

SUPERNATURAL BELIEFS AND PRACTICES AMONG AGRICULTURISTS OF PUNJAB IN CROP GROWING AND LIVESTOCK MANAGEMENT

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Abstract

The present study aims to explore the existence of supernatural beliefs and practices among the rural agriculturalists of Punjab in crop growing and livestock management. The study furthermore attempts to understand the cultural meanings that the Punjabi agriculturalists attach with these supernatural beliefs and practices. For achieving these study objectives, the researchers conducted an exploratory research under the qualitative research approach. Data was collected from the rural agriculturalists using semi-structured interview guide. Interview were conducted with both the male and the female rural agriculturalists. Furthermore, a few interviews were conducted with the rural spiritual healers, agriculture and livestock experts and religious scholars. Supernatural beliefs and practices were found to be integral part of farming and livestock activities among the rural agriculturalists. It is believed that these beliefs and practices are helpful for enhancing crops' production and increasing the profit from raising of the animals. Visiting shrines, use of ashes, roses and salt as antidotes and allocating the share for pirs, i.e. spiritual personalities, and shrines are the major practices reported by the rural agriculturalists.

Introduction

Supernatural beliefs and practices are common in every society (Petrus, 2006). People in every sphere of life adopt supernatural practices attached with their beliefs in a number of ways for different purposes. Greater share of supernatural practices is constituted by magical and occult practices (Jensen et al., 2016). People usually have number of supernatural practices in their daily life upon which they have strong belief. These practices are beliefs in certain occurrences that have favorable or unfavorable outcomes as well as specific happenings that are responsible for delivering good or ill fortune. People in many cultures, for example, believe certain colors, days, and events to be fortunate and/or bad. However, the religious practices that are the part of belief system also change the course of thinking and behaving in both rural and urban areas. Belief in supernatural practices is a global occurrence, yet various cultures have different kinds and degrees of faith on these practices (Tahir et al., 2018). Religious practices are also included in supernatural practices. These practices play a significant role in the development of agriculture and livestock management throughout recorded history. According to McCleary and Barro (2006) religion and agriculture have a close relationship. Religious practices have the capacity to shape people's mind in such a manner that they adopt new agricultural techniques based on their faith too. It is also suggested that religion revolutionized farming (Falvey, 2005). Hence, in religious societies, it is possible that supernatural practices are more affected by religious belief system. Supernatural practices are the part of every sector of life and existence of supernatural beliefs and practices in farming and livestock management are no exception. There exists significant number of supernatural agricultural beliefs and practices that people perform for different purposes. However, the majority of these supernatural practices in agriculture field are expected to protect the crops and animals from evil effects of supernatural forces and for increasing the overall production in farming and livestock. Supernatural agricultural practices of Filipino farmers are also reported that are aimed to enhance production in both farming and livestock. They do not plow the soil much deeper because they believe that the roots of the crops get afraid of darkness. In addition, cutting hairs during sowing seasons will turn to decreased production. They also believe that sowing seeds should be performed along because it keeps the pests away from seeds otherwise pests will visit field in large numbers to destroy the crops (Yule, 1919).

In Pakistan, people in the rural areas are more likely to practice supernatural practices because they are contextually similar to Filipino's farmers. In the rural areas, they might also perform supernatural agricultural practices for increasing production in farming and livestock. However, none of the study has been conducted on exploring the supernatural beliefs and practices among the rural agriculturalists in farming and livestock management. Therefore, the present study is expected to fill the gap in literature by i) exploring the existence of supernatural beliefs and practices in the daily routine of the rural agriculturalists ii) types of supernatural practices to increase production in farming and livestock and iii) exploring the cultural meanings that the rural agriculturalists attach with the supernatural practices.

