

# Sindhi Sufi poetry in contemporary Pakistan: Meeting of tradition and modernity

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## DECLARATION

I, Ajay Pinjani, hereby declare that this dissertation entitled '*Sindhi Sufi poetry in contemporary Pakistan: Meeting of tradition and modernity*' is the outcome of my own study undertaken under the guidance of Dr. P.K. Shajahan, Associate Professor, School of Social Work, Tata Institute of Social Sciences, Mumbai. It has not previously formed the basis for the award of any degree, diploma or certificate of this Institute or another institute or university. I have duly acknowledged all the sources used by me in the preparation of this dissertation.

28<sup>th</sup> February, 2013

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## CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the dissertation entitled '*Sindhi Sufi poetry in contemporary Pakistan: Meeting of tradition and modernity*' is the record of the original work done by Ajay Pinjani under my guidance. The results of the research presented in this dissertation have not previously formed the basis for the award of any degree, diploma or certificate of this or any other university.

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## ABSTRACT

Since inception of life, the conscious being has been struggling to locate their position in the world; the purpose of their existence. This ostensibly never ending journey, quest for truth, has traversed through various paths: mythological, religious and spiritual age. What human kind has achieved though is the common use of axiomatic notions: 'us and them' and innumerable ways of distinguishing one individual from another.

Finding 'true identity' has been an earnest endeavour lead by peoples of all nations in search of peace and tranquillity, however, identity (as understood today) has become a source of fundamental crises and horrendous conflicts that have harnessed hostility, hatred and created countless barriers.

Present identity conscious and fiercely divided world along caste, class, region, race, religion and language has been understood and read differently by distinct schools of thought. One of the most celebrated understandings of 'identity' is put forth by the Sufi school of thought; Sufi saints and mystics have left indelible imprints of their use of altruistic methods to spread the message of peace and harmony throughout the world. The highlighted purpose of their practice has always been to nurture the undivided mind space aiming to pacify artificial barriers.

This research focuses on a particular region; Sindh (often recognized as land of Sufis, mystics and wanderers) and two Sufi saints who are highly acclaimed by the Sindhi population for what they preached and practiced; Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai and Sachal Sarmast. A socio-anthropological study has been conducted; the researcher has visited the shrines, interacted with the visitors and the persons residing in the vicinity.

The aim of this endeavour is to analyse how ordinary masses have interpreted and understood the writings of Shah and Sachal and in what ways have given value to the message of Sufi's in their day to day lives.

## KALAM – BULLEH SHAH

The couplet that incited me to take up this research and delve deep into the realms of Sufism:

Parh parh ilm te faazil hoya	You have read to become all knowledgeable
Te kaday apnay aap nu parhya ee na	But you never read yourself
Bhaj bhaj warna ay mandir maseeti	You run to enter temples and mosques
Te kaday mann apnay wich warya ee na	But you never entered your own heart
Larna ay roz shaitaan de naal	Everyday you fight Satan
Te kadi nafs apnay naal larya ee na	But you never fight your own ego
Bulleh Shah asmaani ud-deya pharonda ay	Bulleh Shah you try to grab that is in the sky
Te jera ghar betha unoon pharya ee na	But never get hold of what resides in you
Bas kareen o yaar	Stop it all, my friend
Ilm-oun bas kareen o yaar	Stop seeking all this knowledge my friend
Ik Alif teray darkaar	Only an Alif is what you need

(Translated by Cokestudio Production)

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# CHAPTER 1

## INTRODUCTION

Understanding any human society and therefore its progress is a cumbersome task; in depth historical analysis in sync with present situation is necessary and socio-economic and political status among other factors have to be studied to bring to the fore any composite finding.

Since inception of life, all conscious beings have struggled to locate their position in the world, endeavouring to find their true identity and therefore the purpose of their existence. This ostensibly never ending journey, quest for truth, has traversed through various paths: mythological, religious and spiritual age; when perturbed by questions of existence and what was not visible to the naked eye, humans believed in mythologies in which sun or fire or water were referred to as Gods; later human beings were introduced to many distinct religious texts (over a span of centuries) that are claimed to have come from God through a messenger and conveyed a complete code of life for humans to incorporate. The proponents of these distinct religious ideologies (at different intervals of history) then set out to various parts of the world to preach the message they had learnt and to homogenize the heterogeneous populations they met, by creating spaces that allowed the people to embed the values and principles provided in those religious texts. These spaces came in the form of religious institutions like Mosque, Temple and Church which then became responsible to impart religious as well as social education to its followers and simultaneously efforts were also made to stress on practices and norms like praying (namaz) or reciting Geeta, Quran or Bible among others. Units like family also became a central party to impart this knowledge and way of life since that is where a child begins the journey of learning.

Through these units and institutions social groups were formulated (although seemingly homogeneous with one religious identity, were profoundly heterogeneous in terms of language, region, gender and other factors) and when mixed with other social groupings (on the basis of religious identity) like Hindus and Christians, there was a need of politicization to ensure acquisition of their legitimate share of natural resources and political spaces through

representation (earlier through clergy, today through members of parliament). Therefore political structures were established for all social groups to voice out their opinion and exercise their demands.

Throughout the formation of social and political groupings, economic structures played an essential role, initially controlled by the feudal lords or the clergy section that had gained its political power through the section of social structure they represented, however in the 17<sup>th</sup> century Europe, after the era of industrialization, when the class of bourgeoisie freed itself from religious rulers and recognized themselves as a separate entity, that brought in different dynamics to the exchange of power politics.

Keeping in mind the context chosen for this research, the Indian Sub Continent (or Pakistan in specific) it is crucial to highlight that to date this region unlike Europe has not let go of religious intervention in matters of state governance. Therefore unlike in Europe where the bourgeoisie class established its base only by revolting against the existing religious powers, in the Sub continent region the bourgeoisie intervened by propagating economic reforms guided by the neo-liberal framework, their policies of development (monolithic in principle) principally thrived on existing conditions, be it religious differences, caste inequality and feudal ownership of land among others. Hence, to understand ‘conflict’ or the extremely complex composition of conflicts arising in a country like Pakistan, one has to profoundly delve into the formation of distinct social structures that exist there which then respond to the political and economic underpinnings that come to the fore as a consequence.

Pakistan today is experiencing an identity crisis (along with economic and political crisis) and is fiercely divided along religion, sects, class, region and language among other influencing factors. Practices and traditions of these distinct social groupings might have always differed, however, conflict arose when people from different communities started differentiating amongst each other on the basis of traditions and practices, establishing axiomatic notions of ‘us’ and ‘them’ and adjudicating who is right and who is wrong, instead of stressing on the core principles on which such practices were established in the first place. It would be naive to establish that such differences in practice did not incite conflict earlier and a plethora of literature is available to limit one from making that assumption. However, with the notions of modernity (used especially in the 20<sup>th</sup> century) – ‘right to self

determination', 'nationalism' and the changes - era of competition and globalization has brought in: fast flowing communication, growing repository of destructive weaponry, privatization of resources, among other factors, have made all local conflicts global in nature and thus multi-dimensional and complex.

