



Vol. 3 No. 8 (August) (2025)

## **The Religious Festivals of District Mansehra: A Comparative Analysis**

**Dr. Maseeh Ullah**

AUSOM, Air University, Islamabad

**Dr. Junaid Bashir**

Tourism & Hospitality Department, FUSST, Rawalpindi.

### **Abstract**

This research explores the diverse and complex religious and cultural landscape of District Mansehra, located in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Pakistan. This land bears the amalgamated culture historically forged by Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism, and Islam when they were at their peak. This study examines through qualitative methods including interviews, archival analysis, and document research, how pre-Islamic rituals have blended with Islamic practices to form local customs and emphasized on the festivals such as Urs Shab-e-Barat, and Mumzaday, which are popularly associated with Islam, yet have nothing to do with Islam in actuality. The paper argues that while such syncretism makes a culture richer, it also induces turbidity and overshadows the purity. It also raises questions about the religious orthodoxy and authenticity. In a nutshell, this research underscores how historical pluralism shapes religious expression in Mansehra and raises a firm boundary between faith and culture.

**Keywords:** Mansehra, Syncretism, Religious festivals, Cultural hybridity, Islam in South Asia, Urs, Shab-e-Barat, Hindu-Buddhist influence, Sikh heritage, Qualitative research, Hazara, Culture.

### **Introduction**

Located in Khyber Pakhtunkhwa (34°12'-35°50'N, 74°08'-75°08'E), Mansehra spans 4,579km<sup>2</sup> of mountains, valleys, and rivers. It serves as a hub for nearby settlements like Kaghan Valley, Battagram and faces urbanization due to population influx<sup>1</sup>.

Mansehra's history reflects diverse influences among which the Greek, Persian, and Buddhist are evidently found in archaeological sites like Zardhiri. This region transitioned from Hinduism/Buddhism to Islam, while retaining the remnants of the left behind cultures.

Culture is something that is shaped by interactive responses that forms religious, societal, as well as artistic structures imprinted on the psyche<sup>2</sup>. It evolves through internal and external influences, with communities adhering to shared ideals or rebelling or making a new tradition of their own. In Mansehra, the decline of Buddhism and Hinduism allowed Islam to develop its roots, however the pre-existing remnants of these religions remained as cultural practices persisting among the converts. This led to syncretic religious observances. The Muslims in Mansehra have co-existed with other faiths and with time they adopted elements from Hindu, Buddhist, and Sikh traditions in festivals like weddings (Nikkah), funerals (Janazah), and Urs (Saint veneration). These practices often blend Islamic tenets with local customs, and this raises questions about cultural authenticity and religious orthodoxy.



## Vol. 3 No. 8 (August) (2025)

While differing in culture, this very attribute makes Mansehra something of a wonder itself, because it contains a variety of ethnicities, and countless opportunities to compare and analyze the past culture that resided among the people and left its trace.

### Aims & Objectives

This study aimed to accomplish the following objectives:

- To analyze the syncretic religious practices.
- To document historical influences on Mansehra's Islamic traditions.

### Research Methodology

This research employed a qualitative and descriptive research design to investigate the syncretic religious practices of Mansehra, this design included:

1. **Interviews:** Conducted with local communities, religious leaders (Ulama), and scholars to explore the myths and practices from the Islamic point of view.
2. **Archival Research:** Past research from leveraged institutional records, case studies like UNESCO's Intangible Culture Reports, and field assessments.
3. **Document Analysis:** Examined historical texts and local documentation to contextualize the findings and draw connections.

In addition to above, I adopted an **interpretive qualitative framework** because it is particularly suited for exploration of cultural and religious phenomena due to its quality of allowing in-depth examination of meanings, perceptions, and live experiences of the local community<sup>3</sup>.

### Ethical Considerations

This study adhered to the following ethical guidelines:

- **The Data Protection Act (1998):** to ensure confidentiality of interviewed personnel.
- **Freedom of Information Act (2000):** to have governed access to public records.

### Data Analysis

A thematic mode of data analysis was applied to interview transcripts and field notes which identified:

- **Key patterns** in syncretic practices like Islamic prayers incorporating local music.
- **Community tensions** between mainstream Islam and cultural adaptations.
- **Authenticity metrics** people had that made them prioritize spiritual and environmental aspects of rituals over stern doctrinal consistency.

