

# Faith beyond Limits: Elderly Pilgrims and Their Arbaeen Journey

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## Abstract

This article explores the participation of elderly pilgrims in the Arbaeen pilgrimage, highlighting their unwavering faith, resilience, and deep spiritual connection with Imam Hussein (AS). This article will also explore the historical significance of Jabir ibn Abdullah Ansari, who, despite his old age, was the first to visit the grave of Imam Hussein (AS) on the day of Arbaeen. His determination and deep devotion set a precedent for future generations of pilgrims, illustrating that age is no barrier when it comes to expressing unwavering loyalty and love for Imam Hussein. Jabir's pilgrimage is a poignant reminder of the profound spiritual connection that transcends physical limitations, further emphasizing the significance of elderly participation in the Arbaeen pilgrimage today.

In the present article I will highlight the elderly pilgrim challenges related to their financial assistance like visa, air fare, transportation expenditure and I will also try to understand health risks, mobility issues, accommodation difficulties, overcrowding, and emotional distress during Arbaeen pilgrimage. The article will also present practical measures to improve their pilgrimage experience, such as enhanced medical support, better accessibility, improved accommodations, guided assistance, and psychological support. By addressing these challenges, the Arbaeen pilgrimage can become a more inclusive and comfortable experience for elderly pilgrims, allowing them to partake in this profound spiritual journey with dignity and ease.

**Key Words:** Elderly Pilgrims, Arbaeen Pilgrimage, Faith and Resilience, Jabir ibn Abdullah Ansari, Spiritual Connection, Pilgrimage Challenges

## Introduction

The Arbaeen pilgrimage is one of the most significant annual religious gatherings in the world, drawing millions of devotees to the sacred city of Karbala, Iraq. This pilgrimage, observed forty days after Ashura, commemorates the martyrdom of Imam Hussein (AS), the grandson of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). It is a journey of immense spiritual significance, symbolizing devotion, sacrifice, and unwavering commitment to the values of justice and resistance that Imam Hussein stood for.

Among the millions of pilgrims undertaking this arduous journey, elderly participants hold a unique place. Their presence is not just a testament to their personal faith but also a reflection of the enduring legacy of Arbaeen that transcends generations. Despite their physical limitations, elderly pilgrims embark on this spiritual journey with remarkable resilience and determination. Their participation in Arbaeen highlights a powerful narrative—one that speaks of faith beyond physical constraints, the transmission of religious devotion across generations, and the perseverance of the human spirit in the face of challenges.

The historical roots of elderly participation in Arbaeen can be traced back to Jabir ibn Abdullah Ansari, a distinguished companion of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). Despite his old age and weakened eyesight, Jabir became the first recorded pilgrim to visit the grave of Imam Hussein (AS) on the day of Arbaeen. Accompanied by his student, Atiyyah ibn Sa'd, he journeyed to Karbala, marking the beginning of a tradition that continues to inspire millions.

However, in the contemporary era, elderly pilgrims face numerous challenges that can make their participation in Arbaeen physically and emotionally taxing. From financial constraints to mobility issues, health

risks, and difficulties in securing accommodation, these barriers persist. This article aims to explore the multifaceted experiences of elderly pilgrims undertaking the Arbaeen journey. It will delve into the historical significance of their participation, examine the various challenges they encounter, and propose practical solutions to enhance their pilgrimage experience. By addressing these concerns, it is possible to make Arbaeen a more inclusive and dignified journey for elderly pilgrims, ensuring that their faith and devotion are honored.

### 1. Significance of Arbaeen Pilgrimage :

Arbaeen holds immense significance in Shia Islam, commemorating the 40th day after the martyrdom of Imam Hussein, the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad, at the Battle of Karbala in 680 CE.

It is not merely a religious ritual but a powerful symbol of faith, unity, and resistance against oppression. The pilgrimage transcends national and ethnic boundaries, bringing together millions of people from diverse backgrounds, reaffirming the universal appeal of Imam Hussein's message of justice, sacrifice, and moral integrity.

Emile Durkheim's concept of collective effervescence is particularly relevant in understanding the impact of Arbaeen. The massive congregation of pilgrims engaged in a shared spiritual experience fosters a heightened sense of emotional unity and social cohesion. The act of walking together, enduring hardships, and supporting one another throughout the journey strengthens communal bonds and reinforces a collective religious identity.

Throughout history, the pilgrimage has been seen as an act of defiance against tyranny and injustice. This is particularly evident in contexts where political regimes have attempted to suppress the commemoration

of Arbaeen. The pilgrimage, therefore, functions as a mechanism of symbolic resistance, allowing individuals to assert their religious and political identities despite external pressures.