Keeping this backdrop in mind, via this dissertation, this research tries to understand the undergoing crises in Pakistan using a particular lens; that offers its analysis through a medium of poetry and use of local folk tales that people of Pakistan can associate with and reflect on

In an effort to understand the ideological differences that have arisen through formation of distinct social groupings, while stressing on the intrinsic core values and principles that spearheaded mobilization of people to adhere to one ideology or other, I have tried through this dissertation to enter the domain of the philosophical school of Sufism. The preachers of Sufism have been profoundly celebrated for their consistent and compassionate effort to reinterpret the core principles of all distinct belief systems and thus challenge practices that digress people from the path of searching for truth to the path of creating communal disharmony or building barriers on the basis of mere visible practices. They had a pivotal role to play especially in the Indian Subcontinent where for centuries people of different religious associations had co-existed together in peace and harmony however during and post Mughal era, religious differences were ignited for political and economic reasons by orthodox practitioners in sync with power mongers and colonial administrators, leading to heights of uncertainty, atmosphere of disgust and distrust and recurrent eruption of violent encounters. Sufi scholars of that age be it Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai in Sindh, Kabir in Uttar Pradesh or Bulleh Shah in Punjab, all spoke vociferously of Hindu Muslim unity and condemned all forms of violence, preaching humans to unite as one entity and not astray from their path of truth and serving humanity as a whole.

The school of Sufism is in itself not a homogenous thought or philosophy today and has equally succumb to claims of 'mine and thine'\* (William Morris) like all other ideologies, no matter how universal they intend to be; claims vary from restricting this thought to preachers of Islam or to accept some non-Islamic practitioners of this thought under the ambit of Sufism.

Keeping in mind the wide array of knowledge base created under the title of Sufism and varying claims, this research focuses on two reverent Sufi scholars of Sindh, Pakistan (often recognized as land of Sufis, mystics and wanderers) – Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai and Sachal Sarmast; their contribution to the Sindhi society and to the humanity at large. Emphasis is made on their profound poetic expression and use of local as well as dominant language of the time, in an effort to reach the wider masses and preach the message of ‘wahadatul wajood’ (Unity of Being).

The research aims to evaluate how this traditional knowledge (the message of afore mentioned poets to nurture the undivided mind space and to pacify artificial barriers) has been understood and put into practice by people in this era of modernity. Oral histories and narratives of shrine visitors, residents living in the vicinity of the shrine and folk singers among others have been recorded, transcribed and analyzed to view from the participants’ life world, what they understand of Sufism and how the message of Shah and Sachal has contributed and is been put into practice.

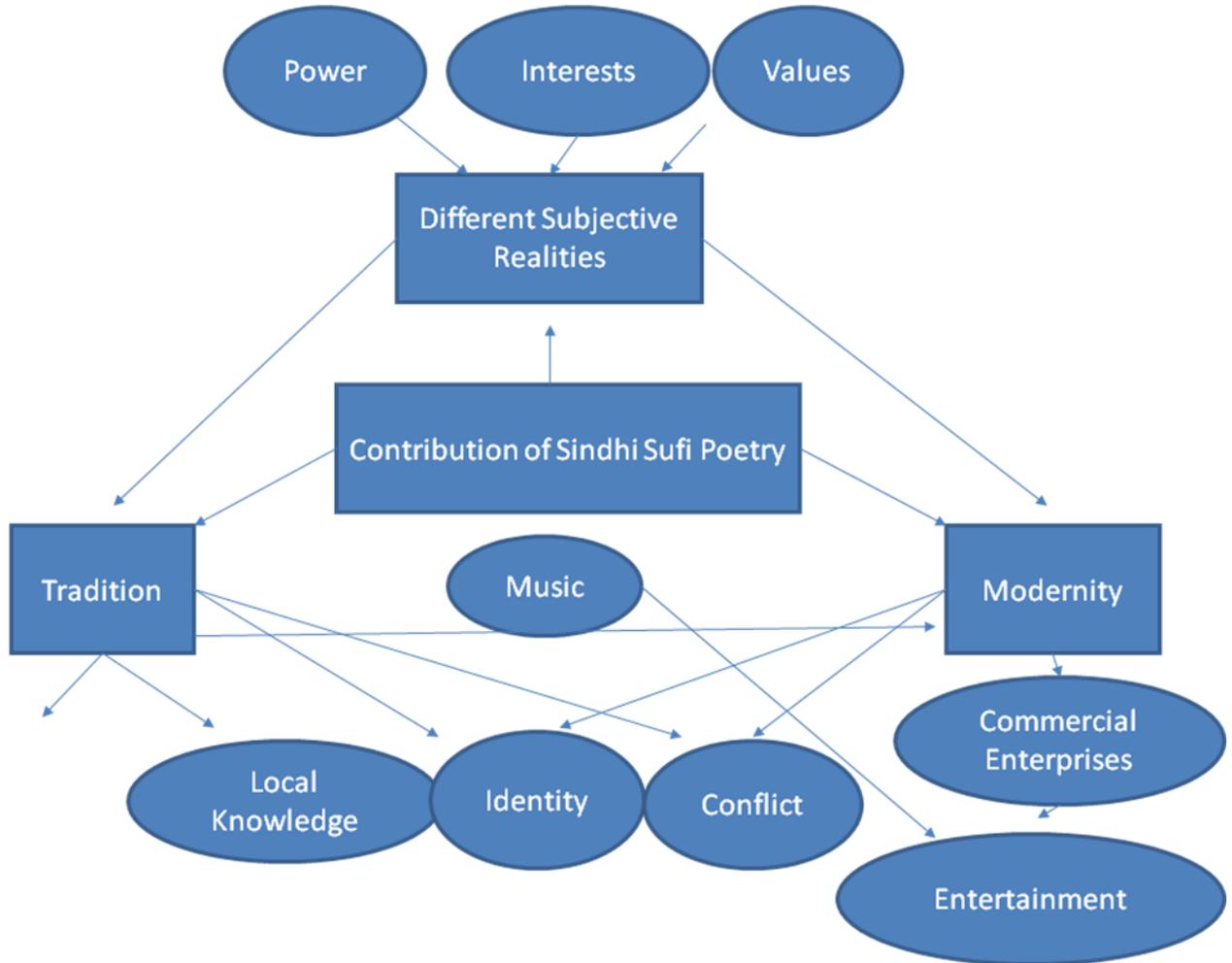
## **OBJECTIVES**

- Observe and understand the innumerable subjective realities of life through Sufi lens.
- Experience the participant's realities by living in their environment and viewing it from their lens.
- Explore how tradition and modernity are connected by using this traditional knowledge in the context of identity and conflicts.
- To identify areas of further research in the context of addressing prevailing conflicts.

