

TRAINS FROM BANGLADESH: TRANSNATIONALISM AND FESTIVAL AMONG THE MUSLIMS OF MIDNAPORE TOWN IN WEST BENGAL

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Abstract: The annual Urs festival, celebrated at the Mazar in the town of Midnapore, West Bengal, is the most significant regional Muslim event. Although the festival is a regional event, yet the celebration is attended by people from outside the state and the country at the Pir's Urs festival at Jora masjid Mazar. The Urs festival is also celebrated in other Mazars to commemorate the death anniversaries of different Pirs. The researcher collected data using participant observation and interview methods to study the Urs festival in the Mazar. The main aim of this study is to document the events held during festival and to understand the maintenance of cross-border relationships between two countries through transnational movements in the Urs festival at Jora masjid specifically focusing on the impact of cross-border pilgrimage. This Urs festival, with its regional origins, attracts participants from various regions and even from other countries, highlighting its global importance. This event commemorates the death anniversary of a respected Pir in the town and draws followers from diverse geographical areas, emphasizing its international appeal. However, information on the other Urs festivals in the town has also been provided here.

Keywords: Mazar, Urs, Muslim, Transnationalism, Impact.

Introduction

The Urs festival, held at the Mazar in the town of Midnapore, West Bengal, is a significant regional Muslim event drawing attendees from across the state, including international visitors. The Pir's Urs festival Jora masjid is the focal point of this culturally enriching experience, attracting a diverse audience keen on participating in festivities. The primary objective of this research is to study the preservation of international relationships between two nations through transnationalism during the Urs festival at Jora masjid in this metropolis. Transnationalism involves the complex interaction localized cultural customs and the establishment of connections that reach across various geographical areas (Levin, 2002). It refers to the phenomenon of individuals, culture, and financial resource crossing over and operating beyond the constraints of national boundaries (Longley, 2022). During the Urs festival, the Mazars attract numerous visitors from West Bengal and other regions, establishing the Mazars as significant tourist destinations (Molla, 2018). The specific focus is on analyzing the influence of cross-border pilgrimages. The Urs festivals have upheld the presence and heritage of Mazars in this town for many years. This festival provides a window into the tradition of Mazar culture and the prominence of Sufism, which is reflected in the observed rituals at the Mazars. The Mazar premises have become a meeting place for the gathering of Hindu and Muslim pilgrims who

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visit the Mazar for this religious event, thus continuing the tradition of communal harmony and peace among the townspeople (Singh, 2013).

The town of Midnapore is known for its significant number of mosques and Mazars. Additionally, it hosts the Jora Masjid Urs festival, which is considered the most famous religious Urs festival in West Bengal. This festival serves as a significant convergence for adherents of two religions, as well as pilgrims from various districts within and beyond the state. The Mazars renowned as a gathering place for pilgrims from Bangladesh contributes significantly to its appeal. The local and domestic Mazars in this area consistently draw a large number of visitors throughout the year. In recent times, there has been an increase in the participation of international pilgrims during the festival (Mondal and Chakrabarty, 2021).

The involvement of Hindus in celebrations at Muslim Mazars fosters a feeling of unity and mutual support within local communities and neighborhoods. A noteworthy observation was made regarding the active participation of Hindus in the observance of Urs at several specific Mazars (Singh, 2013). This article emphasizes the widespread popularity of Mazars, their significant socio-economic impact, and the enduring existence of specific Mazars. This is based on participant observation of the festival's portrayal of the Mazar culture perspective. During festivals, Hindus and Muslims visit the graves at these Mazars to offer *ziyarat* (prayer), make *mannat* (vow), *shinni* (complacency), visit Mazars and offer *nazrana* (bestowment of money or gift) and worship in order to achieve different goals (Maity, 2015). These Mazars experience a significant increase in revenue during the Urs festival, primarily due to the collection of donations, pledges, and subscriptions in the name of *pir*, as compared to the rest of the year. So, the Mazar serves not only as a spiritual center but also accommodates commercial activities enabling the generation of revenue. As a result, the management has transformed it into a multifaceted space for both religious and business pursuits in the present context.

Urs festival

During the field survey, Pirzada Alhaj Syed Shah Mustarshed Ali Al Qaderi provided information regarding the Urs festival. According to him, the term Urs is derived from the Arabic words "arus" and "aris". "Arus" translates to "bride", while "aris" means "groom", where it signifies the notion of union or marriage. The term Urs is used to refer to the moment when the marriage of *Arus* and *Aris* has been consummated, i.e., when the bride and groom come together in union. This is a significant occasion that marks the completion of the marriage ceremony and is steeped in cultural and traditional significance.