For elderly pilgrims, the significance of Arbaeen extends beyond religious devotion—it is a reaffirmation of their spiritual agency and participation in the collective memory of their community. Their presence on this journey is not only a personal act of faith but also a living testimony to the endurance of religious traditions. Many elderly pilgrims view their participation as a culmination of a lifelong spiritual journey, a means of seeking divine blessings, and an opportunity to pass down their devotion to younger generations

Here are some key aspects of its significance:

1. **Spiritual and Moral Message:** The Arbaeen pilgrimage is a testament to the unwavering commitment of devotees to the values of justice, sacrifice, and truth that Imam Hussein upheld. Pilgrims endure hardships as an act of devotion, symbolizing their spiritual connection with the suffering of the Imam and his companions at Karbala.
2. **Solidarity and Unity:** The pilgrimage unites people from different backgrounds, cultures, and nationalities, creating a powerful sense of community. This shared experience reinforces the bonds among the Shi'a Muslim community and beyond, fostering empathy, cooperation, and mutual support among pilgrims.
3. **Symbol of Protest:** The Arbaeen walk is not only a religious ritual but also a form of social and political protest against oppression and injustice. Throughout history, it has served as a means of expressing resistance against tyranny and authoritarian rule, showcasing the struggle for justice.

4. Reaffirming Faith: For many pilgrims, particularly the elderly, Arbaeen serves as a reaffirmation of their faith and life-long commitment to Imam Hussein’s teachings. For many observing its rituals strengthens their faith and provides a sense of renewal.

## 2.Literature Review: Faith Beyond Limits – Elderly Pilgrims and Their Arbaeen Journey :

The Arbaeen pilgrimage, one of the world’s largest annual religious gatherings, draws millions of pilgrims to Karbala, Iraq. Among these pilgrims, the elderly constitutes a significant demographic, demonstrating remarkable faith and resilience despite physical, social, and environmental challenges.

Several theoretical frameworks help contextualize the participation of elderly individuals in pilgrimage. The participation of elderly individuals in pilgrimage can be meaningfully analyzed through Victor Turner’s (1973) concept of liminality and *communitas*, which describe the transitional and unstructured dimensions of ritual processes. Turner posits that in the liminal phase, individuals are “neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial” (Turner, 1973, p. 95). For elderly pilgrims, this state offers a unique opportunity to transcend the social constraints and marginality often associated with aging. In stepping outside of normative social roles—those of grandparents, retirees, or dependents—they enter a sacred context where they are redefined not by age but by shared spiritual purpose. Within this liminal phase, the formation of *communitas*, or a spontaneous feeling of egalitarian bonding, becomes central. Turner argues that *communitas* “emerges where structure is not” (Turner, 1973, p. 127), enabling older participants to experience deep social connection and mutual recognition—conditions that are often elusive in their everyday lives.

Emile Durkheim's (1912) notion of collective effervescence further enriches this understanding by emphasizing the emotional energy generated in shared ritual experiences. Durkheim writes, "the very act of congregating is an exceptionally powerful stimulant. Once individuals are gathered together, a sort of electricity is generated from their closeness and quickly launches them to an extraordinary height of exaltation" (Durkheim, 1912) Through the lens of Durkheim, pilgrimage becomes a potent site where individuals are re-integrated into the collective moral order, allowing the elderly to reaffirm their social significance and emotional belonging. It thus serves as both a sacred experience and a sociological act of reintegration, challenging the structural exclusions of old age.

Studies on religious aging have highlighted how religiosity often intensifies in later life, becoming a central pillar of identity and meaning-making for the elderly. Moberg (2001) notes that religion serves as a critical resource in coping with the existential challenges of aging, such as declining health, bereavement, and the awareness of mortality. Similarly, Pargament (2007) emphasizes that religious engagement in old age is not merely ritualistic but deeply psychological, offering a framework for resilience, purpose, and transcendence. Walking to Karbala is experienced as an embodied expression of faith, through which they seek nearness to the memory and moral example of Imam Hussein.

Despite age-related limitations, many elderly pilgrims undertaking the Arbaeen journey exhibit extraordinary perseverance, which can be better understood through the lens of resilience in aging as discussed by Baltes and Baltes (1990). In the context of Arbaeen, faith functions not merely as a personal belief system but as a deeply embedded social and cultural resource that enables such adaptive strategies. Further, elderly pilgrims often experience intergenerational bonding during the Arbaeen journey,

as younger family members, community volunteers, and even strangers assist them along this path. This reinforces what Dulin (2005) identifies as the importance of social connectedness in later life, where meaningful relationships contribute to a sense of purpose and well-being. The hospitality culture along the pilgrimage route (Mawkibs) creates a supportive environment, fostering a sense of care and communal belonging.

