

Intransience of centuries old desert legacy: A case study of Religio-cultural traditions of Cholistan

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Abstract

The desert area of former Princely State of Bahawalpur is known as Cholistan or Rohi. It was a part of Great Indian Desert Rajasthan. The Cholistan part of Bahawalpur state covered 2/3 land of the State. Like the other part of Rajasthan desert, it was also, once a thickly populated area with flowing rivers and green fields. Its people were prosperous and well mannered. It was the central place of Indus valley civilization as it revealed by discovering many sites in the area. After the dryness of rivers and conversion the area into desert a large number of populations migrated to other areas. But the remaining population decided to face the harshness of desert life and adjusted their way of life according to the atmosphere. Indeed they were civilized and had traditional way of life.

In this paper an attempt is made to analyze their way of life, social values and religious activities. It is also stated that the Abbasid rulers of Bahawalpur gave special interest to this area as they made the Derawar fort capital of the state which situated in the centre of desert. It is analyzed the way of life, socio-religious traditions, dwelling and dress, food and habits, cultural values, simple nature, hospitality and other habitual manners. Moreover, social activities and celebrations of birth, wedding and death as well as religious activities, festivals, *urses* and fairs etc have also been highlighted.

Keywords: Cholistan Desert; Religious Activities; Cultural traditions, Festivals; Social Norms

1. Introduction

Cholistan desert covers 2/3 land area of Bahawalpur region. It is thinly populated area. The population once must have consisted mainly on Buddhists, now comprises of Hindus and Muslims. But in the desert part of the state Muslims are in majority.

Three terms are popularly used in this dry zone of Hakra valley, *chol*, *Rui* and *Dahar* which show the area was thick populated with flowing water of Hakra river. It is in fact an extension of the *thar* or Great Indian Desert of Rajasthan. The Principal portion of Ex-Bahawalpur State "Abbasid rulers carved out of the erstwhile desert kingdoms of Bikaner and Jaisalmer in seventeenth century A.D., ^[1]. The total area of Cholistan of Bahawalpur is "ten thousand three hundred and ninety nine squire miles, in which six thousand two hundred and ninety four squire miles in Bahawalpur, two thousand five hundred and twenty five squire miles in Rahim Yar Khan while one thousand five hundred and eighty squire miles in Bahawalnagar ^[2]. The total length of Cholistan desert is four hundred and eighty kilometers and width is varying from thirty two to one hundred and ninety two kilo meters less or more everywhere. It is situated nearly "one hundred and twelve meters high from sea level and between 27.7 degree to 29 degree north latitude and 65.96 to 72.87 degree eastern latitude ^[3]. The climate of Cholistan is arid. Annual average rainfall is 137 mm and is very unreliable. Cholistan has been suffering from "frequent and severe droughts, destroying vegetal cover and large number of the animal population ^[4]. The ground water, if available, is now and then brackish at most places and that too are found considerable depths. At a few places where potable water is found semi-permanent and permanent settlements can exist.

The Historical evidences reveal the fact which has proved today that the area was a part of Indus valley and also had its central place and so its people followed the traditions of the Indus valley civilization. There were discovered many such sites which had its link with Indus valley civilization. Discovered sites of Harappa and Moenjo Daro were "the two major cities of the Indus had a distance of three hundred and fifty miles apart showed the cultural values of Indus valley civilization ^[5]. Among discovered sites the Ganveriwala seemed of the same age of Harrapa (Punjab) and Moenjo Daro (Sind). The experts made an opinion that Ganveriwala was not a village or town but it was nearly a paralal inhabitation of Harappa and Moenjo Daro. But "it was big in size nearly forty acres to Harappa and only five acres small to Moenjo Daro ^[6]. It had also all the features of Moenjo Daro and naturally had similarity with it. The purpose to state this discovery is to determine that how much old is the land of Cholistan and has historical significance and background.