The term Urs has been used to refer to important Sufi death anniversaries and is still used in many parts of the world. In Arab culture, the wedding day is celebrated as Urs, while in our country, it is observed as the death anniversary of Pir, Wali-Auliya, Fakir-Darbeshes. In Sufi culture, the day on which a saint dies

or departs from the physical world is known as Urs. It is believed that during this day, the saint is reunited with Allah.

The Urs festival is an annual event observed across various distinct of West Bengal at different times each year. It is celebrated to commemorate the death anniversaries of *pir*, Wali-Auliya, and *Fakir-darbishes*. The festival involves several religious activities, including Mazar *Ziyarat*, *mannat*, *Quran Tilawat*, *dhikr*, and *niyazpak* (food distribution).

Of particular interest is the annual Urs festival, which is celebrated with great fervour to commemorate the death anniversary of notable Sufi saints such as Hazrat Syed Shah Murshed Ali Al Qadri and Mazars dedicated to these revered figures hold anniversary celebrations on the precise day of their passing. It is worth nothing that Taku Shah Pir's Mazar and Chand Shah Pir's Mazar share the same death anniversary. The celebration dates of several Mazars in the city were primarily established by the individuals who first began overseeing them, on the day a grave was recognized as a Mazar. A few Mazars were dated by the local populace, thus every year, the Urs festival is celebrated in the town. In order to understand the observance of festival days better, it may be helpful to categorize Urs at these Mazars into three distinct categories.

- The Urs festival is celebrated on the day of the Pir's death.
- The Urs festival celebrated on the date specified by Mutawali or Khadems or local people.
- And there is no fixed date for the celebration of the Urs festival, but it is usually observed on the lunar day or on the day before or after a particular Islamic festival.

Description of special train from Bangladesh:

In 1902 AD, a special train carrying pilgrims from Rajbari, Bangladesh arrived in Medinipur to celebrate the pir Urs festival. This annual tradition has been continued over time, highlighting the unwavering devotion of Bangladeshi people to their religious beliefs. The Significance of this event is not only limited to its spiritual importance but also serves as proof of the cultural ties that bring communities together across borders. This particular train service was initiated solely for the purpose of facilitating transportation for pilgrims in Medinipur, through a collaborative effort between the Governments of India of India and Bangladesh. Despite the various challenges faced by India and Bangladesh, such as communal tensions, terrorism, and smuggling, it is noteworthy that the movement of trains between the two countries remains unaffected. Despite the possible negative impacts of these issues, trains continue to operate without any disruption, serving as a testament to the resilience of the transportation system in the region.

TABLE-CALANDER OF URS FESTIVAL IN THE MAZARS OF MIDNAPORE

Sl.no	Name of Mazar	Ward no	Events	Rituals	Day	Time	Duration	Place	Organizer
1.	Mazar of Jora Masjid	Ward no-21	Urs	Mazar ziyarate, Milad Sharif, Waz Mahfil, Niyaz distribution	Before few days Urs	Morning to Night	4-5 days	Jara Masjid premises (Mirza Bazar)	Sajjadanshin Huzur
2.	Ala Huzur death anniversaries	Ward no-14	Urs	Mazar Ziyarate, Milad Sharif, Mazar covered by Chaddar, Waz mahfil, Niyaz distribution	6 th 'Falgun'	Morning to Tomorrow Morning	2 days	Khangah Sharif	Descendants
3.	Mazar of Chandan Baba	Ward no-14	Urs	Mazar Ziyarate, Milad Sharif, Mazar covered by Chaddar, Waz mahfil, Niyaz distribution	6 th 'Zul-Hijjah' (Arabic month)	Morning to Night	1 day	Chandan Baba's Mazar premises	Khadem's Family
4.	Mazar of Hazrat Ibrahim Shah (R.A)	Ward no-22	Urs	Mazar Ziyarate, Milad Sharif, Mazar covered by Chaddar, Niyaz distribution	27 th of Shawal	Morning to Night	1 day	Hazrat Ibrahim Shah Baba's Mazar premises	Khadem
5.	Mazar of Chupsha Baba	Ward no-14	Urs	Gosol, Grave covered by new Chaddar, Mazar Ziyarate Quran Telayat, Food distribution	1 st 'Falgun' (Bengali month)	Dawn to afternoon	1 day	Chupsha baba Mazar premises	Mazar committee
6.	Mazar of Pahelowan Baba	Ward no-04	Urs	Gosol, Grave covered by new Chaddar, Mazar Ziyarate, Quran Telayat, Urs pak, Mazar Ziyarate, Qawali	26 th 'Magh' (Bengali month)	Morning to next day night	2 Day	Pahelowan Baba Mazar premises	Khadem
7.	Mazar of Gambhira Baba	Ward no-20	Urs	Gosol, Grave covered by new Chaddar, Mazar Ziyarate, Quran Telayat, Two type Niyajpak distribution	1 st 'Baishakh'	Morning to night	1 day	Gambhira Baba Mazar premises	Mazar committee