However, we also need to keep in mind that studies on aging and mobility, such as those by the World Health Organization (2015), emphasize that long-distance travel can significantly heighten health risks for elderly individuals, including dehydration, fatigue, and the aggravation of chronic conditions. Medical studies on pilgrimage, such as those by Gatrad et al. (2005), emphasize that elderly pilgrims require tailored healthcare support due to their heightened vulnerability during physically demanding religious journeys. But mostly study shows that such healthcare needs are often met not through formal systems but via informal, community-based networks of volunteers and religious institutions, reflecting a moral

### **3. Jabir ibn Abdullah Ansari as a role model for elderly pilgrims of Arbaeen :**

Jabir ibn Abdullah Ansari, a companion of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), holds a significant place in the history of the Arbaeen pilgrimage. His connection to the Arbaeen is considered one of the most touching and profound events in Shia Islam.

Jabir ibn Abdullah Ansari is seen as the first person to have visited the grave of Imam Hussein in Karbala after the martyrdom of the Imam. The date is the 40th day which is observed that followed the tragedy of Karbala. This marked first commemoration of Arbaeen. Upon his arrival at Imam Hussein's martyrdom place, Jabir was overwhelmed with grief and sorrow, expressing his deep love and respect for the Imam and his companions.

Jabir ibn Abdullah al-Ansari’s visit to the grave of Imam Husayn in Karbala in 61 AH (680 CE), forty days after the tragic events of Ashura, is widely regarded and recognised as the moment of the Arbaeen pilgrimage. His visit marked the first known pilgrimage to the site of Husayn’s martyrdom, establishing a tradition of ziyarah (pilgrimage) that would grow into one of the largest annual religious gatherings in the world.

For millions of pilgrims, the journey to Karbala it is a form of ibadah (worship). It is through this connection that Arbaeen becomes a lived expression of wilayah (spiritual guardianship) and muhabbat (love) for the Ahl al-Bayt. It extends to a communal affirmation of resistance against oppression, rooted in ethos of truth.

### Data Analysis

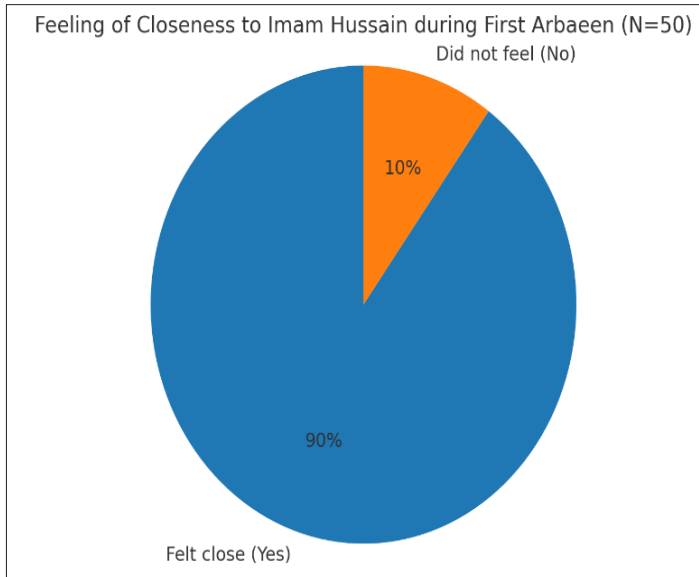


Fig 1 Pie chart showing the distribution of responses from 50 first-time Arbaeen pilgrims regarding their feeling of closeness to Imam Hussain during the pilgrimage. A vast majority of respondents – 90% (45 out of 50) – reported feeling very close to Imam Hussain and even believed that Imam Hussain was looking towards them during their first Arbaeen experience. In contrast, only 10% (5 out of 50) did not share this sentiment.