Methodology

The present study explores supernatural beliefs and practices among rural agriculturalists in farming and livestock management. The objectives of the study are exploratory in nature, hence, the researchers used qualitative research approach and based the analysis on inductive reasoning. In other words, under the qualitative research approach, an exploratory research design was

applied in the study to achieve the study objectives. The researchers selected qualitative tools and techniques to select the research sites, tools and techniques of data collection and data analysis. The researchers purposively selected a research site in one of the districts of Punjab province that is situated in central Punjab region. The boundaries of the district are linked with South and North regions of the province. Therefore, reflections of the traditions from other regions of the province i.e. South and North are also expected to exist in the district. Three villages were selected where the majority of the inhabitants are agriculturalists. These rural agriculturalists were purposively selected using a non-probability sampling technique. However, it was tried to select the participants, both the males and the females, from three age groups of 18-35, 36-50 and above 50 years. This categorization was also purposive to ensure representation of both the sexes and different age categories. On the other hand, the religious scholars i.e. pirs, imam masjid, agricultural field mobilizers and veterinary field mobilizers were also recruited in the sample to note their point of view about the existence of supernatural beliefs and practices. These stakeholders are important key opinion makers and source of knowledge for the rural agriculturalists. In addition, they make frequent contacts with the rural agriculturalists, therefore, their point of view was expected to add new insights in the study findings. In-depth interviews were conducted with the research participants using semi-structured interview guide. Interview guide was prepared by conducting a pilot study in a separate village that was not the part of actual sites. However, the agricultural field mobilizers, veterinary field mobilizers and two local key opinion makers also assisted researchers in designing and preparing the interview guide. As the topic of the present study is relatively sensitive since it is related to the established practices that also have their roots in the religious faith, therefore, the researchers had to take special care during the fieldwork and used the ethics carefully. In addition, the power dynamics of the rural settings in Punjab also demanded special planning and execution of the fieldwork activities. Therefore, the researchers visited the fields with the assistance of a local influential academician. However, it was also made sure that the local gatekeeper should be separated from the fieldwork activities to collect data independently. A female team conducted interview of the female research participants and a male research team conducted interviews with the male research participants. In addition, strategies of entering field and ethical consideration were given importance for ensuring data quality and no harm to the participants. Data was collected from both interviews as well as field observations were noted during the interviews. The subjective data was transcribed into English language and the findings were drawn using thematic analysis technique.

Findings

The findings of the present study are presented in both the predetermined and emergent themes that are as follows:

Supernatural beliefs and practices in everyday life

This study found that the supernatural beliefs and practices are quite visible in the rural settings in different aspects of villagers' life. Supernatural practices are predominantly based upon the supernatural beliefs of traditional and religious nature existing among the rural agriculturalists. It was revealed that the rural agriculturalists' lives are surrounded by many supernatural beliefs that have an ancient regional history. In addition to this, the study found how different practices are followed among the agriculturalists based on particular religious belief system. One of the research participants mentioned how "taveez dhaga, dam darood and promising and declaring are

commonly performed for blessings in the household”. Furthermore, supernatural beliefs also exist among the villagers for treating physical ailments, psychological illnesses and disorders, infertility and sexual dysfunction and protection from the evil eye. One of the research participants indicated that:

My brother was suffering from fever. We visited many doctors but in vain. At last, I was told by one of my relatives to visit a pir in nearby village. Pir gave us two types of taveez that proved very beneficial for treating the fever.

The study found how its common among the rural agriculturalists to visit pirs and other spiritual healers to treat psychological disorders. One of the middle age rural agriculturalists reported that “when my mother was suffering from convulsion. My murshid advised me to pray and recite few Quranic verses for her which I performed for twenty-one days”. In addition to treating psychological illness, the rural agriculturalists visit shrines in order to address the problems in their family and concerning their health and social relations. Promising and declaring at shrines for different purposes are the two such practices that the rural agriculturalists repeatedly perform. Visiting shrines, promising and declaring the share of shrines are considered helpful for overcoming physical and psychological illnesses as well as for treating the infertility. The majority of the female rural agriculturalists mentioned infertility and sexual dysfunction as the two major issues for which the majority of rural women visit shrines and pirs and also promise and declare the share of the shrines and pirs.