2. Religio-cultural Traditions: Birth, Wedding and Death

In the life Span of man there come three stages. They are: birth, wedding and death. Everyone who comes in the world has to go through these stages and then to go to next one. But the notable thing is that these stages or events are celebrated by the people of different regions of the world in different ways according to their own status, geographical atmosphere, climate and resources available. Nevertheless, in reality every tribe, clan, society and nation tries to celebrate these events as best as she can. She has the sentiments of pleasure and sorrow and observes them with same soul. The same situation is of Cholistanis. They celebrate now and then the birth, wedding and death occasions according to their own way and social

character of the desert region. They were simple in birth, wedding and death manners according to their nature. But they celebrated birth and wedding ceremonies with pomp and show and death rites according to their religious order.

As the child's birth is considered an event of happiness and pleasure in the whole state area with desert land. Particularly, the birth of male child was considered as a good fortune and celebrated a lot of pleasures at birth of a son. The people of Cholistan gave more importance to son and celebrated the occasion with full fervor, as they considered him as heir of his father or family ^[7]. They celebrated various ceremonies on the birth of male child: *Chhatti*, *Jhand* (shaving hair of Head) *Aqeeqa* and circumcision etc. They distributed alms, sweetmeats, and even cooked food among poor, neighbors, relatives and friends and enjoyed pleasures on these occasions. But on the birth of female baby they did not celebrate such type of ceremonies and observed these rites simply.

The people of Cholistan enjoyed various celebrations regarding wedding. They did marriage with in tribe or clan. "They preferred to arrange marriage with in family or close relatives then they did in any close branch of the tribe or caste" ^[8]. They followed another tradition regarding wedding manners that commonly boy and girl were engaged to each other in childhood and at reaching the age of puberty they were married with pomp and show. Moreover, it is said that they spent lavishly on engagement and also on wedding but they, sometimes, did expenses more than their status. There was also a tradition among them that the wedding ceremonies were started one week before the wedding day. Male and female singers gathered at bridegroom's house before a number of days of marriage. The drum beaters, pipers and flutists gathered there to show their art and extended the enjoyments and pleasures of wedding. Besides this the fellows of bride groom played *Jhoomar* (local dance) while camel dance was also held at some places on the occasion.

Obviously, the Muslim community was majority population in Cholistan while Non-Muslims were scattered in the different desert areas. Notably, wedding traditions and social manners of both communities were same but they performed their marriage protocols of religious nature according to their own religious orders. It is also said that "the divorce was unlawful to Cholistanis and the widows did never re-marry ^[9]. they regarded it improper. Polygamy was common tradition of Cholistanis and some of them had three or four wives. Nevertheless, they honoured the woman who gave birth to more and more children.

Death is a part of life. Every creature of the universe has to face it, whether human or any other creature. The world is mortal so the man is also mortal. The people of Cholistan also had their own ways to follow the various occasions as death. Regarding death manners, first of all they offered *Janaza* prayer (funeral prayer) of the deceased which was led by Mullah (Religious guide) of the area and then buried it.

A large number of Non-Muslims also settled in Cholistan desert. They adjusted themselves in social life of the desert but their cultural values and habitual manners were different from Muslim community and it looked a clear difference in attire and social manners of birth, wedding and death. Like the Muslim community they also had simple life style. They used simple dress, food and dwellings. They mostly used milk, butter and animal's meat of alive or dead except donkey, dog

and cock. They adjusted themselves in social manners of the desert life having their own identity.