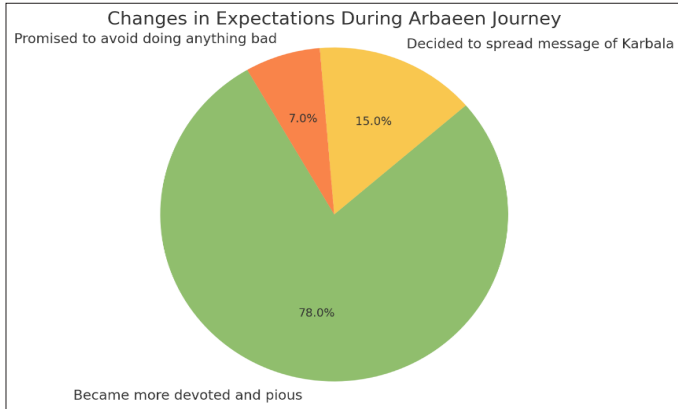


Fig.2 This pie chart shows how respondents’ expectations transformed during the Arbaeen journey:

78% reported becoming more devoted and pious as the pilgrimage progressed. 15% were inspired to spread the message of Karbala. 7% made a personal promise to avoid doing anything bad going forward.

The chart underscores the deep spiritual impact of the pilgrimage, with most participants experiencing a heightened sense of religious devotion and moral commitment.

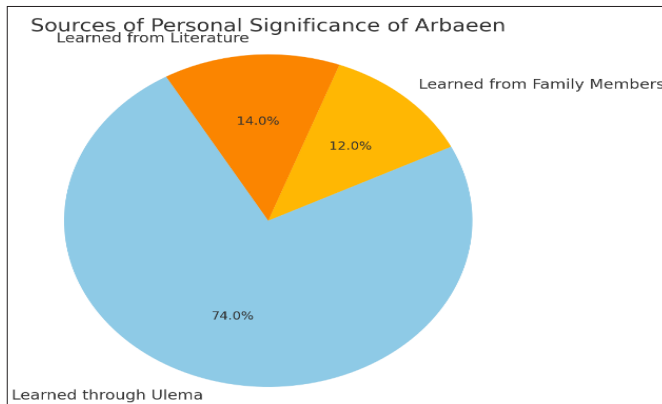


Fig 3 The pie chart illustrates how respondents came to understand the personal significance of Arbaeen:

74% of participants learned about its significance through Ulema (religious scholars), marking it as the most influential source. 14% gained understanding through literature. 12% were influenced by family members.

This data highlights the pivotal role of religious guidance in shaping spiritual understanding among elderly pilgrims

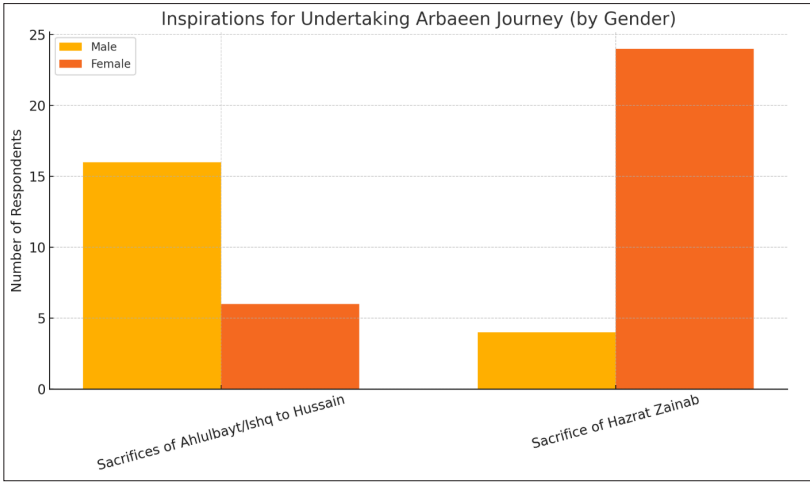


Fig 4 comparative bar chart showing what inspired elderly male and female pilgrims to undertake the Arbaeen journey. It clearly highlights the distinct motivational focus among genders—men predominantly cited the sacrifices of Ahlulbayt and love for Imam Hussain, while a smaller segment of women highlighted the sacrifice of Hazrat Zainab.