## **RESEARCH QUESTIONS**

- Is the message of Sufism being conveyed through its followers or is it merely used as a form of entertainment?
- How people living in the vicinity (of shrines) have made connection to Sufi philosophy if any?
- How Sufism contributes to the understanding of life and search for truth, from participant's point of view?

# CONCEPT MAP



## **CHAPTER 2**

### **LITERATURE REVIEW**

Before attempting to understand what Sindhi Sufi poetry has to offer to the prevailing conflict situation in Pakistan, it is essential to first introduce the philosophical school of Sufism, its etymological foundation as well as its historical background. Thereafter the researcher has brought the readers' attention to the period of 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> century in Sindh (modern day Pakistan); the socio-political and economic conditions in which Shah Abdul Latif and Sachal Sarmast lived their life and the accompanying factors and individuals who thoroughly influenced the content of their poetry. Emphasis has also been made on the varying interpretations made by scholars in respect to the identity of these poets as well as the association of the content of their poetry to a particular religion or philosophical thought; stressing on the details as to who is the poetry addressed to and through which medium (poetry, music, folktales, multi-lingual approach).

After a thorough literature has been presented about the poet's biography, the conditions that provoked them to express and the contribution made by them, the research travels ahead in time and provides a brief account of the ongoing situational crisis in Pakistan. Subsequently, an attempt was made to understand these conflicts from a Sufi lens referring to the interpretation made by scholars and erudite persons. Throughout this endeavour, at regular intervals couplets of Shah and Sachal's poetry have been presented (with translation) to articulate the message in the poet's own words as well as appreciate the beautiful yet complex use of language leaving the interpreters with a cumbersome task of deciphering the true meaning out of each verse.

### **ETYMOLOGY AND DEFINITION**

The challenge for any individual to make a scholarly attempt in understanding the world of Sufism begins from its etymology itself. As visible throughout the research, vast array of interpretations are available, that although might distinguish on the technical aspects:

specifications related to its root or origin, but reach wider consensus in respect to the core defining characteristics of Sufism.

The notion Sufi emanates from two Arabic words *ṣafā* (purity) and *ṣūf* (wool), implying coarse of tattered rags or wool worn by them as a practice of asceticism.<sup>1</sup> The two were combined by the Sufi al-Rudhabari who said, "The Sufi is the one who wears wool on top of purity."<sup>2</sup> Other interpretations suggest it has originated from the term *aṣ-ṣuffah* (the people of the bench) who were companions of Prophet Muhammad (peace be upon him), while some believe that it has derived from the Greek word *sofia*, meaning wisdom. Be it where the notion 'Sufi' has originated from, it is widely accepted that, Sufis approach to reach God is through the path of sheer love and compassion; an attitude of mind and heart towards God<sup>3</sup> or achieving the consciousness of one reality, naming that wisdom, light, love or nothing.<sup>4</sup> Thereby, practitioners within the philosophical school of 'Sufism' (coined by F.A.G. Tholuck) in common parlance are attributed as 'seekers of divine truth'<sup>5</sup>.

As far as the effort to define tradition or practice of Sufism in jargons or to a confined boundary is concerned, Reynold Nicholson has made an interesting observation: their chief importance lies in showing that Sufism is undefinable.<sup>6</sup>

## **HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF SUFISM**

Innumerable factors have contributed to the development of Sufism as a movement or a tradition as we know it today. It has traversed many distinct political and social realities and

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<sup>1</sup> Panjabi, K. (2011; 144) *Poetics and Politics of Sufism and Bhakti in South Asia Love Loss and Liberation*. Kolkata: Orient BlackSwan

<sup>2</sup> Kabbani, M. H. (2004; 83) *The Naqshbandi Sufi Tradition Guidebook of Daily Practices and Devotions*. Fenton, USA: Islamic Supreme Council of America

<sup>3</sup> Titus, M. T. (1930; 111) *Indian Islam: A Religious History of Islam in India*. London: Oxford University Press

<sup>4</sup> Underhill, E. (1911) *Mysticism: A Study in the Nature and Development of Man's Spiritual Consciousness*. New York: Oneworld Publications

<sup>5</sup> Gottreu Tholuck, F. A. (1821) *Sufismus sive Theosophia Persarum Pantheisitica*. Berlin: Duemmleri

<sup>6</sup> Nicholson, R. A. (1914; 25) *The Mystics of Islam*. London: Routledge

has shaped itself over a number of centuries, thereby voluntarily or involuntarily subjected to infiltration by existing realities of each time period and spacial characteristics.

An important facet of human being is his/her dual existence; one that is external (what is visible) and the other that is internal (what is hidden to the naked eye). Similarly, all religions are composed of this characteristic; the former advocates for temporal realities and is often referred to as the political form of religious appearance focusing on adherence to practices and rituals, while the latter deals with the spiritual growth of human development and encourages its practitioners to seek within for answers to the unknown. This process of spiritual awakening is understood as mysticism; ‘a universal phenomenon found in all religious traditions, including Hinduism, Buddhism, Manichaeism, Zoroastrianism, Hellenism, Judaism, Christianity and Islam. In Islam, this tradition is referred to as Sufism or tasawwuf.’<sup>7</sup> It is the esoteric (batin) aspect of Islam, as distinguished from its exoteric (zahir) aspect<sup>8</sup>, that intends for the purification of the self and strengthening the personal connection with God.

In regards to the origins of this tradition, there are varying interpretations; some argue that its roots lay in the pre-Islamic era, influenced by the Vedantic philosophy, however, most scholars claim that Sufis derive their mystic vision primarily from Quran and Hadith (this discourse will be brought many times throughout this research). Throughout the Islamic world, orthodox Islam has been associated with political authority while Sufism has been associated with the personal, private side of worship.<sup>9</sup> The tussle between the Orthodox and the Sufi practice has been profoundly visible during the entire political history of Islam; in fact the latter was a counter-movement to the scriptural stringency imposed by the ulemas and developed into a movement only as a response to the erroneous practices of the widening Muslim establishment with political and religious authorities acting as custodians of Islam.

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<sup>7</sup> Tanvir, A. (2006) Sufism in History and its Relationship with Power, Islamic Studies. *Islamic Research Institute, International Islamic University*, Vol. 45, No. 2, pp. 221-268.

<sup>8</sup> Burckhardt, T. (2008; 164) *An Introduction to Sufi Doctrine*. Canada: World Wisdom, Inc.

