

Cultural and Literary Interrelations between India and Pakistan: The Liberal Sindhi Sufi Link

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Toeing the line of the French comparatists, this paper based on historical research, tries to see how the Sufi thought that vibrates throughout Sindh (now Pakistan) has taken shape in post-Partition India. With data from written sources and oral tradition through interviews, this paper seeks to throw light on how Sufism in Sindh developed in an extremely liberal way and further explores how this liberal, all-encompassing spirit is retained in the Sufi practices of the rootless Sindhis in India even today. Giving examples from the poetry of the Sindhi Sufis, it brings to light the liberal view of Sindhi Sufis. This paper then goes on to focus on Dr. Rochaldas' Darbar in Ulhasnagar, an important Sufi centre in post-Partition India. Further, it seeks to throw light on visits between India and Sindh at this Darbar. It then traces Sindhi Sufi culture as practiced here and also gives an account of the literature produced herein. The paper seeks to emphasize that the liberal spirit of the Sufis of Sindh— an all-encompassing form of devotion— continues to reverberate within the Indian borders today, regardless of the pain of rootlessness caused by a tragic Partition sixty-five years ago.

Sindhi Sufi Culture

Sufism in Sindh can be traced way back to the 10th Century, when Mansur al-Hallaj, the Sufi who claimed 'ana-ul-haq' ("I am truth"), is said to have visited her (Jyotwani 126). In fact, Sindh has been the entry point to and an important seat of Sufism in the South Asian subcontinent. The Sindhi way of life is the Sufi way of living:

It was during the reign of Soomra rulers of Sindh of 12th, 13th century A.D., the Sufi mystics came to Sindh from Persia. ...Even though the impact of Sufism was gradual, the people of Sindh, Muslims, Hindus and other casts of and religions ,found it

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convenient to adapt it as they found a spiritual solace in its principles (Boer).

Sufism manifested itself in Sindh in a markedly liberal way assimilating local and regional beliefs to such an extent that historians prefer to use the term 'Sufi Culture' in place for 'Sufism' in references to Sindh (Boivin 118). To quote Sufi Sakhi Qabool Mohammed IV:

Mysticism of Sindh is the harmonic blend of the finest worths of both Vedantic and Islamic ethics. Sufis of Sindh sang the glory of Ram and Rahim alike(67).

Classical and Sindhi literature is literature of the Sufis. The period from 1500 onwards to about 1850 was the richest period of Sindhi literature; this was the time when Sindhi poetry flourished and spread an eternal fragrance over Sindhi life. Interestingly, this literature is almost all steeped in Sufism that had string grip over Sindh and even today continues to impress the Sindhi frame of mind. Qazi Kadan (d.1551), Shah Abdul Karim (1536-1623), Shah Inat of Nasrapur (d.1709), Shah Inayat Jhok (1656-1718), Saheb Dino of Daraz (1689-1788), Mian Isa (d.1742), Shah Abdul Latif (1689-1752) who was the great grandson of Shah Abdul Karim, Sacal(1739-1829), grandson of Saheb Dino, Makdhum Abdul Rahim Grohri (1739-1778) , Muhammad Zaman Lawari (1713-1774) are some Sufi poets whose writings contribute to the rich heritage of Sindhi literature (Gidwani92).

The chant of 'mast Qalandar', common to all Sufi singing in India and elsewhere, originated in Sindh (Wolf). 'Mast Qalandar' refers to Lal Shahbaz Qalandar whose shrine is in Sehwan, Sindh. Bayazid Bistami, responsible for the spread of Sufism in South Asia, had a Sindhi, Abu Ali al-Sindhi, for his guru (*Encyclopaedia Iranica*). According to another famous Sufi, Jami, from modern Afghanistan near Herat, Al-Sindhi taught him the specific technique of annihilation in Divine unity (ilm-e fana dat tawhid mi amokhtam). According to Derryl McLean, it is possible that al-Sindhi himself borrowed the technique from the Pashupatas (for some the ancestors of the Nathpanthis, the famous jogis of Sindhi Sufi poetry), who were a predominant Shivaite sect in Sindh, especially from their concept of nirvana (Brill 117). Dara Shikoh, brother of Mughal Emperor Aurangzeb, was initiated by a Sindhi, Mian Mir (Jyotwani 111). Perhaps it

was no chance that the most liberal of all Mughal emperors India ever saw, Akbar, was born in Umarmkot, Sindh (Boivin xi).