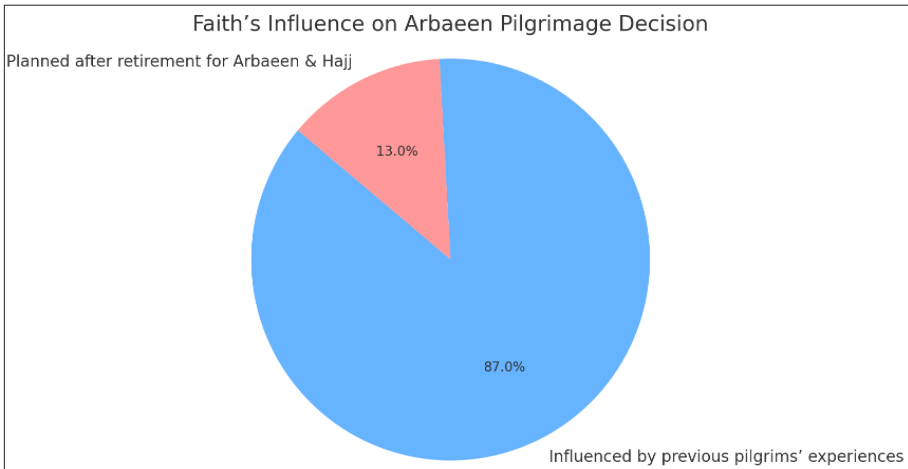


Fig 5 Pie chart showing how faith influenced the decision to participate in the Arbaeen pilgrimage. The vast majority were inspired by stories and experiences of past pilgrims, while a smaller group planned the journey as part of their spiritual goals post-retirement.

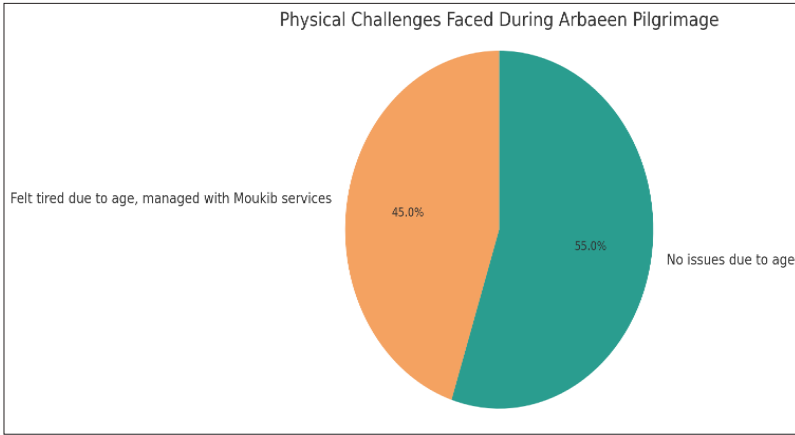


Fig 6 This pie chart represents the physical challenges encountered by elderly pilgrims during the Arbaeen journey:

45% reported feeling tired due to age but managed with the supportive services provided at Moukib (hospitality tents along the route).

55% stated they experienced no physical issues despite their age.

The data suggests that while some pilgrims faced age-related fatigue, community support structures like Moukib played a vital role in enabling their journey.

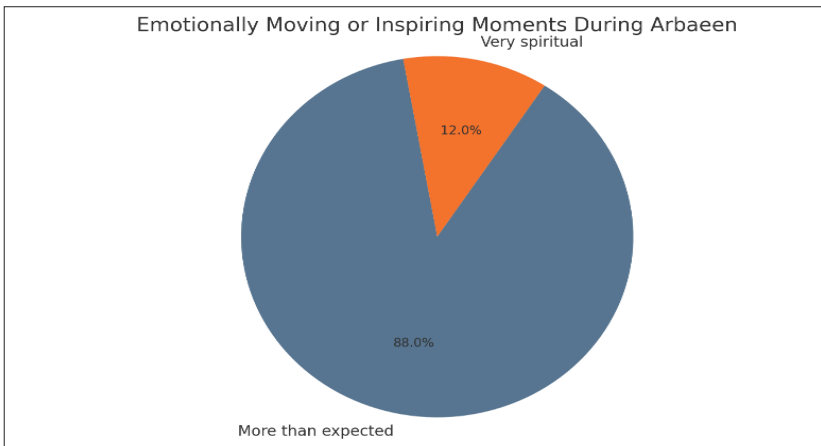


Fig 7 This pie chart shows how pilgrims described the most emotionally moving or inspiring moment of their Arbaeen journey:

88% felt the journey was “more than expected”, indicating a powerful, overwhelming emotional or spiritual experience.

12% described their moment as “very spiritual”, emphasizing inner transformation.

This demonstrates that for the vast majority, the Arbaeen pilgrimage exceeded their expectations and left a lasting emotional and spiritual impact.