Visiting shrines for agricultural crops and livestock management

Visiting shrines of the popular pirs, religious scholars and spiritual leaders is a common practice among the rural agriculturalists to gain diverse benefits. The rural agriculturalists were found to visit the shrines of their pirs for increasing production of their crops and economic gains in raising of the animals. Visiting shrines is more popular among the women and older agriculturalists. On the other hand, visiting shrines is less practiced among the younger and educated rural agriculturalist. One of the research participants (male, 55 years) responded that “it is the advice of my murshid to visit shrine every Thursday night. During night stay, if you say prayers at shrine, your prayers will be answered immediately.” On the other hand, a women farmer claimed that “I visit shrine every Thursday for distributing milk. Distribution of milk at shrine protects our animals from diseases and prolong the lactation period.”

Furthermore, the rural agriculturalists visit shrines for taking blessed stuff from the shrines to gain diverse benefits in agricultural farming and raising of their animals. They usually collect ashes, salt and roses from the shrines. These artifacts are believed to be sacred. Agriculturalists give ashes, salt and roses as oral antidotes for prevention and treatment of different physical ailments in animals. One of the male participants (48 years old) told that “my father advises to give this blessed salt to animals for treating fever, digestive problems and for foot and mouth diseases.” Another participant (30 years old male) replied that “our pir asked us to give an oral dose of few grams of blessed ashes or salt from the shrines. I regularly give salt and roses to my animals and it protects them from different diseases”. Similarly, a female rural agriculturalist (60 years of age) claimed that “I have collected roses from my murshid’s shrine that I give to my sick animals in case of any health related emergency.” On the other hand, the rural agriculturalists

also visit shrines for increasing crops' production. In this context, two types of activities were reported by the rural agriculturalist when they visit shrines. First, the rural agriculturalists pray at the shrines for enhancing their production. They believe that praying at shrines is more likely to be responded because of the sacredness of the pirs who is buried there. Secondly, the farmers were found to collect roses, salt and ashes from the shrines to use them as antidotes to prevent and treat different diseases of the crops. These antidotes were also used to prevent crops from the wild animals i.e. mouse, jackals and porcupines.

Promising and declaring for agricultural purposes and livestock management

The rural agriculturalists practice promising and declaring for increasing their agricultural production and raising of their animals. Promising and declaring are a type of self-promise and the rural agriculturalist believed that these promises and declarations should be fulfilled as announced. In any case, if these promises and declarations are not fulfilled, a harm can occur to any member of the household, animals and crops. One of the research participants (37 years old male) mentioned that "I have a promise to bring milk of my buffalos once in their lactation period to the shrine for distributing in order to overcome physical diseases of my animals and prolong their lactation period." Similarly, a female participant (50 years old) claimed that "it is my promise to cook dalgula and distribute among children. I am keeping this promise since 30 years when I got married." There are many forms of promising and declaring that range from cooking food items, distributing milk and celebrating gayarwainsharif etc. One of the female rural agriculturalists mentioned that "we regularly celebrate gayarwainsharif. It is celebrated on 11th of every moon in the name of Sheikh Abdul Qadir Jilani. On this day, we distribute milk among the villagers with a belief that our dairy cattle will be blessed". The rural agriculturalists also reported the practice of promising a share of their crops' production. For example, one of the male farmers highlighted that "I had a promise to give 1/12 part of my crops' production for the poor in the name of Holy Prophet for blessings in my crops and animals." In conclusion, the rural agriculturalists practice promising and declaring and they believe that this increases their crops' production and enhance profits from raising animals.

Allocating the share of pirs and shrines

The present study found that the rural agriculturalists allocate a share of pir from both the crops' production as well as from their animals. This share varies from one agriculturalist to the others. Three different quantities of share were reported by different agriculturalists. First, they were allocating 1/11th part of their overall production of crops. Second, farmers allocate 1/12th part of their overall production. Third, 21st part was also mentioned by a few of the rural agriculturalists. They believed that this allocation is a source of blessing. There are two different practices found in allocating the share of pirs and shrines. The majority of farmers who allocate the share of their pirs were of the views that they give the allocated share of pirs to them. One of the male rural agriculturalists (53 years old) reported that "my father told me to allocate the share of our pir from crops and animals. I allocate 1/12th part for them. At the end of every season, I separate the allocated share and transport it to their destination i.e. pir sahib or shrine." Another female participant (50 years old) mentioned that "I allocate the share of shrine from my crops and animals. My mushid asked me to cook rice and meat to distribute it among the children at the end of every season". This suggests how the rural agriculturalists distribute the allocated share of shrines in a variety of ways e.g. cooking food items and distributing among the children, distributing wheat, rice in raw form and helping the poor by selling the allocated share. Another