3. Social Activities

The shortage of water is now and then a major problem of Cholistanis and has made their lives tough and miserable. They ever wandered in search of water in the whole desert and be oppressed to adopt a nomadic life. But inspite of all these difficulties and harsh life they developed their social activities and amusement programmes in which they had an opportunity to exhibit their qualities and enlarge their joys, and to get free from worries of life. They celebrated and participated in these ceremonies with pomp and show. Among these social activities fairs come first. People of Cholistan are now and then very fond of fairs and festivals and participated in them aggressively to forget their difficulties and find relief for some time from tiresome activities of social life. It had been remained a social tradition of the region that "the *melas* and fairs held all over the Indus valley. The fairs provide the people various amusement and funny items and programmes of enjoyment and pleasure but in verity it was not the only target of such types of gatherings. It is said that these fairs were not held for the sake of pleasure and passion alone but their venues also served as places where city dwellers, farmers and nomads used to meet once or twice year to exchange their views and goods directly or through the intermediary of bazar dealers. The fair of *Channanpir* has been remained the principal fair in Cholistan. It has become an index of socio-religious traditions. Notably, feature of the region is that there was held no fair without religious attachments and almost all the fairs held at shrines of the saints. The fair of *Channanpir* held in the heart of desert. The people participated in the festive ceremony zealously. "They made vows and offerings on its completion fulfilled the promise accordingly and made no attempt to excuse or postponed the vow but tried to complete it as soon as possible" ^[10]. It is said that there was very wonderful scene at the fair of *Channanpir* and an un-comprehended passion and a sense of rejoicing and pleasure that all the Cholistanis (male and female) were in special zeal at the occasion. They seemed free of all social and religious bounds of shame and prudency, social values and rites and expressed their emotions openly with full sense of love and care in natural way. It was their tradition which is held for long times up till now and that invisible thing brought them at desert fair from far desert and surrounding areas. In this way they had physical and spiritual relief and calm for, sometime from their hard lives of terrified desert. Besides the principal fair of *Channanpir* many other fairs and *urses* were held in the desert and other parts of the state. The people participated in such fairs or *urses* with zeal and enthusiasm. These fairs were not only the centers of religious and social activities but also economic activities as well. As the loneliness places of fairs or *urses* had been changed in crowded bazaars, where were available everything of need as well as food items ^[11]. The special feature of these fairs or *urses* was that the minority community also participated in such fairs, although they had held and celebrated their own religious festive fairs. That is the peculiar feature of desert people that they participated in each other ceremonies of such type without any fear and prejudice but in their own ways. The Non-Muslims community also held their own fairs and festivals freely.

Besides this “they celebrated all their religious festivals and tribal rites among their desert fellows with full delight and enthusiasm without any fear”^[12], they were so affiliated and attached with majority Muslim community that they become a part of their social character.

The people of Cholistan held and participated some other social activities and amusement programmes. Although these items were held at fairs yet they also held separately on pleasure occasion or for using spare time, sometimes. Among these social activities were: *Jhoomar*, Musical programme, spectacle, camel fighting and races etc. The *Jhoomar* was a favourite activity of Cholistan people. The remarkable thing is that even female played *Jhoomar* in their own ways. Mostly, they performed at wedding occasions, fairs, *urses* and spectacles and even, sometimes, separately in small groups locally to spend their spare time. It became an index of their social life. Another social activity of Cholistanis was sinning. They arranged musical programmes on different occasions of pleasure and sometimes for entertainment at local level. They sang local songs of Saraiki, Marrvari languages. They used simple musical tools made locally and tunes as well. Notably, the local artists belonged to both the communities.

Another social activity of Cholistanis was hunting. They were very fond of hunting and some of them also did hunting of wild animals or birds but they did not use to eat their meat. They did so only for avidity or to sell them to other hunters. They also participated in the quail and the partridge competitions but at small level. Moreover, they had a social manner that they were experts in searching foot prints which were called *pairaree* in local dialect. Among those “some were so experts that they told the bred of animal on seeing foot prints. Besides this they had an ability to tell the family tree of a person on seeing his foot marks”^[13]. It was very wonderful quality of Cholistanis which developed among them due to facing hard life and wandering in the sandy desert. Another social activity of Cholistanis was playing different games. They were fond of local games to their spare times. Mostly, “the game was prevalent among Cholistanis known as *sheedan* in local language. The game was very popular among children whom they played with avidity and interest”^[14]. They also played *deti danna*, *nonar patta*, *phutkulian*, *ikki poor* and hide and seek etc. Story telling was a favourite social manner of Cholistanis. It is also source for them to use their spare time and to forget their sorrows and pains of harsh desert life. They mostly made stories themselves by observing different events during wandering in the vast sandy desert and even real incidents caused to create a story. They gathered at a place near their village or lambardar’s *dera* and by them which later became stories and the participants learnt them by heart and caused to hear other young ones. In this way the art of storytelling was transferred from generation to generation. The tradition was so common that some people had adopted it as profession and as a past time. “They waited some persons or even a caravan to cause to hear those stories and gave calm and relief to their soul”^[15] It is verity that the story telling was an avidity and art but it was compulsion of Cholistanis. Because solitude is a plague itself and the loneliness of a desert could not be imagined that what it is being terrified. So they used to solve the problems in this job which continued them to engage. The notable thing was that the Non-Muslims had an equal interest in the art.