Sufis of Sindh transcend the boundaries of religion, class, caste and gender; making for a unique entity. The Sufi influence, deeply embedded, into the soil of Sindh was put to test during the Partition of the Indian subcontinent that uprooted the Sindhi-Hindus from their homes. Yet, true to their mettle, the Sindhi Sufi poets in India, continued with the spirit of toleration and respect for all differences.

1. Dr. Rochaldas' Darbar: A Sindhi Sufi Darbar in Ulhasnagar

Dr. Rochaldas' Darbar, situated in the midst of what once was a refugee ghetto, is an island of peace in the centre of noise. An alam— holy flag post— carrying the holy flag of Lal Shahbaaz Qalandar welcomes the visitor to the sacred calm of this place. By the side of the flag on the pole is Shiva's trident. A basil plant, the sacred tulsi, stands in the centre of the compound. What strikes an observer on entering the main hall of the Darbar is the fact that there are pictures of Sufis, Saints and Gods worshipped in different religions; so that a picture of Shiva stands close to a picture of Christ along with pictures of Sufis who were 'Muslims' and also of Saints who were 'Hindus'. Just by the side of the samadhis of Dr. Rochaldas and his heir, Dr. Hari, is the Guru Granth Sahib. A lamp is kept perpetually lit by the side of the Granth Sahib on the wall in a metal niche made for the purpose. Dr. Rochaldas' and Dr. Hari's pictures are on the samadhis. Diagonally to this picture of Dr. Rochaldas is the picture of his Murshid (Master) Saain Qutub Ali Shah. On the wall a picture of Jhulelal, the ubiquitous Sindhi god, is there too.

There is absolutely no restriction or compulsion to be observed for entering the Darbar. One may or may not cover her head; may or may not bow at any picture or even the samadhis. Usually, the entrant rings a bell at the door step but this too is not mandatory. Some devotees light incense sticks picking them from the tray in front of the samadhis and place them in the incense stand in the same tray. There is no strict time for entering the Darbar. There is thus all the space available to a worshipper in the progress of her conscious.

1.1 Dr. Rochaldas: A Biographical Note

Dr. Rochaldas was born in Rohiri Shareef², Sindh on the 6th of January, 1880. In his early childhood, Dr. Rochaldas spent a lot of his time at Vasan Goth in the Tikana³ of Saain Vasan Shah who was the Guru (master) to his elder brother, Diwan Metharam. In 1901 he joined the Hyderabad (Sindh) Medical College. It was at Hyderabad that he got acquainted to Saain Qutub Ali Shah at Tando Jahaniya. He passed his medical examination in 1904 and got a job in Aden, Yemen, where he served till 1905. After this he served as a government doctor in hospitals and jails at Kotri, Hyderabad, Shikarpur, and Jacobabad. In 1912, he set up a private hospital at Rohiri. Here he conducted the cataract eye surgery which was rare in those days. He soon shifted over from allopathic to homoeopathic treatment for his patients as homoeopathy was cheaper. Dr. Rochaldas was among the earliest Indian practitioners of homoeopathy in the subcontinent. This practice is carried on till today by Dr. Rochaldas' son, Saain Pritam, at the Ulhasnagar 'Dr. Rochaldas Qutubshahi Homeopathic Free Dispensary'. Dr. Rochaldas also set up a clinic at Karachi. It was in 1948 January, when riots hit Karachi and Dr Rochaldas' clinic was destroyed, that he decided to cross over the borders of a newly framed India. After going to Surat, Baroda and Bhuj, he finally decided to settle in Kalyan Camp (now Ulhasnagar) at Shanti Nagar, Camp No.3. On the 10th of December, 1957, he breathed his last (Harjani 51-58).