participant reported that “I cook rice at the time of annual fair celebrations at the local shrine by selling allocated share of my crops and animals”. In conclusion, diverse practices exist among the rural agriculturalists to use allocated share of pirs and shrines for receiving blessings for crops, animals and household.

Discussion

The present study traced the existence of different types of supernatural beliefs and practices existing in rural agricultural communities in the context of agriculture and livestock management. The rural agriculturalists believe that the supernatural practices such as visiting shrines, promising, declaring and allocating the share of pirs and shrines increase the production of crops and enhance the profit in raising of their animals. However, the findings of the present study are in contrast to the majority of the scientific studies conducted to increase crops' production and livestock management. It is argued by the academics previously that the supernatural beliefs and practices cannot be proved scientifically (Ali et al., 2011; Gruber, 2017; McAfee & d'Entremont, 2017; Watts et al., 2015) and thus these practices, and predominately the beliefs, are of no use in enhancing production in both the sectors of farming and livestock management. However, the contributions of this study in exploring the supernatural beliefs and practices cannot be ignored since the empirical evidence collected for the present research suggests that the supernatural practices are integral part of both farming and livestock management among the Punjabi agriculturalists.

The study also highlighted that the rural agriculturalists follow supernatural practices i.e. visiting shrines, promising and declaring and allocating the share of shrine and pirs that they believe as helpful in prevention and treatment of diseases in crops and animals. These findings of the study are also in sharp contrast with other academic studies conducted on the prevention and treatment of diseases in crops and animals. Agricultural scientists and experts in veterinary health care believe on scientific innovation, technology and modern techniques to prevent and treat different diseases in crops and animals (Hoshide, 2002; Neethirajan et al., 2017; Nguyen Chau & Scrimgeour, 2021; Maruod et al., 2013; Muzari et al., 2012). However, these findings provide a unique contribution in literature both in the domain of agricultural sciences and sociology of religion. Existence of supernatural beliefs and practices among the rural agriculturalists is largely invisible in the academic literature. Therefore, the present study is expected to fill the existing gap in the literature on the existence of supernatural beliefs and practices in farming and livestock management.

Similarly, there is no academic study conducted to explore the use of ashes, roses and salt from the shrines for increasing production of crops and in preventing and treating the diseases in animals. It is another unique addition in the literature that how the rural agriculturalists consider such artifacts, i.e. ashes, roses and salt, an antidote to cure different diseases in crops and animals. However, allocating the share of shrines and pirs is supported by existing literature. Christian and Hindus also allocate share of their crops' production and animals for church and temple respectively (Barnett & Stein, 2012; Brooks, 2004; Gruber & Hungerman, 2007; Thaut, 2009). Similarly, Sikhs perform such practices that they believe are a source of blessing for them (Singh, 2006). This study also advocates how these practices of allocating share for shrines exist in rural communities of Punjab, Pakistan. This suggests that the tentative generalization of the findings of the present study is possible based on the contextual similarities in rural areas of Pakistan, India and other South Asian societies.

Conclusion

The present study explored the supernatural beliefs and practices among the agriculturalist in Punjab. Qualitative exploration of the data highlighted the existence of supernatural beliefs and practices in rural Punjabi communities that agriculturalists believe are beneficial for them. Specifically, the supernatural practices are traceable in agricultural farming and livestock management. These practices exist in form of visiting shrines, promising and declaring and allocating the share of pirs and shrines. The rural agriculturalists believe that following these practices enhance crops' production and increase profit in raising of their animals. While these findings lack the support of existing literature, arguably the academics cannot ignore the empirical evidence provided by this study on how supernatural practices and beliefs are integral part of agricultural farming and livestock activities in Punjab.

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