### Limitations

**Sample bias:** Rural perspectives might be overrepresented.

**Reliance on memory:** Some oral histories could reflect idealized pasts due to unavailability of scripture.



## Literature Review

Mansehra was formerly known as Pakhli Sarkar but it still holds the rich and complex religious and cultural history made by successive empires and spiritual traditions taking their turns. From the Mauryan dynasty under the Emperor Ashoka to the Hindu Shahi and Ghaznavid rulers, the region of Mansehra has witnessed a diverse tapestry of faiths. The famous Ashokan rock edicts near Bereri Hill in Mansehra affirm the area's historical significance as a religious center for early Buddhists and Hindus<sup>4</sup>.

Throughout the centuries, Mansehra was ruled by several dynasties that include the Maurya, Hindu Shahis, Turks, Mughals, and later Sikhs and the British. Each period left its cultural footprint that contributed to its former layer of spiritual identity. Hindu influence is more evident in the continued reverence for deities like Shiva on Mount Bareri, while Buddhist traces are found more through regional architectural symbols and ritual places<sup>5</sup>.

Islam became prominent in the region during the Ghaznavid and Ghurid invasions, integrating earlier traditions into evolving local Islamic customs. Sufi traditions in particular played a central role in this process, embracing the local customs to ease conversion and encouraging communal harmony.<sup>6</sup>

Academic studies confirm that symbolic rituals from prehistoric Balochistan and Indus valley carried forward into Islamic and other religious practices in Mansehra region<sup>7</sup>. (Cambridge University Press.). Similarly, the mythological and ritual traditions of Hinduism shaped the social fabric<sup>8</sup>. (Barnes Historical Series.), while Sikhism which emerged in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, contributed values of community service and equality<sup>9</sup>. Jainism, though it was less dominant, also left a footprint through artistic motifs discovered in ancient ruins<sup>10</sup>.

Scholars have also emphasized that Islam in South Asia absorbed many indigenous customs into its entity, especially those tied to community festivals, shrine veneration, and marriage practices<sup>11</sup>. Architecture also served as a medium for religious expression, blending aesthetic traditions from Islamic, Hindu, and Buddhist sources<sup>12</sup>.

Overall, the religious practices in Mansehra reflect centuries of cultural and spiritual integration, and recognizing this complexity is the key to understanding how contemporary festivals and rituals are practiced in a diversely and historically marked settling.

## Discussion

### Religious Festivals of Religions

Religion has long influenced human civilization and with that, it shaped cultures, changed moral cultures and social structures, and still continues to play a vital role in personal and collective identities. Among the major religions that had a grand influence in the festival culture of Mansehra are the following:

- a) Hinduism
- b) Buddhism
- c) Sikhism
- d) Islam

### Hinduism

Characterized by polytheism and a belief in reincarnation, karma, and dharma, Hinduism is considered to be the world's oldest living religion among its



## Vol. 3 No. 8 (August) (2025)

believers. It emphasizes on the cyclical nature of life and the journey of our souls through multiple births as different beings. The major festivals of Hinduism include the following:

- **Diwali**
- **Holi**
- **Navratri**

### **Buddhism**

Derived religion's founder, Siddharta Gautama also called the Buddha, this religion emphasizes on the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path as a way to overcome suffering and attain a state of enlightenment. It rejects the caste system and promotes non-violence, compassion, and mindfulness. The major festivals of this religion include:

- **Vesak**
- **Magha Puja**

### **Sikhism**

Guru Nanak founded Sikhism in the 15<sup>th</sup> century in Punjab as a monotheistic religion that focuses on devotion to one God, equality, and service. It denounces idol worship and caste distinctions. The key Sikh celebrations include:

- **Guru Nanak Gurpurab**
- **Baisakhi**

### **Islam**

Islam is a strictly monotheistic religion revealed through the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), generally based on the Five Pillars: faith, prayer, charity, fasting, and pilgrimage. Muslims believe in one God (Allah), the Quran as the final revelation, and the Day of Judgement. Islam has only two festivals:

- **Eid-ul-Fitr**
- **Eid-ul-Adha**

All these religions above are not only a religious obligation but they're also a culture of a community expressed in spirituality and moral values. While the beliefs might differ, each religion's festivals serve to bring people together and strengthen the core ethical principles.