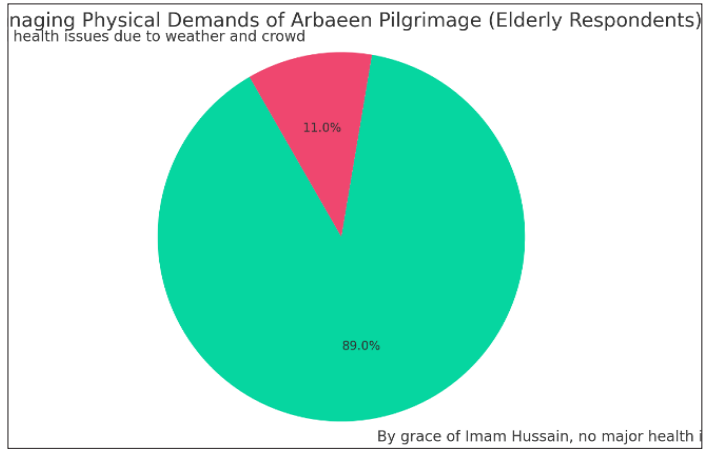


Fig 8 This pie chart illustrates how elderly participants managed the physical demands of the Arbaeen pilgrimage:

89% attributed their ability to cope to the grace of Imam Hussain, stating they faced no major health issues during the journey.

11% experienced health challenges primarily due to weather conditions and crowd density.

The overwhelming majority of respondents credit their endurance to spiritual resilience, showcasing how faith plays a central role in their physical well-being during the

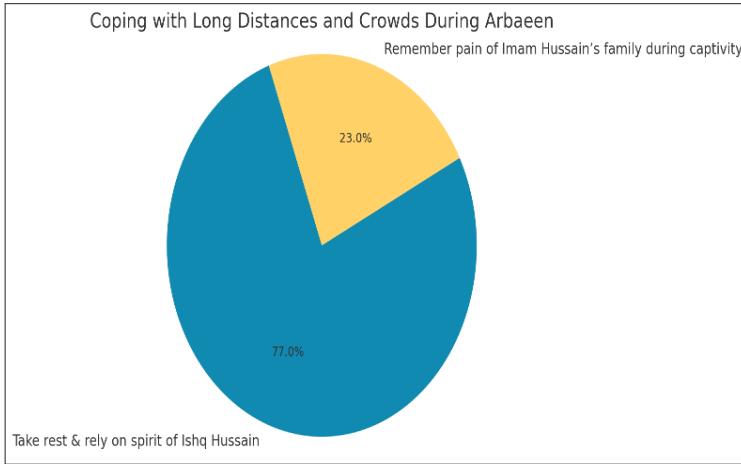


Fig 9 This pie chart illustrates how elderly pilgrims cope with the long distances and large crowds during their journey to Karbala:

77% manage by taking rest and drawing strength from the spirit of Ishq Hussain (deep love for Imam Hussain).

23% motivate themselves by remembering the suffering of Imam Hussain's family during their captivity.

The responses reflect both physical coping strategies and profound emotional resilience rooted in spiritual devotion

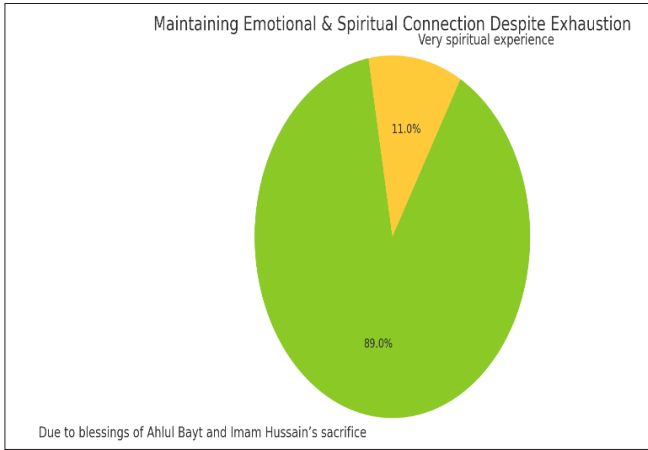


Fig 10 This pie chart shows how elderly pilgrims maintain their emotional and spiritual connection during the physically exhausting Arbaeen journey:

89% credited their sustained connection to the blessings of Ahlul Bayt and the sacrifice of Imam Hussain.

11% described the experience as inherently spiritual, which helped them remain emotionally and spiritually strong.