8.	Mazar of Bakkarh Karthorhi	Ward no-20	Urs	Gosol, Grave covered by new Chaddar, Mazar Ziyarate	15 th 'Baishakh'	Morning	1 day	Gambhira Baba Mazar premises	Mazar committee of Gambhira Baba
9.	Mazar Sharif of Hazrat Jumman Ali Shah Bukhari	Ward no-22	Urs	Gosol, Grave covered by new Chaddar, Mazar Ziyarate, Quran Telayat, Niyajpak distribution	10 th 'Muharram'	Morning to night	1 day	Jumman Ali Shah Baba Mazar premises	Mazar committee of Jumman Ali Shah Baba
10.	Mazar Kala Pir Baba	Ward no-20	Urs	Gosol, Grave covered by new Chaddar, Mazar Ziyarate, Quran Telayat, Niyajpak distribution	12 th 'Falgun'	Morning to night	1 day	Kalapur Baba Mazar premises	Local people
11.	Mazar of Sentar Shah Baba	Ward no-18	Urs	Gosol, Grave covered by new Chaddar, Mazar Ziyarate, Quran Telayat, Niyajpak distribution	4 th January	Morning to Afternoon	1 day	Sentar Shah Baba Mazar premises	School committee
12.	Mazar of Hazrat Jhulan shah baba	Ward no-21	Urs	Gosol, Grave covered by new Chaddar, Mazar Ziyarate, Quran Telayat, Niyajpak distribution	Before day of Sab-e barat	Afternoon to Night	1 day	Jhulan Shah Baba's Mazar premises	Mazar committee
13.	Mazar of Chandsa Baba	Ward no-18	Urs	Grave covered by new Chaddar, Mazar Ziyarat, prashad distribution	13 th 'Chaitra'	Morning to Night	1 day	Chandsha Baba's Mazar premises	Khadem
14.	Mazar of Khaki Shah Baba	Ward no-17	Urs	Grave covered by new Chaddar, Mazar Ziyarate, Jolsha	10 th 'Muharram'	Night	1 day	Karbala Moidan	Khadem
15.	Mazar of Hazrat Balak Shahid Baba	Ward no-06	Urs	Gosol, Grave covered by new Chaddar, Mazar Ziyarate, Quran Telayat, Niyajpak distribution, Jolsha	12 th 'Falgun'	Morning to Night	1 Day	Hazrat Balak Shahid Baba's azar premises	Mazar committee

16.	Mazar of Shah Adil Baba	Ward no-07	Urs	Quran Telayat, Mazar Ziyarat, Niyazpak Distribution	Day of Sab-e-barat	Morning to Night	1 day	Shah Adil Baba's azar premises	Mazar committee
17.	Mazar of Buddushah Baba		Urs	Grave covered by new Chaddar, Mazar Ziyarate,	10 th Muharram	Night	1 day	Buddu Shah Baba's Mazar premises	Khadem
18.	Mazar of Badiujama Baba	Ward no-04	Urs	Grave covered by new Chaddar, Mazar Ziyarate Niyajpak distribution	26 th 'Falgum'	Afternoon to Night	1 day	Badiujama Baba's azar premises	Khadem
19.	Mazar of Golap Shah Baba	G.P- Siramani	Urs	Gosol, Grave covered by new Chaddar, Mazar Ziyarate, Quran Telayat, Niyajpak	10 th 'Falgum'	Morning to Night	1 day	Golap Shah Baba's Mazar premises	Mazar committee
20.	Mazar of Nashir Shah Baba	G.P- Siramani	Urs	Gosol, Graved covered by new Chaddar, Mazar Ziyarate	10 th 'Falgum'	Morning to Night	1 day		Golap Shah Baba's Mazar committee
21.	Mazar of Mustafa Madani Baba	Ward no-12	Urs	Quran Telayat, Niyajpak distribution, Iolsba	10 th 'Baishakh'	Morning to Evening	1 day	Mustafa Madani Baba's Mazar premises	Mazar committee
22.	Mazar of Sahabharang Baba	Ward no-15	Urs	Gosol, Grave covered by new Chaddar, Mazar Ziyarate, Quran Telayat, Niyajpak	3 rd Thursday 'Chaitra'		1 day		Khadem
23.	Mazar of Arefin Baba	Ward no-11	Urs	Gosol, Grave covered by new Chaddar, Mazar Ziyarate, Quran Telayat, Niyajpak Gojol Mehfil	22 nd 'Falgum'	Evening to Night	1 day	Arefin Baba's Mazar premises	Khadem family
24.	Mazar of Atahar Ali Bagdadi	Ward no -11	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----	-----

