Religion and society before the advent of British were already divided but internally there was religious tolerance and harmony like other parts of Subcontinent. In the beginning the Zikri movement was taken more as a Sufi sect rather than a separate sect or a distinctive religious idea but with the passage of time this harmony was transformed towards religious conflict. In conception and understanding of religion there is no difference between the Namazis (Muslims) and the Zikris both have the same conception of religion. On the other hand there are minor differences in practice of religion between the Namzis and the Zikris. On these differences the Zikris cannot be declared as non-Muslims. This is the reason that the British could not disturb the religious dynamics and harmony of Makran. This is also the reason that the British count both the religious groups as the same. In present age there are some elements which are working to disturb the peace of Makran by showing differences between the Zikris and the Namazis. British Makran, religiously was harmonious before and after the British advent. Zikris of Makran are a reality, as they can be found in various parts of Balochistan. Although they have stopped preaching, the Zikri population continues to grow. The main reason for this is that they haven't been disturbed recently, and there hasn't been any Zikri genocide as done before.

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