The overwhelming majority found strength and connection through deep-rooted faith, emphasizing the powerful role of religious devotion in enduring the pilgrimage

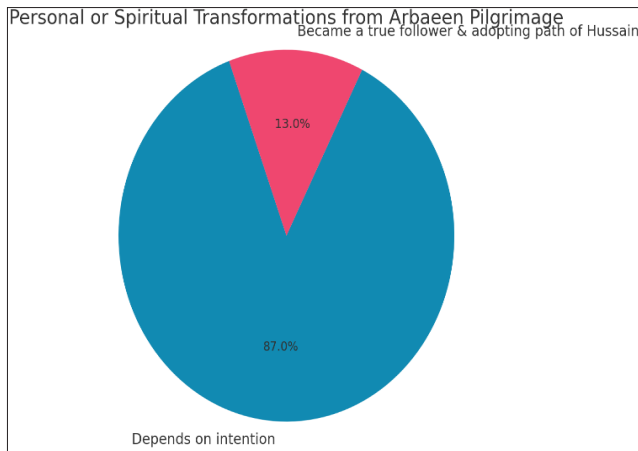
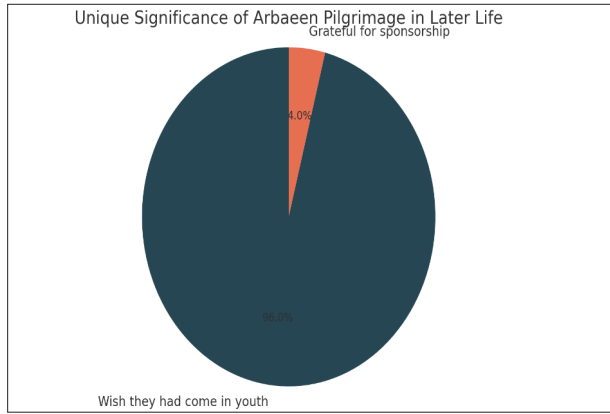


Fig 11 This pie chart reflects the personal or spiritual transformations reported by elderly pilgrims after participating in the Arbaeen pilgrimage:

87% believe that transformation depends on one's intention, highlighting the importance of internal sincerity in deriving spiritual benefit.

13% said they have become true followers of Imam Hussain and are actively trying to adopt his path in their daily lives.

The data indicates that while most view transformation as a personal choice shaped by intention, a significant number experienced a tangible shift in their spiritual outlook. Fig 12 This pie chart presents how elderly pilgrims perceive the unique significance of the



Arbaeen pilgrimage at their current stage in life:

96% expressed that the experience would have been even more meaningful or easier had they undertaken it in their youth.

4% conveyed gratitude for sponsorship, which enabled them to participate despite their age or financial limitations.

This reflects a blend of reflection and gratitude, with most pilgrims valuing the journey deeply while also acknowledging the physical limitations of aging.

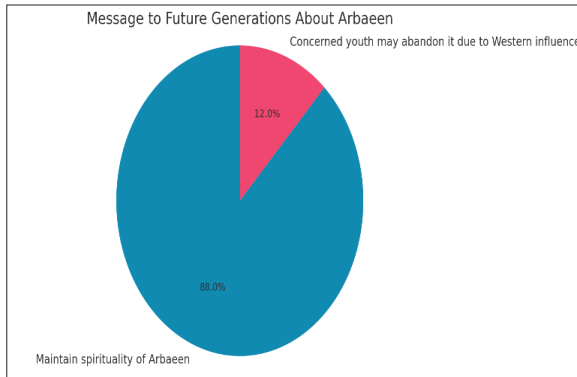


Fig 13 This pie chart represents the message elderly pilgrims wish to convey to future generations regarding the Arbaeen pilgrimage:

88% emphasized the importance of preserving the spirituality of Arbaeen, urging the youth to uphold its sacredness.

12% expressed concern that Western influence may lead younger generations to abandon the pilgrimage and its values.

The responses show both hope and apprehension—highlighting a desire to pass on the essence of Arbaeen while being mindful of cultural shifts.

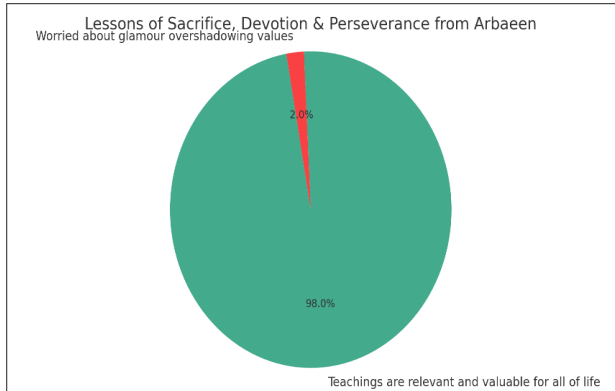


Fig 14 This pie chart shows how elderly pilgrims interpret the lessons of sacrifice, devotion, and perseverance through the Arbaeen pilgrimage:

98% believe that the pilgrimage teaches values that are relevant in all aspects of life, and that Imam Hussain’s teachings hold lasting value for future generations.