4. Religious Traditions in Cholistan

The desert area has been remained a part of Indus valley as well as the other state’s area. The major populations of the desert area of the state were Muslims and Hindus, while Muslims had clear majority and the second largest community of the area was Hindus. They were both attached to each other in various social bonds but had their own religious thoughts and creeds and observed them according to their own religious values and traditions.

The Muslim community of Cholistan was scattered in the whole desert. They led a difficult life in the sandy desert but had their religious values and traditions and observed them according to Islamic order and civilization. They performed the birth, wedding and death ceremonies according to Islamic laws and manners. On the birth of child “they said *Azan* in right ear and *takbeer* in the left ear of the child. They also celebrated *Akika* ceremony on the sixth or seventh days of birth according to Islamic manner. Regarding wedding they held *Nikah* (neptual knot) ceremony and was performed by Mullah of the area and Jumma Shah family held the job in Cholistan. Likewise, regarding death manners they followed Islamic ways. First of all they gave bath to the dead body and then offered funeral prayer according to Islamic order. They did alms for the relief of deceased’s soul. But they observed some other rites; *Qulkhani*, seven Thursdays, *chaliswan* (forty day’s ceremony) *varehran* (anniversary) etc. Which had no relation to Islamic order but a part of religious traditions of the Muslim community of south Asia. Moreover, they observed religious festivals; Eid-ul-Fitr, Eid-ul-Azha, Eid Milad-ul-Nabi (S.A.W.W), Miraaj Sharif, Shab-e-Braat, Giarvehin Sharif (on eleventh of each lunar month) in which. They distributed milk of their cattle among the poor, relatives and neighbours on the day. They considered it as an alms of milk as well as animals “which was given now and then in the name of Hazrat Syed Abdul Qadir Jilani (Rh.A) In this context their view was that if they did not do so their animals would suffer from various diseases and *barkat* (abundance) would vanish from the herd”^[16]. They celebrated all these religious ceremonies with full fervor and religious zeal. The tradition of observing ‘Giarvehin Sharif’ was not an Islamic order but they had firm belief in it and considered it as religious rites. Besides this they also followed and respected the Islamic signs and order in their daily life. They observed the fasts during the Holy month of Ramadan and most of them were careful about prayers and said prayers regularly. Begum Yasin has described her observation of saying prayer of Cholistanis as; “The scene of the men at village mosque, rich and poor, young and old, employer and employee, all stood shoulder to shoulder, heads covered feet bare, bending forward, raising their arms to Allah the Almighty, bending down till their foreheads touched the ground. They were performing “the closing prayer of the day known as Maghreb prayer”^[17].

Moreover, they followed a number of superstitions considering them as part of religious beliefs and values. As they observed a superstition about shoe. They considered perverse shoe as an ill omen. They called it *mondha khalla* in local language. The concept was that it was a disgrace of sky and disobedience of Allah the Almighty. So whenever they saw a shoe lying upside they changed it in right side immediately whatsoever they were busy. They followed many other superstitions of such type.