<sup>9</sup> Hodgson, M. (1974; 213) *The Venture of Islam. Conscience and History in a World Civilization*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press

‘The precise time and place of their emergence cannot be ascertained today as several contradictory hagiographic accounts have blurred the genesis of the group.’ As the religion of Islam spread at breath and length during the 8th century from Egypt in the west to Persia in the east, with greater emphasis on materialistic and political concerns, a need was felt to spearhead a spiritually inclined movement by Sufi practitioners who preached their belief in ‘*marfia*’ or spiritual knowledge received through ‘*ittisal*’ or mystical union with God.<sup>10</sup> This endeavour was not positively received at many instances since Sufis encouraged internal emancipation rather than stressing on juristic observances of the Suras or other core rituals pertaining to Islam; the ruling elite as well as *ulama* (theologians and jurists), who had a firm grip over political power, were generally suspicious of its disruptive and revolutionary potential, hence remained apprehensive of the Sufis.<sup>11</sup>

Then and even today, Sufis are a living enigma, for the devoted, they act as preachers who teach them how to experience the existence of god; for the orthodox they have been a community of hallucinators who dance, drink, sing and whirl. Be they what they are in the public eye, it can’t be denied that they have been prime mediators in explaining the ecstasy of religious experience and made the hidden meanings of Islam not only accessible but also adorable through the magic of poetry. Though, their concern has primarily been to vindicate the relationship between human and god, while doing so they have also forged a bond between human and society.<sup>12</sup>

These contradictory views regarding the role of Sufis and other intervening factors including intermingling with people and texts of other faiths especially in the Indian Subcontinent along with recent wave of nationalism leading to so called homogenization of nation states has influenced the development of Sufi tradition in many ways; these have been discussed at length in the chapters hereafter.

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<sup>10</sup> Panjabi, K., op. cit., p.147.

<sup>11</sup> Anjum, T., op. Cit., pp. 221-268.

<sup>12</sup> Punjabi, K., op. cit., p.144.

## **SINDH – 17TH AND 18TH CENTURY**

The Indus Valley civilization is well reputed for being a repository of wealth, culture and inter-faith harmony. It traces back to one of the most well developed (at its time) civilizations' of Mohenjo-Daro and Harappa. Due to its rich and fertile land it has attracted many travellers including traders, missionaries, as well as invaders and colonizers for centuries, who either plundered it for amassing material wealth or used it as a destination of huge strategic importance to fulfil their colossal aims of conquering the known world at breath and length. No matter how long they came for and for what purpose, each one of them left an indelible imprint on the people of Indus valley (modern day Sindhi's, Punjabi's and neighbouring residents); in the form of, religious conversions, rituals and traditions, food and clothing, languages and much more.

Modern day Sindh was an attractive destination for both, sea bearers (European and Arab traders) as well as nomads and invaders travelling across modern day Central Asian Republics in search of refuge and wealth. Therefore to understand the composition of present day Sindhi society one must travel back in time and analyse intervention by various people; Aryans, Iranians, Greeks, Arabs, Gupta Dynasty with its Buddhist non-violence, Rai Dynasty with its Vedantic Brahmanism, Delhi Sultanate rulers, Mughal emperors and British colonizers. For the purposes of this research the researcher has taken into account the 17th, 18th and 19th century when in the first part, Sindhi leaders paid allegiance to Mughal rulers and subsequent to their fall, were administered by the British colonial administrators.

For nearly seven centuries from middle of the ninth to the beginning of sixteenth century the state of Sindh remained continuously in the possession of Sindh, more than 5 centuries under the Soomras and nearly two centuries under the Samas. This period of Sindh history was a period of progress for Sindhi society. Almost all historical and semi-historical tales and events of pride, myths, folktales and folk heroes belong to this long-lasting period of the independent state of Sindh.<sup>13</sup> After the collapse of Samma rule, Sindh was destined to be governed by invaders – Arghuns (1521 – 54) and Tarkhans (1554 – 91) before being subsumed into the Mughal Empire; a period of grave crisis in the history of Sindhi society.

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<sup>13</sup> Joyo, M. H. (2009; 39) *Shah Sachal Sami*. Translated by Saleem Noorhusain, Karachi: Culture and Tourism Dept.

Before asserting the characteristics of this crisis period, it is worthwhile to add a perspective of one of the acclaimed Sindhi writers – Ibrahim Joyo, who keeping in view the historic blunders in Sindh, has given an in depth account of the genesis of conflict within a particular nation state.

The writer uses three fears that all humans have, as a premise to put forth his understanding of a formation of a society and state; fear of unknown, fear of other humans and fear of own self or savage nature. These phobias then urge human beings to look out for protection and therefore religion, state (rule, government) and culture come into form respectively. Inside the shell of religion one has nurtured faith, and believes that a superior and invisible authority exists – with whom all answers are preserved; inside the shell of state – that functions on two principles, power and force, one tries to protect him/herself by forming alliance and joining power holding interest groups; and inside the shell of culture one aims to satisfy his/her physical and mental urges and uses external resources of nature to the best of his/her intellect. The important point comes when these three compulsory and fundamental features of human society, interact with each other; it is crucial to analyse which one maintains its supremacy over the other two thereby influencing the form of governance in that particular society.

Since state and religion rely on force or power and faith or belief respectively, according to Ibrahim Joyo, both these facets are ego-centric and self conceited, they resist any kind of change and always feel the need to control and channelize its one sided stand. Whereas culture, that nurtures itself through intellect and reason – is an emancipating feature within society that encourages residents to question norms and traditions and enables them to appreciate their creative self. The best course out of such an untenable situation should be to have both, state and religion – power and faith – under the watch of culture and let it expand and develop. What has, however been actually and frequently happening is that sometimes state uses religion as its handmaiden and sometimes religion uses state as its handmaiden; the twosome league, nevertheless, maintains its roughshod supremacy over intellect/reason so as to keep it from progressing and developing lest free thought came up with means of their change or repudiation.<sup>14</sup>

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<sup>14</sup> Joyo, I., op. cit., pp.31, 32

Similar pattern was witnessed in Sindh towards the end of Samma rule. ‘No society, no country, no nation can suffer defeat at the hands of a foreign power and after suffering defeat remain under subjugation for continuously long periods unless it suffers from some internal weakness or shortcoming.’<sup>15</sup> At the time of the Arghun invasion in the beginning of the 16th century, the ruling dynasty was engaged in internecine struggle for power. Sindhi state was expending its strength in fights against its own self; could not save itself from defeat and slavery because of its internal weakness, which had its roots in political and religious cord.

This era marked by communal hatred, self prophesising supremacy, pseudo claims over identity, literature and territory, and heights of ignorance, continued for a long time and inevitably had a strong impact on the lives of the Sufi saints who penned down their grievances and thoughts in a poetic expression in their effort to ignite the conscience of Sindhi society that had derailed from its virtuous path.