27.	Mazar of Golap Shah Baba	Ward no-10	Urs	Gosol, Grave covered by new Chaddar, Mazar Ziyarate, Quran Telayat, Niyajpak	'Gum' day of 'Muharram'	Afternoon	1 day	Golap Shah Baba	Noor-e-Alam Mazar committee
28.	Mazar of Kale Khan	Ward no-21	Urs	Grave covered by new Chaddar, Mazar Ziyarate, Quran Telayat	19 th 'Falgun'	Evening	1 day	Kale Khan Baba's Mazar premises	Mazar committee
29.	Mazar of Taku Shah Baba	Ward no-21	Urs	Gosol, Grave covered by new Chaddar, Mazar Ziyarate, Quran Telayat, Niyajpak	20 th 'Rajab'	Morning to Night	1 day	Taku Shah Baba's Mazar premises	Khadem
30.	Mazr of Khwaja Noor Muhammad Chishti	Ward no-20	Urs	Gosol, Grave covered by new Chaddar, Mazar Ziyarate, Qawali	29 th 'Falgun'	Night	1 day	Ghambhira Baba's Mazar premises	Khadem
31	Mazar of Hazrat Jalal Uddin Bukhari	Ward no-23	Urs	Mazar Ziyarate, Jolsha	20 th March	Morning to Night	1 day	Midnapore Circuit house premises	Khadem
32.	Mazar of Syed Shah Baba	Ward no-25	Urs	Gosol, Grave covered by new Chaddar, Mazar Ziyarate	Day of Sab-e-barat	Night	1 Day	Syed Shah Baba's Mazar premises	Tantigeria Cemetery committee
33.	Mazar of Deowan Chamru Baba	Ward no-23	Urs	Gosol, Grave covered by new Chaddar, Mazar Ziyarate, Quran Telayat, Niyajpak	26 th 'Chaitra'	Morning to Night	1 day	Deowan Chamru Baba's Mazar premises	Khadem's Family
34.	Mazar of Selim Shah Baba	Ward no-13	Urs	Gosol, Grave covered by new Chaddar, Mazar Ziyarate, Niyajpak	22 nd 'Falgun'	Afternoon to Night	1 day	Selim Shah Baba's Mazar premises	Khadem

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35	Mazar of Banki Shaha Baba	Ward no-13	Urs	Gosol, Grave covered by new Chaddar, Mazar Ziyarate, Niyajpak	4 th 'Baishakh'	Afternoon to Night	1 day	Banki Shaha Baba's Mazar premises	Khadem
36	Mazar of Ankarh Shah Baba	G.P-Kankabati	Urs	Gosol, Grave covered by new Chaddar, Mazar Ziyarate, Quran Telayat, two type Niyajpak	2 nd 'Magh'	Morning to Night	1 day	Ankarh Shah Baba's Mazar premises	Khadem