### **The Beliefs in Mansehra**

Islam does not tolerate mixing up thinking that one has faith in Allah, but questions, whether or what if. The accessible examples of law and values that address any aspect of human life are the Quran and Hadith. If we do not obey Islam's proper teachings, we may not be true Muslims, but comparing Allah with other living beings or idols (called Shirk) makes things Muslim subject to punishment to hell. The Shirk is the only sin made deliberately or by accident that has no redemption. The myths and traditional/cultural aspects also contribute to misleading Islam's original teachings. Of course, we must have a lot of information and data that can lead us in the right direction. The key sections that distinguish one from Islam are incorrect faith and wrong acts that are not tolerated by Allah and transmitted through His Messenger.



## Vol. 3 No. 8 (August) (2025)

However, long before Islam came to the region, the Hazara (Division of Mansehra) was dominated by Hindus, Buddhists, Sikhs and other faiths. And those faiths remain still in the common practice of the people in Mansehra like their dances and cultural rituals.

### **Festivals in Mansehra**

#### **Mumzaday**

In the first month of the Islamic calendar, particularly on the 10th of Moharram, this practiced is celebrated where the young girls take their sweet, cooked pudding decorated with colorful eggs, coconut, resin and any available dried fruit to the cemetery on this day while singing a particular song related to Karbala massacre. If the girl is engaged, her in-laws send sweet pudding to the bride. This roots back to the grand children of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) which has nothing to do with Islamic beliefs.

#### **Shab-e-Barat**

Celebrated on the 15<sup>th</sup> of Shabaan, fifteen days prior to the month of Ramadan. People through balls of fire into the sky every night and this tradition continues till Ramadan. Muslims have adapted this unrelated practice as a welcoming of Ramadan.

#### **Urs**

In actuality it is Walima in the Arabic language for the food distributed at the time of Nikkah (Wedding). However, the term changed its meaning as the annual festival on the shrines where people come to feed, dance, play music, light lamps, abuse drugs, and prostate to the graves.

Plenty of festivals including the weddings, funerals, and all of the mentioned above are hybrid mixtures of many others. None of them are pure religious teachings but a complex mixture of the many that came before and settled. The most common example and the most deeply rooted one is the wedding ceremony which is a dense amalgamation of Islamic, Hindu, and now recently diverting towards the Western culture.

### **Conclusion**

In the South Asian Subcontinent, the religions existed mixed with each other at one time. People of many religions existed in one community and practiced their culture exclusively. And it was this mixed-up relationship that made a lasting influence in the culture of the people of Mansehra because culture and tradition do not die, instead they shift, and this is the uniqueness of Hazara Culture which exists for centuries and still retains its importance. However, the belief and culture has become turbid, nothing is pure because of this. The proper faith of Islam is almost warped and genuine values are quite difficult to find in this diverse hybrid community of many cultures.

### **References**

1. Husain, A. N., Colby, T. V., Ordóñez, N. G., Allen, T. C., Attanoos, R. L., Beasley, M. B., ... & Wick, M. R. (2018). Guidelines for pathologic diagnosis of malignant mesothelioma 2017 update of the consensus statement from the



## Vol. 3 No. 8 (August) (2025)

- International Mesothelioma Interest Group. *Archives of pathology & laboratory medicine*, 142(1), 89-108. (Giger & Davidhizar, 1990)
2. Willis, L. E. (2008). Against financial-literacy education. *Iowa L. Rev.*, 94, 197.
  3. (Hussain, I. (2017). *Archaeological and Cultural Heritage of Hazara*. Hazara University Press.)
  4. (Shakirullah & Young, R. (2016). *Symbolism and Ritual in Prehistoric Balochistan*. Pakistan Heritage, 8.)
  5. (Bashir, M. (2014). *Religious Practices in Rural Pakistan*. Cultural Heritage Review.)
  6. (Smart, N., & Ninain, B. (1999). *The World's Religions*.
  7. (Barnes & Noble. (1998). *Hindu Rituals and Traditions*
  8. (Cunnigham, A. (2011). *Sikh History and Cultural Interactions*. Historical Review of Punjab.)
  9. (Cavendish, R. (2000). *Jainism and Its Ancient Roots*. Indian Antiquity Journal.)
  10. (Thanvi, A. (1428H). *True Creed in Islam*. Dar-ul-Ishaat.)
  11. (Shamsuzzoha, H., & Islam, H. (2012). *Mughal Mosques of Medieval Dhaka*. Architectural Studies Journal.)