2% expressed concern that the growing glamour around the pilgrimage may overshadow its core values.

The response highlights Arbaeen’s deep moral and spiritual significance while acknowledging the need to preserve its simplicity and sincerity.

### Challenges Faced by Elderly Pilgrims :

Despite their determination, elderly participants in the Arbaeen pilgrimage encounter multiple challenges that can affect their physical and emotional well-being.

#### A. Health Risks and Physical Strain

Walking long distances, often in extreme weather conditions, can be physically exhausting for elderly pilgrims. Many suffer from chronic illnesses such as hypertension, diabetes, and arthritis, making it difficult to endure the rigorous journey. The lack of immediate medical facilities along the route further exacerbates health-related risks.

### **B. Limited Mobility and Accessibility Issues**

The pilgrimage route, while well-equipped with facilities, is not always accessible for elderly individuals with mobility impairments. Uneven terrain, crowded pathways, and the absence of adequate seating areas pose significant hurdles. While wheelchairs and support services are available, they are often insufficient to accommodate the large number of elderly pilgrims.

### **C. Accommodation and Sanitation Facilities**

Finding suitable accommodation during the pilgrimage is another major concern. Although mawkibs (hospitality tents) provide food and rest areas, elderly pilgrims often struggle to find comfortable sleeping arrangements. Moreover, sanitation facilities may not always be elderly-friendly, leading to additional discomfort.

### **D. Overcrowding and Safety Concerns**

With millions of pilgrims converging on Karbala, overcrowding poses safety risks, particularly for elderly individuals who may be prone to fatigue or disorientation. The risk of falling, getting lost, or being separated from family members adds to their vulnerability.

### **E. Emotional and Psychological Struggles**

Many elderly pilgrims travel long distances from different countries, sometimes without direct family support. Language barriers and unfamiliar environments can lead to anxiety and emotional distress. Additionally, the profound spiritual nature of the pilgrimage can be overwhelming, requiring emotional support.

### **Measures to Improve the Experience for Elderly Pilgrims :**

Given these challenges, various measures can be taken to ensure a more comfortable and enriching experience for elderly pilgrims:

### **F. Enhanced Medical Support :**

Establishing more mobile medical units along the pilgrimage route, staffed with specialists in geriatric care, can provide timely assistance to elderly pilgrims. Offering check-up services and emergency response teams can mitigate health risks.

### **G. Better Accessibility and Mobility Assistance :**

More wheelchairs, electric carts, and resting areas should be provided along the pilgrimage route. Expanding transportation services within Karbala and surrounding areas can help those who cannot walk long distances.

### **H. Improved Accommodation and Sanitation Facilities :**

Special accommodation areas for elderly pilgrims, equipped with proper bedding, hygiene facilities, and easy access to washrooms, should be designated. This will help ensure their comfort and well-being during the journey.

### **I. Guided Assistance and Safety Measures**

Volunteers should be trained to assist elderly pilgrims, guiding them through crowded areas and ensuring they do not get lost. Establishing designated checkpoints where elderly pilgrims can rest and receive support can also enhance their safety.

### **J. Emotional and Psychological Support Services**

Counselling services and multilingual guides can help elderly pilgrims navigate the pilgrimage experience. Providing opportunities for them to share their stories and reflections can also create a sense of community and emotional support. economy of caregiving embedded in faith.

## Research Gaps

The Arbaeen pilgrimage is full of stories of faith, struggle, and resilience. The following research gaps highlight critical areas that should have further sociological exploration:

- Undertake immersive, on-ground ethnographic research to document the first-hand experiences of elderly pilgrims
- Analyze how support systems, such as Mawkibs, volunteer caregivers, and religious service providers aid or shape elderly participation in the pilgrimage.
- Investigate and explore the gender-specific experiences safety concerns, and access to resources during the journey.
- Explore how technological tools and infrastructural advancements impact the accessibility and navigation for elderly people.

## Conclusion

The participation of elderly pilgrims in the Arbaeen pilgrimage is a testament to their deep faith and commitment to the remembrance of Imam Hussein (AS). While they face numerous challenges, their resilience and determination highlight the spiritual significance of the journey. By implementing practical solutions such as improved healthcare, better accessibility, and enhanced support services, the experience of elderly pilgrims can be made more comfortable and fulfilling. As the Arbaeen pilgrimage continues to grow, it is essential to ensure that all pilgrims, regardless of .age, can partake in this profound spiritual event with dignity and ease

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