

Q: The concept of sacred fire in Murree tribe in Balochistan is a key belief system to practise a traditional system in the tribe. How many other belief systems you know that practise in Pakistan, discuss them in detail.

Belief System and Anthropology

'Belief system' as conceptualized by renowned anthropologists such as Clifford Geertz and Bronislaw Malinowski, refers to a structured set of beliefs, values, norms and practices that shape an individual's and group's understanding of the world. It encompasses religious, cultural, and philosophical perspectives that guide behavior and interpretation of reality within a particular social context. These systems often provide a framework for understanding the meaning of existence, human relationships and moral principles thereby playing a fundamental role in shaping cultural identity and social

Cohesion within societies. One of the renowned anthropologists **Dr. Akbar S. Ahmad** has called the 'belief system' as the core of religion. Thus, it is belief system that makes a person to believe in unrealistic and illogical rituals.

Explicating Belief System, Animism and Concept of 'Sacred Fire'

Belief system lays the foundation of animism, animatism, manaism and totemism. It makes individuals to believe in immaterial souls, spiritual significance of rivers, trees, fire, rocks etc. **E.B. Tylor** described animism as belief in spiritual beings inhabited in not only humans but also inanimate objects (**E.B. Tylor, Primitive Culture, 1871**).

→ Animism and the concept of 'Sacred Fire'

The concept of sacred fire alligns with the ^{broader} concept of animism proposed by **E.B. Tylor**. Because Tylor had considered

inanimate objects to possess spiritual essence. In Pakistan, the Murree tribe of Balochistan consider fire sacred and believe that it has power to conduct justice. **Dr.**

Akbar S. Ahmad during his work in Murree tribe studied that the people of this tribe believe that :

“ Fire is sacred and it will not burn the feet of the innocent and it will burn the feet of guilty only.”

So, their traditional justice system is based on this concept. Whenever a crime is committed in this area, the suspects are asked to walk on this fire which they call sacred fire for making decision about the offence. This is an example of **animism** from Pakistan.

Belief Systems in Pakistan

a. Belief in Spiritual Powers of 'Chinar Tree' of Kashmir:

In Kashmir, the Chinar tree (*Platanus orientalis*) holds significant spiritual value. People offer prayers or tie threads around these trees for seeking blessings or fulfillment of wishes.

b. Belief in evil spirits and exorcism:

In Pakistan, it is a common belief that is possessed by many locals. People believe in evil spirits and exorcism. For instance, in 2017 a teenage girl named Anwara Begum died in exorcism ritual in Karachi just because her family thought that she was possessed (*Express Tribune, False Beliefs in Pakistan, December 2017*).

c. Belief in ablution of sins by practice of self-flagellation:

In Pakistan, there are beliefs that lead people to have firm

faith that they can absolve sins or gain favor by practice of self-flagellation. Its best example is of **Muharram** where one of famous incidents took place in Lahore in 2009 when a man died due to severe head injuries. (BBC, superstitions in Pakistan, November 2009)

d. Belief in Evil Eye (Nazar e Bad):

The belief in evil eye is widespread in Pakistan. It is believed that envy or jealousy directed someone can cause harm or misfortune. To ward off the evil eye; people may use various protective measures like wearing amulets (taweez), displaying charms and symbols etc.

e. Belief in Ghost Marriages:

In some tribal regions, it is believed that if a man dies unmarried his family should seek a bride for symbolic marriage to him. This is done to ensure that the deceased's lineage is preserved and is looked

after in life hereafter.

f. **Belief in Numerology and Astrology:**

Numerology and astrology hold much importance in Pakistani society. Many people consult astrologers and numerologists because they believe in seeking their guidance regarding important life decisions like marriage, business ventures and career choices.

g. **Belief in sacred sites and shrines:**

Throughout Pakistan, people believe that their prayers will be accepted by their Creator if they visit these sites and shrines. There are many sacred shrines in Pakistan that are blindly followed by people like Data Darbar (Lahore), Baba Farid shrine (Pakpattan), Panj Pir shrine (Uch Sharif).

h. **Belief in Spiritual Healing and Folk**

Medicine: Pakistani inhabitants often practice forms of spiritual healing and

folk medicine that blend indigenous beliefs with Islamic or Sufi traditions.

Recently, a fake spiritual healer famous as **Pir Haq** was exposed by journalist Iqbal ul Hassan. People, him for having believed

power to cure of physical ailment (Tribune, **Pir Haq exposed in Lahore, October 2023**).

i- Belief in Animal symbolism and Totems:

This is an example of totemism. Emile Durkheim has defined **totemism** as a fundamental form of religious expression based on ^{set of} beliefs and practices centred around totem (sacred symbol or emblem)

(Emile Durkheim, *The Elementary Forms of Religious Life*, 1912).

For instance, in Balochistan camel holds cultural significance as a symbol of endurance.

j- Belief in Storms as Omens of Trouble:

In Punjab, storms with lightening are believed to be symbols of trouble and

misfortune. Such beliefs stem from cultural traditions or folklore passed down through generations, ^{perceptions of} shaping storms as foreboding events.

K. Belief in charisma of colors:

In Pakistan, there are many beliefs associated with colors. For instance, wearing black is considered inauspicious during celebrations. Red is believed to be a color of good fortune that is why it is believed ^{that} to wear red on wedding will bring happiness. Similarly, it is commonly believed that wearing green on **Thursday** will attract good luck and prosperity.

L. Beliefs associated with physical appearances :

In Pakistan, it is believed that certain physical appearances or features are symbols of good luck, wisdom, prosperity or bad luck. For instance, broad forehead is believed to be a sign of wisdom and good

fortune in life.

m. Belief associated with sacrifice of animals:

In almost all provinces of Pakistan, it is believed that troubles and fore-coming difficulties or misfortune can be avoided by the sacrifice of animals. For example, current president of Pakistan was famous for sacrificing a goat everyday for years in order to avoid any obstacle in his political career (Dawn, Superstitions in Politics, November 2015).

n. Belief in revelation of Dream:

In Pakistan, many people believe that some pious men and women are blessed by God to have true dreams or to reveal dreams. This belief led the people of Chakwal to blindly follow Syeda Bibi who was famous for having true dreams in Chakwal. One day she asked people to travel through Arabian sea without any boat in order to reach

heaven which she had seen in her dream; people did so and died which is named as Hawkes Bay incident of 1983. (Dr. Akbar S. Ahmad, Death in Islam: Hawkes Bay Incident, June 2022)

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

Belief system forms the bedrock of human understanding and serve as the cornerstone upon which the buildings of religions are built. As stewards of faith and custodians of tradition, belief systems within religions not only shape individual identities but also forge collective bonds. In this way, belief systems foster communities of shared purpose because they stand as testament to humanity's enduring quest for meaning and purpose by offering glimpses into divine bliss.