This highlights the importance of continued collaboration and cooperation between the two nations to ensure the smooth functioning of essential transportation systems. After the war between India and Pakistan in 1965, train services between India and Bangladesh stopped. In 2008, the Governments of India and Bangladesh took the initiative to resume the train movement between the two countries, which had been halted for several years. There were some incidents that occurred, but they didn't cause any disruption in the movement of Urs special trains. Despite the communal riots of 1946 which resulted in widespread violence and destruction, the Urs festival train continued to operate uninterrupted. The train stopped due to the following reasons: 1965 India-Pakistan war, 1971 Bangladesh liberation war, 1992 communal agitation in India, 1994 Surat famine, and 2021-2022 covid-19 pandemic. Until 2019, an annual train service was operational during the Urs festival, which involved the train's arrival in the city for a single day. During a train journey in 2019, Syed Rashid Ali Al Qaderi communicated to the leader of the pilgrimage group, wishing for an extension of their trip by one additional day. The first time the special train was coming for two days for the Urs festival in 2022. I have taken this information through an interview with Md. Mahbub Ul Alam, the leader of these pilgrims.

Syed Shah Irshad Ali Al Qadri, the Middle son of the Pir, organized the Urs Festival in 1902. Every year, the Urs of his Father Ala Huzur is celebrated on the 6th of *Falgun*, while his Urs is celebrated on the 3rd and 4th *Falgun*. During the Urs festival, thousands of Pilgrims from different states and districts of the country gather to celebrate. It is worth nothing that a highly- equipped special train from Bangladesh carries 2-3 thousand pilgrims for the Urs festival, making it the most fascinating aspect of the event.

At this time, the pilgrimage to this pir's grave, *Ziyarat*, starts three to four days in advance, and pilgrims get a chance to visit the grave after standing in long queues. They carry flower bouquets, sweet food as prasada, and incense sticks to the Mazar.

Apart from the Jora Masjid premises, the Urs festival is also celebrated at other places including Rouza-E-Aqdua, Khanqah Sharif, Chandan Baba Mazar premises, and Chillapak.

Currently, the Urs festival is held in 2024 under the supervision of Sajjadansin Hujur Hazrat Syed Shah Yasub Ali Al Qadri. The 123rd Urs festival of Maulapak has concluded.

The Jora Masjid provide access to the Mazar for both men and women visiting it during their *Ziyarat* of the pir's grave. Men can enter the Mazar through the front gate, while women can access it through the dedicated back gate. After entering through the women's entrance, there is a field. *Naat* and *Isale Sawab* were held from dusk to 10 pm on the premises of Jora masjid. Devotees were *Ziyarat* of the graves in this Mazar throughout the night.

The increasing popularity of the Mazar as a tourist destination can be attributed

to a rise in the level of belief and confidence in the Mazar. This is evidenced by the growing annual number of pilgrims visiting the Mazar. The Urs have a profound impact on the socio-economic, cultural and religious structure of the town. The construction of the Mazar and the events organized to promote cultural development contribute to establishing a framework for economic growth at the Mazar. The increasing number of pilgrims from the state and Bangladesh traveling to this location by train has led to greater reliance on local transportation to facilitate travel between pilgrimage sites. During festive periods, local toto divers have the opportunity to increase their earnings as compared to regular times of the year. Clothing, shoes, and toys are purchased from this town by individuals from other districts within the state and from outside the state. Additionally, Bangladeshis buy aluminium utensils, particularly spices such as cumin, as well as sweets and snacks, others food items, fragrance, and handicrafts from this town. Visitors to the Mazar not only make purchases from the shopkeepers in the Mazar premises but also patronize the town's various markets including the Boro bazar, Choto bazar, School Morh bazar and other locations throughout the town.

Conclusion

The majority of Urs festivals in Midnapore town are localized within this specific area. Orthodox Muslims express the view that the Urs festival celebrated at Mazars does not align with Islamic practices. They say that since Allah, Hazrat Muhammad Rasulullah, and companions did not mention anything about this kind of observation of death (Urs), it is considered bid'ah for men and women to sit together in the Mazar. The Urs festival, commemorating the death anniversary of Jora Masjid pir Syed Shah Murshed Ali Al Qaderi, is a major pilgrimage event that draws both domestic and international pilgrims to the town. During this festival, our country welcomes hundreds of thousands of pilgrims from Bangladesh who cross their country's borders to visit. The festival assumes a critical role in shaping the bedrock of international relations through transnationalism between the two countries. Upon the arrival of the pilgrims in Medinipur, local authorities have implemented administrative, political, law enforcement, and medical measures annually to ensure the well-being of the visitors. This festival not only contributes to the cultural vibrancy of the city but also has a significant economic impact. Local traders eagerly anticipate the festival and the influx of pilgrims from Bangladesh, which contributes to the city's economic growth throughout the year.

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