1.2 The Ordinariness of a Sindhi Sufi

The Sindhi Sufi may be born in an ordinary family, may or may not be educated, may follow a common profession, may or may not have a family. Dr. Rochaldas was born to Diwan Sujaansingh, who was Head Clerk in the Government Engineering Department. Dr. Rochaldas' elder brother, Diwan Metharam, worked as Chief of Municipality. Dr. Rochaldas married three times and fathered five children. Dr. Hari, son of Dr. Rochaldas and heir to the Darbar, was a practicing homeopath. Saain Damodar, son of Dr Hari and current heir, was an advocate. Dr. Rochaldas himself got a degree in medicine, L.C.D.E., in those days and later practiced homeopathy. He took nominal charges from his patients and earned only enough for a day time's provisions for himself and his family.

² Shareef is a term of respect affixed to a place related to a Sufi, a holy place.

³ TikaNa is a place of worship usually associated with a 'Hindu' saint.

1.3 The Sindhi Sufi: An All-inclusive Link

In spite of the fact that Dr Saahib's clinic was destroyed in communal riots in Karachi, Dr. Rochaldas' Darbar continues to maintain the all-inclusive spirit of toleration and harmony. The devotional practices at the Darbar, besides the pictures and the alam, stand testimony to this spirit. The day begins at the Darbar with the dhamaal⁴— the drum beat to the rhythm of 'mast Qalandar'— from 4.00 to 4.30 in the morning. Around 9.00 a.m. flowers are arranged at the samadhis and incense sticks are lit. It is around this time that a devotee opens and reads a few verses of the Guru Granth Saahib, with head covered, as a mark of respect to the Sikh practice. 4.30- 4.45 p.m. again is the time for dhamaal. The devotees at the Darbar sing "Raghupati raghav raja ram..." (a bhajan in praise of Lord Ram) after the dhamaal. It is interesting to see how devotees have added their own line—"Krishna Karim tero naam" ("Krishna and karim are your names")— to this bhajan. 6.00 p.m is the time for aarti⁵. First to be sung is Saain Qutub Ali Shah's composition "Sakhi Sabaajhal Baajh Kayo Ka" ("O benign One, shower some blessings"). The aarti "Om Jai Jagdish Hare" ("Praise to the Lord of the world") is next, followed by an aarti in the name of Saain Rochaldas, "Om jai Rochal Shah avatar" ("Praise be to King Rochal God incarnate"). If anyone present wishes to sing another Sufi kalaam or a bhajan, s/he may do so. In the meanwhile, another devotee 'puts the Guru to sleep', that is, reads a few verses before closing the Guru Granth for the day. The ardas⁶ is then sung. The prayers end by hailing all Gods, Saints, Jhulelal, Lal Shabaaz Qalandar and the gathering. 7.00 p.m is again the dhamaal for fifteen minutes. It is a very harmonious spirit that the devotees carry out with themselves.

⁴ Dhamaal is a huge drum beaten by a pair of sticks; it also refers to the sound 'mast Qalandar' that is generated from the beat or also to the dance to the beat.

⁵ Aarti is a prayer usually praise of the deity concerned, the act of singing devotional songs usually with a lamp lit which is moved in circles in front of the picture or idol of the God, sometimes also refers to the lamp lit at a place of worship.

⁶ Ardas literally means offering that is sung after the reading of the Guru Granth Saahib.

At the versi-anniversary of death-celebrations every year, the ‘munajat’ written by Roshan Ali Saain, son of Saain Qutub Ali Shah, is read out by the whole gathering of about 400 people. A new print of the ‘munajat’ is brought out at the version, if the need be felt. It is made available in the Arabic and Devnagri script of Sindhi. The word ‘munajat’ offers the meaning of “supplication for repentance of sins.” This composition is a kind of prayer for the well-being of one and all. It contains twenty-one couplets in all and the tenth couplet goes:

yane hindu ya musalma jo ache hit pandhu kare,
Kar hasuli dil ja matlab har kuja je vaste
[all those who come here Hindu or Muslim,
grant the desires of their hearts for the sake of well-being.]