## **INTRODUCTION TO SHAH AND SACHAL**

“Why do you learn Sindhi of all languages?” This question was asked to Ms. Annemarie Schimmel, a German scholar who translated the works of Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai into German language. She responded, “For the historian of religion, the role of the Indus Valley as a repository of mystical ideas is even more attractive than its role in the political history of Islam.”<sup>16</sup>

Shah Abdul Latif was born in 1689 in the village of Hala Hawaili in the Hyderabad district of Sindh, (modern day Pakistan). Few details are known about his youth but what appears certain is that at the age of twenty, he fell in love with a girl, who was the daughter of Mirza Mughal Beg – an influential person belonging to an aristocratic family. After his proposal to marry her was rejected he quietly suffered the pangs of separation and his journey of

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<sup>15</sup> Joyo, I., op. cit., p. 40

<sup>16</sup> Schimmel, A., (1986; 2) *Pearls from the Indus – Studies in Sindhi Culture*. Jamshoro / Hyderabad: Sindhi Adabi Board

altruistic emphatic poetry began. ‘When he was under pressure either to forget the girl, or not to mention his love, he expressed his feelings in poetry:

Every moment I have been prohibiting it (heart)  
But it cannot stop thinking about the beloved,  
even for a single second.  
The more restrictions I impose, the more heartache  
is tearing the wounds apart.’<sup>17</sup>

When his family failed to convince the girl’s parents and more so the latter responded with discontent and harsh response, Shah Abdul Latif was forced to leave the city and this is how his journey began during which he met yogis, travelled onto distant places and was introduced to their respective folk tales, which he then used as a medium to convey his message of peace and harmony.

Shah Abdul Latif is also remembered as Bhattai, referring to the place ‘Bhit Shah’ where a shrine has been built in his name. ‘It is believed that during wandering period, Shah Abdul Latif had once visited Bhit; a sandy place and completely isolated and ideal for meditation. He, after marriage, decided to shift to Bhit and lived there for rest of his life.’<sup>18</sup> Today it stands as one of the most appealing artefacts to Sindhi population, who visit the shrine in remembrance of Shah Latif.

Abdul Wahab, later named Sachal Sarmast was born in 1729 in the village of Daraza in the province of Sindh. His name in itself speaks a lot about his poetic discourse – Sachal means truth and Sarmast means intoxicated, thereby was known to be intoxicated with truth. His teachings have often been compared with Mansur al-Hallaj, the Sufi martyr in 10<sup>th</sup> century, who ecstatically proclaimed, ‘I am the truth’. Reference to Mansur’s proclamation will be made several times during this paper.

Shah is said to have met Sachal during a visit to that part of Upper Sindh and remarked: This lad would take the lid off the earthen pot cooked by us. He had meant that Sachal would

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<sup>17</sup> Sayed, D. (1988; 20) *The Poetry of Shah Abdal – Latif*. Jamshoro/Hyderabad: Sindhi Adabi Board

<sup>18</sup> Khoso, F. M. (2009; 25) *Selected Verses from Shah Jo Risalo*. Govt. of Sindh: Culture and Tourism Dept.

uncover and publicize what he himself had kept covered and symbolic.<sup>19</sup> It is evident from the poetry of both these reverent ascetics that whereas the mystic Bhattai conceals the mystical meaning in complicated symbols and rarely opens his heart to express the mysteries of mysticism aloud, Sachal, whose pen name is *Āshiklr* ("open"), sings without restriction the deepest secrets of love and union.

He pours out the intense love of his heart, complains that God always makes those He loves suffer, teases the orthodox, and yet sees One in all the different manifestations of being:

Thou art Mansur (i.e. Hall-j),  
and Thou made him suffer  
and Thou art again the mallas. . . .<sup>20</sup>

#### **WHAT INFLUENCED THE LIVES OF SHAH AND SACHAL**

People of Sindh, out of love, respect and affection remember Shah Abdul Latif as a symbol of identification, remembering him with many names; Sindh jo Shah, Sohno Latif, Latif Sain, Bhit jo Ghot and more. 'Shah Jo Risalo' is a collection of fascinating and intriguing mystic poetry that recollects countless experiences from the lives of many distinct backgrounds that Shah became aware of through his travel. His poetry is the mood and habit round which the mind of Sindhi people revolves. His was the eye, deep and comprehensive, over their history and their land, its ethos, both physical and human; and what he conveyed to them of his insight lies embodied in Sindhi, their mother tongue, and in a form and diction, unique and unsurpassable, which they well understood.<sup>21</sup> On the other hand, Sachal has composed poetry not only in classical Sindhi but also in Siraiki, Persian and Urdu. The beauty of Sachal's melodious verses can enrapture even those who may disagree with the contents of his poetry, i.e. with the bold assertion of the essential 'Unity of Being'<sup>22</sup>.

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<sup>19</sup> Joyo, I., op. cit., p. 37.

<sup>20</sup> Schimmel, A. (Spring - Summer 1971) *Mahfil*, Vol. 7, No. 1/2, pp. 71-80

<sup>21</sup> Sayed, D., op. cit., p. Xiv.

<sup>22</sup> Schimmel, A., op. cit., p. 99

The prolific writings of both were influenced by many individuals and factors concerning their age; the most visible is the religious strife and communal violence that had enveloped the politics of Sindh at the time. The revered scholar, Ibrahim Joyo, highlights an important characteristic of poets and the way situations of crises stimulate their writings rather than wear them down:

*Lifeless and useless institutions, which for historical or tradition reason remain stuck to the body of society and cannot be gotten rid of by any other means nor do they take their hands off, come unstuck during crises. A disturbance or an accident occurring during crises cannot harm a sensitive mind. On the contrary, great spiritual forces that were dormant before are jolted into feverish activity. Sensitive minds, i.e. thinkers, poets and artists, strong and full of life as they are, consider critical situations auspicious and promising. Sensitive minds mature in big and painful experiences, in the course of which they acquire new standards and reach more free, promising and reliable decisions about life on earth.*<sup>23</sup>

Similar observation can be made in the case of how Shah and Sachal reacted to the prevailing crises of their time. What is more delightful to witness is that instead of searching for solutions outward, they found examples of commitment, determination, struggle, peaceful coexistence and more, within the very Sindhi nation that was facing turmoil. Especially, Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai, who, through his splendour capabilities of expression entered into the simple and unpretentious lives of *sangis* (gypsies), *marus* (desert dwellers) and *sanghars* (herdsmen / Shepherd) among others, and connected their daily actions with love for divine and values of peace and harmony among all human beings.

Let us go to the weavers, who possess such subtle love  
They connect all the day, never learnt they to disconnect<sup>24</sup>  
Shah Abdul Latif

If one comes across the ‘Shah jo Risalo’ it is easily decipherable that he was influenced by many facets of Sindhi society, especially the different folktales, yogis, fishermen and else. He, unlike Sachal, has hidden his mystical ideas under a thick layer of various symbols taken

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<sup>23</sup> Joyo, I., op. cit., p. 33

<sup>24</sup> Soomro, K. H. (2012; 10) *The Great Game and The Indus Valley*. Sewahan Sharif: Sain Publisher

from all spheres of life as well as from the classical Sufi tradition, and particularly from Maulana Rumi's Mathnavi. H.T. Sorley, a British administrator who translated 'Shah jo Risalo' in English accurately quotes: 'He is the real jewel of the Kalhorro age. He has written poetry that deserves a wider public than it has yet attracted. His life is an epitome of the age in which he lived.'<sup>25</sup>

It is widely acknowledged that Shah had always supported the cause of oppressed, ignoring their birth given identities. It was this universal character that believed in 'unity of being' which made him travel and appreciate lives of all distinct Sindhi people. A very important influence was exerted on Shah Abdul Latif by Shah Inayat Sufi of Jhoke (1721).