The people of Cholistan were very simple in their social manners but they had awareness of religion. They also protected their religious thoughts and manners. The desert area of Bahawalpur state was very ancient and had been centre place of old civilizations. So there were many shrines of saints and *Sahaba* (R.A) or *Tabbiesn* (Rh. A) scattered in the desert as well as other areas of the State. They were believers of saints and respected them accordingly. They went there and made votives and offerings. They also participated in *urses* and fairs held at these shrines zealously. They also paid visit to pilgrimage offerings for the purposes. In this way they showed their creed on saints and santons. They also had belief in miracles of santons. It is said that there was a small piece of stone in the mosque of Marot fort. The saying is that it was infact butter of camel's milk. It occurred so that once a santon stayed there. He asked for milk but the owner refused to give as he said that he would make butter from the milk. The santon got angry and the butter which he (the owner) had already changed into stone and still present for seeing" [18]. The concept is that the butter vanished from camel's milk from the day. They believed in many other miracles of such type. Moreover, they followed a tradition that they wore pieces of gold and stones and *mankay* (which were made of clay, bone or others in oval and triangle shape) around necks closely. Notably is that they used separate thread for each one. They found these things in the ruins during wandering in the desert. They had belief in them and considered them as religious values and manners. The remarkable thing is that the tradition was followed by the Muslims and Non-Muslims in similar way.

The Muslim community of Cholistan loved their religion very much and had rich values of Islamic civilization. In spite of hard desert life they held Islamic values and followed them zealously. Although they observed some superstitions due to living with Hindus yet they never violated the basic creeds of Islam.

As it has been stated earlier that Non-Muslim community also inhabited in the desert for long ago. Among them Hindus were in majority. They had different castes and followed their religious thoughts and creeds. They ever held their own religious thoughts and values which were prevalent in the whole sub-continent. They were free to observe their religious protocols without any resistance in the state area by Muslim majority. Even they both participated in each other's festive occasions although they performed their religious creeds and worships according to peculiar ways of their own. They also followed their religious traditions and celebrated all the religious festivals and fairs held in the state area as well as in south Asia. As they celebrated Devali, Dashera, Holi, Maharaj purse Ram and many other social as well as religious festivals of Hindus of the south Aisa. They performed all the ceremonies of religious nature and festive occasions with pomp and show, religious enthusiasm and freely. "They also participated in some Muslim religious fairs or *urses* without any resistance [19]". They even made vows and offerings on the shrines of Muslim saints. They also followed various superstitions as religious beliefs. As the tradition was prevalent that if they found a male or female in the morning, having a pot or pitcher filled of water, was considered a good omen. While if they found a person having empty pot or pitcher was considered as failure and disgrace for the whole

day. They also followed many other superstitions of such type in their daily life as religious manners.

5. Conclusion

Cholistan is the two-third of the state land where the water has always been the major problem of its inhabitation. Due to this reason they are forced to adopt mostly nomadic way of life and face many troubles for survival. It can be said that the lack of water and sandy desert had outlined the social character and outlined social character and traditional role of Cholistanis. This dryness of land and vastness of desert moulded their physical features according to the nature. They seemed hard, dry and ill-mannered in appearance but in reality they were now and then sincere, mild, humble and open-hearted. They were hospitable, affable, sympathetic and friendly nature.

Their dwellings, dresses, traditional manners regarding birth, wedding, death and social activities were simple but well mannered. They served their guests with fresh milk, butter and meat. They observed social activities and celebrated their festive occasions zealously which were an index of their traditional life and social character.

The people of cholistan has held firmly traditional way of life. They were simple and land lover. The Hindu minority, living on the land had the same sentiments. Living with each other for centuries they both affected one another in social manners and even in religious values. Both the communities loved their own religious philosophies and observed religious festivals and traditional values in their own ways zealously. They had respect now and then for ulema, saints and religious personalities. There was no conflict between two communities regarding religious matters. The both communities remarkably lived with each other in peaceful atmosphere. They also participated in social and religious celebrations of one another without any hesitation and prejudice. They were satisfied with their traditional life. If the people of other areas of Pakistan follow their example the whole country or even region will become the centre of peace and prosperity.

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