The basic belief of non-duality is not simply a belief of the Sindhi Sufis, it is also a practice. It is thus important to take note of the fact that though Dr. Rochaldas was born in a Hindu family, he took ‘naam’ or initiation from Saain Qutub Ali Shah, who was a ‘Muslim’. In fact, devotees believe that it was Saain Vasan Shah, Dr. Rochaldas’ brother’s ‘Hindu’ Master, who helped Dr. Rochaldas get initiated by a ‘Muslim’! It was Saain Qutub Ali Shah who encouraged Dr. Rochaldas to read the Sukhmani or to arrange the reading of the Guru Granth Saahib! It is this spirit of an all-encompassing oneness that makes simple devotees at the Darbar refer to Dr. Rochaldas or Dr. Hari or Saain Damodar as ‘Allah’ or ‘khud khuda’ just like Krishna, Guru Nanak or Ram are to them. Such lines and terms are the legacy of the spirit of the Sufi Masters in Sindh who sang with equal love for Allah and Ram, or Krishna and Mohammed for that matter.

1.4 Secular Compositions of Sindhi Sufis

Dr. Rochaldas, in one of his compositions, says:

Keep Faith in Allah,
leave the false world!

In another composition this Allah is a Hindu God: “Chant the naam of Narayan...,” he says. It was common for the Sufi Masters to refer to the scriptures of different religions and point out to the non-dual. As for example, Saain Qutub Ali Shah in Sindh said:

Ram beside Krishna does stay
know this truth
Seeta with Laxman observes Diwali
search and realize this.
Qutub Ram and Rahim are both within
See now, this moment.

It is such compositions that are sung on the Full moon day at the Darbar; obviously it is love for all that the devotees imbibe.

This Darbar has published important Sufi literature. Based on the ‘Gospel’ of Sri Ramakrishna is the first publication in four volumes, of the discourses and dialogues of Dr. Rochaldas with his disciples, named *Ke Sahitoon Sajjan Saan*. This was later translated into English as *Some Moments with the Master*. Smaller versions of this or experts are also brought out from time to time. Dr. Rochaldas’ explanation of the Bhagvad Geeta and also that of Yoga Vashishtha are published with the same titles respectively. These books are now for sale online at www.gyaanmarg.com.

1.5 Visits from and to Sindh

At the Darbar most of the visitors know that Saain Qutub Ali Shah was the Murshid (Master) of Dr. Rochaldas and that his dargah is at Tando Jahaniyan, Hyderabad, Sindh. Noor Saain, the current heir at Tando Jahaniyan and great grandson of Saain Qutub Ali Shah, visited the Darbar at Ulhasnagar in 1988, then around the year 2004 or 2005. Saain Damodar visited him in 1998-99 in Sindh. Saain Damodar also visited the Lal Shahbaz Qalandar shrine at Sehwan Shareef in Sindh. Around the year 1992 Saain Damodar and Noor Saain met at a disciple’s place in Florida, U.S.A. Saain Pritam visited the dargah of Qutub Ali Shah sometime in the 1980s. At times these Sufis meet at a disciple’s place in Bombay or wherever convenient; political boundaries hardly matter. Worshippers throng in multitudes to get one glimpse of the Sufi,

forgetting ‘Hindu’ or ‘Muslim’. The Sindhi word ‘pohotal’, literally meaning ‘one who has reached’, is thus rightly used when referring to a being who is believed to have attained liberation; regardless of the religion s/he was born in.

Where politics divides, the Sufi spirit unites. So that even if it were political reframing of boundaries that uprooted the Sindhi Hindus from Sindh, the Sufi Darbars in present day India continue to place in a niche ‘Muslim’ Sufis whom they revere. Their Sufi spirit refuses to accept the politics of division for their god is ONE. It is this firm faith in non-duality that leads them to respect all gods of all religions. The devotional practices at the Darbar show that the Sufi spirit of love continues to live in spite of political divisions in the name of religion.

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