Shah Inayat was a revolutionary of his time and is recalled by many as the first social reformer of Sindh. He was opposed to both, zamindars (landlords) and the orthodox theologians. Allegation were made against him that he was trying to overthrow the establishment, which lead to the infamous battle of Jhok (lower Sindh – Thatta) A siege laid down for about four months could not capture him due to strong resistance by his followers, however the administrators succeeded at last by cheating him – carried the book of Holy Quran proposing a peace talk. He was branded a heretic and was beheaded in the year 1718.

Shah Abdul Latif was 28 years at the time. This event had a profound effect on the life and thought of Shah Abd al-Latif. To commemorate the man's death, he composed some melancholy verses.

The voice of God-seekers is heard no more in the sitting room.

The Adesis have left, and the emptiness of the place is killing me.

Those who used to give bliss to life have departed.<sup>26</sup>

(Sur Ramkali)

Sachal Sarmast has advocated for same principle as Shah did however in a simple use of language and indeed vociferously rather than symbolically. Although he did not travel like

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<sup>25</sup> Sayed, D., op. cit., p. 36

<sup>26</sup> Sayed, D., op. cit., p. 135

Shah did but was well aware of the crisis undergoing and religious dogmatism that continued to beleaguer the masses with wrong interpretations and away from the divine truth. As quoted earlier, he was most influenced by Mansur Al Hall-j proclamation ‘An al Haqq’ (I am Truth). Like former, Sachal was also accused of undermining fundamental beliefs of Muslim faith.

Nearly 600 years after Mansur’s execution, Sachal repeated his verse:

Man khudayam, man khudayam (I am God).<sup>27</sup>

In another verse he says:

If I keep silence, I am called a polytheist.  
If I say it loud and clear, I am labelled infidel,  
Demystify it if anyone can, says Sachedino.<sup>28</sup>

## POETRY

Language is a stalwart example commemorating human creativity; communities all over the world have contributed to this endeavour hence making it possible for one to communicate to another. Human interior (heart, soul and mind) contains an arcane and unfathomable world.<sup>29</sup> Each individual contemplates his/her environment, interpreting the existing socio-political and economic realities, however, some have managed to traverse beyond mere conversing, to bring alive experiences of others and convey the feelings embodied within them by using their ability to present their message in an inexplicable expression known to us as ‘poetry’. If language is a repository of the whole experience of a nation or a society, poetry is repository of its more important experience.<sup>30</sup>

*According to Aristotle, poetry is more thought provoking than philosophy and more instructive than history. It is so because poetry “as a whole”*

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<sup>27</sup> Schimmel, A., op. Cit., pp. 99, 100

<sup>28</sup> Joyo, I., op. cit., p. 22

<sup>29</sup> Ibid., p. 29

<sup>30</sup> Joyo, I., op. cit., p. 21

*looks deeper into human nature. Its peculiarity, rather the reason of its greatness, is that it gives shape to the internal secret, to the core of things, to the spirit rather than letter, and, moreover, it sheds suffused light on its period and its people and, having thus become one with them, understands them more clearly and accurately.*<sup>31</sup>

Therefore, nations throughout the world have identified themselves with their poets, who then become the identity of that region and even century's later residents as well as foreigners get introduced to that region by reading their poetry.

Similarly, Shah and Sachal both are remembered as the light bearers of Sindhi nation who through their poetic mode of expression encompassed signs of current realities and wisdom accompanied with beauty of all the fine arts, that ensured their writings to become immortal and applicable to readers of all times. Its beauty is everlasting and remains there in every age and period to please and envelop the heart. That is why poetry with realism, sagacity and beauty has continued to be considered not only the trustee and interpreter of lofty and forceful aims and urges but the most effective, perennial and clear organ and medium of their expansion and propagation.<sup>32</sup>

Some symbolic expressions are common to all Sufi poetry and have been grossly misinterpreted in every age leading to allegations of heresy and infidelity upon great Sufi poets. It is undoubtedly witnessed that Sufi poetry makes the 'love' the foundation of their relation with God than 'fear' or nay other feeling. In order to express the same, symbols from lived realities are used and love between man and woman is used as a metaphor to explain the feelings undergone by the Sufi in search for his/her divine love – God. Additionally, worldly images become a tool for Sufi poets to display their mystic state, often using symbols like wine, the cup bearer, the tavern; all forbidden in orthodox Islam in their outward form.

'Wine' is the catalyst that brings about the meeting of the mystic's soul and spiritual vision. 'Drunkenness' is a metaphor for ecstasy excited by Divine Love. It refers to figurative drunkenness, a condition reached through ecstatic experience which enables the Sufi to discover a hidden dimension beyond his normal habit of thought. The 'cup-bearer', brings the

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<sup>31</sup> Ibid., p. 29

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

wine of love and symbolizes the Guide or Teacher who leads the mystic to drink of Divine Knowledge. The 'tavern' refers to the heart of the mystic, or to the Sufi meeting place, a dwelling-place of love. Intoxicated ones, those who are mast or 'drunk', are lovers of God, the Sufis who have a vision of the Beloved, the Divine.<sup>33</sup>

Thus, Sufi poetry may appear to be profane to the uninitiated, but embodies sacred meaning to the initiated. A beautiful example of the use of such symbols is a kalam written by Hazrat Zaheen Shahtaji and sung in the voice of the legendary, Abida Parveen, titled 'ji chahe to sheesha ban ja'.<sup>34</sup> It guides the listener from just enjoying a glass of wine and 'feeling' intoxicated to the point of 'becoming' intoxicated (in love for the divine) by kindling the light within him/herself.

## **FOLK TALES**

Growing up in the Indian subcontinent or elsewhere, it is certain that no child is brought up without hearing the folk tales celebrated within that particular region. The magic of folk tales is that they through their appealing message acquire a profound position within the social fabric of a community making it a necessary element of that culture. Resident of that community feels pride in claiming ownership for the same and ensuring that the message in the story is transferred to the generation after.

Shah Abdul Latif, like some of his predecessors used the old folk tales of Indus Valley as a medium for his poetic expression and put forth his message using symbols from the tales itself. From the poetry of Shah Abdul Latif one can trace the places he visited and the type of people he met. His observations of his surroundings and the lessons he learns from a study of nature and the hardships of the journey provide him with abundant raw material for his poetry. All the experiences he has during his travels, and the lasting impressions they leave on his mind, he expresses through various surs of the Risalo.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>33</sup> Rumi, M. (2008) *The Concise – Garland Encyclopedia of World Music*. UK: *Routledge*, Vol 2., p. 1048

<sup>34</sup> You Tube. (2010, Dec 19) Ji Chahe Abida Parveen. Retrieved from [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i4FfDB\\_A\\_jg](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=i4FfDB_A_jg)

<sup>35</sup> Sayed D., op. cit., p. xi

A brief insight into some elements of the folk tales used by Shah Abdul Latif is necessary for the reader to appreciate and connect with Shah's recount of each. Folklores included Laila – Chanesar, Umar – Marui, Momal – Rano, Noori – Jaam Tamachi and Sassui – Punhoon, among others. For Shah Abdul Latif the characters best suited to convey his spiritual message to Sindhi masses were the heroines of these tales, who despite their frailty, stood fast the test of their love, each in a different way, according to their circumstances. Laila in her vanity surrendered her beloved lord Chanesar for a night to get a priceless diamond necklace from Kaunru. Marui never compromised with Umar (King) to be his queen and thwarted his every move to break her resolve to go back to her people, her betrothed and her country Malir. Moomal was found by Rano in the embrace of a man when he came to visit her at night and left in disgust to punish her for her infidelity. Moomal resorted to every effort to make it clear to Rano that the person he saw was her sister Soomal in disguise, but Rano Mendhoro ignored her laments. Noori, a fisher man's daughter – of lower caste got married to King Jam Tamachi after the latter fell in love with her. Even after her marriage she chose to wear her simple attire rather than adorn herself with jewellery like other wives of Tamachi. When the king inquired, she told him that the simple dress reminded her of what she inherently was, and what she owed the king for her elevation. Sassui suffered great hardships in search of her beloved husband Punhoon and travelled long distance alone leaving behind all her worldly attachments, and never did she lose her faith and leave halfway without reaching her destination.

Shah Abdul Latif Bhitai was impressed in the case of each character with the repentance, faith and dedication of these women with which they proved their innocence, purity and love for their beloveds. Perhaps the greatest achievement of Shah Abdul Latif is that, following early examples in Sindh and in Punjab, he built a complete catechism of Sufism based on the old folk tales of Indus Valley by transforming the heroines of these tales – Sassui, sohni, Lila and others into symbols of soul.<sup>36</sup>

Scholars having distinct dispositions have interpreted these sur's or chapters differently. Some of the most common interpretations include: Sassui represents the soul (who longs for truth and God), who is in love with the Prince of Kech. But his brothers take him away at

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<sup>36</sup> Sayed D., op. cit., p.59

night, and she, awaking from the ‘slumber of negligence,’ finds the bed empty and follows him from Bhambhore into the desert, running towards the far-away Baloch mountains until she dies from thirst. Similarly, Marui, who is captured by the rich ruler of Umarkot but remains faithful to her beloved in the home village, just as the human soul should refrain from all earthly happiness in order to be reunited with her Beloved in the eternal homeland.<sup>37</sup> In all these narratives, love becomes a powerful metaphor of seeking, and seeking finds its lotus in the journey, even as the journey becomes a resonant image for seeking.

When reading these poetic expressions, some notions come across quite often and are important to understand: – ‘*Dindi*’ refers to walking, ‘*Safr*’ to journey, ‘*Hijr*’ to leaving one space for another, ‘*Manzile shauq*’ to gradually progress in different stages of *ishq*, ‘*Ishq*’ relates more to seeking, and ‘*Salik*’ is one who perpetually seeks. These notions help the reader connect with the poets’ vision and message that is connected to spiritual seeking hence journey and stages within seeking encompass of many hidden meanings.

It is often seen that messenger songs become a prime vehicle of expression. God appears as a lover-hero to the devotee, who, in the guise of the love-sick heroine sends messages through birds or animals.

Couplet below were uttered by Sassui (in words of Shah Latif) while taking her last breaths.

I did not meet my love although  
An hundred suns to setting sped.  
O Let me yield my life when I  
Have seen him, hence my journey made.  
I have not met my love but thou  
Art sinking to thy rest, O Sun.  
The message I give thee, take  
And tell to my beloved one.  
To Kech go, say: ‘The sad one died  
Upon the path.’ It was not for me

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<sup>37</sup> Schimmel, A. (Spring - Summer 1971) *Mahfil*, Vol. 7, No. 1/2, pp. 71-80

To meet my love: death supervened.  
I'll die, be nothing utterly  
In separation from my love.

(Sur Sassui)<sup>38</sup>

The sorrow of separation and the ultimate longing for the divine being place this work within the realms of mystic poetry.

As stated below, Marui although adorned with all the riches of the palace, was perturbed and kept wailing, for her parents and her people and for her village Malir, whom she was forced to leave after marriage.

If I die here, longing for my country  
O sir! Take my body to my homeland  
So that at least my dead body may rest in Thar,  
in the same graveyard  
I will live again, if only my corpse is taken to Malir.

(Sur Marui)<sup>39</sup>

For some, Shah's poetry was entirely influenced by the verses in Quran and life of Prophet whereas for others it had influences from traditions of other faiths.

According to H. T. Sorley, The genius of Shah Abdul Latif lies, in the fact that he blends these classical ideas and expressions with the raw material of Sindhi folk tales: how he combines the allusion to the *riiz-i-alastj* the pre-eternal covenant between God and Man (Sura 7· 171) with Sohni's pre- eternal love for Mehanval; and how he has in the most exquisite manner sublimated the highly naturalistic description of the rainy season by connecting it with the mystic's longing for the Prophet Muhammad who, as the intercessor on the Day of Judgement, is *rafrma* - Divine Mercy - for the hearts, just as the rain is *rafrma* for the thirsty

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<sup>38</sup> Word Press. (2011 Aug. 28) Sassui-Punhoon. Retrieved from <http://shahabdullatifbhitai.wordpress.com/2011/08/28/part-%E2%80%933-sasui-%E2%80%93punhoon/>

<sup>39</sup> Sayed, D., op. cit., p. 28

earth (a motif which is similarly used in Buddhist texts, too, where Buddha is compared to a rain- cloud). These examples, to which many more can add, show Shah's genius.<sup>40</sup>

On the other hand, author Das observes that there are authentic instances of interaction between the poetic tradition of the Sufis and that of the Bhakti movement. The Radha legend was transformed into a doctrine from the sixteenth century under Chaitanya, with Radha representing the shakti (divine power) of Krishna. The legends and romances of Heer Ranjha, Sohni Mahiwal and Sassui Punhooon – that Punjabi and Sindhi poets drew their symbolism from – share central features with the Radha theme. They glorify a woman passionately in love with a man against stiff social opposition and portray the tragic separation of lovers.<sup>41</sup>

## **ACTORS IN FOLKTALES**

Folklores are read and sung in almost all communities however what makes some different from another is the way they are told and the interpretation that follows. This is where Shah Abdul Latif has showed his artistic skills and exhibited his profound knowledge about all facets of the very diverse Sindhi community. Characters playing the main role in any script always have the most impact on its audience; hence Shah was very conscious and wise while choosing his leading characters. It is evident from the Shah jo Risalo that the victors of his writings were always the most marginalized and left out (whose account no one spoke of); women, yogis, fishermen, weavers, herdsman and alike.

His poetry often presents life from the women's point of view emphasizing on their role as an empowered being and celebrating the same rather than reasoning domination by the society. Sur Marui is a good example of that:

In Sur Marui, Shah Abdul Latif depicts life in two distinct social milieu. On one hand there is Umar, the ruler of Sindh, full of glory and riches. On the other hand the poor nomadic people of Malir, who barely have the necessities of life. Marui, from Malir is brought to the palace

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<sup>40</sup> Schimmel, A., (Winter 1968) Mahfil, Vol. 4, No. 2., pp. 50-52

<sup>41</sup> Punjabi, K., op. cit., p. 12

by force, who although bestowed with all the luxuries, detests everything around her and longs for the simplicity of Malir and its people.

Blessed are the women of my country,  
whose shelter is the desert.  
The golara (name of a wild plant) and the gugriyun (name of a tree)  
is the bedding of my relatives.  
They are wrapped up with the creepers,  
The forest dwellers move about in the forest.  
My Maru (countrymen of Malir) gave me wasteland  
As a dowry.<sup>42</sup>

In another chapter, Sur Suhni: Suhni is married to Dam against her wishes. As a result she never accepts him as her husband, instead falls in love with Mehar and visits him every night by crossing the river. While society despises her and accuses her of immorality, as even witnessed today, the poet, praises her courage in breaking all the rules of the society; commenting strongly that the marriage imposed on her, without her consent, does not bind Suhni in a lasting relationship.

When the souls were questioned in pre-eternity  
My relationship with Mehar was preordained from that day,  
How could that which was  
Already written in my destiny be undone?<sup>43</sup>

In Sur Noori, the poet brings to the fore the unjust caste stratification existing in the society. Noori belongs to the Muhana caste, the lowest in Sindhi society. Shah praises her for her simplicity, which was later admired by King Tamachi who makes her his chief queen. The poet suggests that virtues should not necessarily be attributed only to the upper caste (so called) nor should vices be immediately associated with the lower caste (so called).

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<sup>42</sup> Sayed, D., op. cit., p. 87

<sup>43</sup> Sayed, D., op. cit., p. 80

She was not a muhani from her  
hands, feet nor behaviour.  
Like the thread in the centre of the strings  
Of the Surindo (musical instrument),  
She was a queen among queens.  
From the beginning,  
her manners were those of royalty.  
Samo (Tamachi) recognized her  
And tied red thread round her wrist.<sup>44</sup>

Shah Abdul Latif not only praises courage of women but also when felt the need advises them to not to astray from the righteous path or would have to bear the consequences for their unwise decision.

In Sur Lila – Chanesar, after Lila loses her loving husband King Chanesar due to her negligence and greed for jewellery, Shah blames her for her superficiality and even though she realizes her mistake, it is too late.

I was the queen in the kingdom of Chanesar  
The maids, servants and doorman all greeted me;  
A musical band of drums and pipes  
used to welcome me, and I was always  
entertained with special treatment.  
I was the centre of attraction among friends  
Since my beloved has deserted me,  
I have become like a widow.<sup>45</sup>

Maintaining the dominance of feminine voice, Shah in his Risalo often mentions people of lowly trades and backgrounds such as weavers, spinners, washermen, potters, blacksmiths, brick-bakers, minstrels, fishermen, nomadic people, merchants and sailors. Although showing

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<sup>44</sup> Sayed, D., op. cit., p. 83

<sup>45</sup> Sayed, D., op. cit., p. 85

the hard and virtuous occupations held by each of them, he views the situation from women's perspective who wait for their loved ones to come back and pray for their success, and at the same time vent out their emotions of anxiety and trivial conditions.

A woman eagerly waiting for her husband to return:

O mother! Let my beloved return (from the journey)

I will have quarrel with him.

And ask him why he stayed long

When he promised to come soon.<sup>46</sup>

Aside from the aforementioned actors, Shah also greatly appreciated the painful, courageous and sturdy life of yogis, and commemorated their efforts by writing two entire chapters about their endeavours – Sur Khahori and Sur Ramkali. After leaving home for the first time, Shah Abdul Latif met yogis of various kinds. It is said that he accompanied the yogis on their journey to several places of pilgrimage – sacred to Hindus, and spent three years in their company.

Khahori and Ramkali both refer to the wandering ascetics. Shah Abdul Latif emphatically admired the cumbersome yet fulfilling life lived by the yogis; their renunciation from worldly matters, living a life of self abnegation; simple wearing; and constant remembrance and longing for God. While the former sur speaks about his experiences with the yogis, the latter sheds light on how he felt and remembered the time spent with yogis after they abandoned him at the temple of Henglaj while he lay asleep.

Mother ! I saw those who have Beloved seen

One must stay a night with those who with God have been,

Their recognition becomes a raft in the ocean of the world.

(Sur Khahori)

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<sup>46</sup> Sayed, D., op. cit., p. 89

The knowledge that they gather, has not end,  
news of the spiritual world they to us relate,  
after that they talked of the loved one.

(Sur Khahori)

Snap all worldly ties if to be a yogi, you desire,  
go not to friends' house to weep and shed tears,  
beg from those who knowing all, pretend to know not.

(Sur Ramkali)

If you want to be a yogi, drink a cup of nothingness,  
work for it, and stand there ego-less,  
that way seeker! oneness commodity you may acquire  
from its rigin.

(Sur Ramkali)

With what purpose do the yogis adopt these ways?  
They ask not heaven, nor for hell their hearts are set,  
neither they are concerned with disbelievers nor with the  
believing ones,  
standing they repeat, "Try to win loved one".

(Sur Ramkali) <sup>47</sup>

Many individuals, experiences and accounts (historic as well as of his own life) have contributed to what is available to us in the form of 'Shah jo Risalo' today. In totality, it speaks about living an authentic and virtuous life. The Risalo is a kaleidoscope of multifarious themes and dimensions. Sometimes it appears to be a Sindhi translation of the Holy Quran meant to teach its readers the infinity of Allah and the essence of Islam and how to find the right path. At other times it tells about the relentless and intense yearning of a lover for his beloved. At other times it admires the beauty of the human form and its environments. Sometimes it cautions the unwary against the turbulent and no-rushing waves.

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<sup>47</sup> Khoso, F. M., op. cit., pp. 222, 223, 234, 245

At other times it shows deep sympathy for the have-nots and downtrodden and castigates their exploiters and oppressors.<sup>48</sup>

Its complexity of language as well as use of symbols is, its dominant feature that has most attracted the readers from distinguished field of interests and backgrounds, to take on the challenge to interpret what the author tried to convey to his people back in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Although scholars have agreed partially to what Shah tried to convey through his prolific expression, when it comes to the identity of the poet himself, it is amusing to find distinct assertions made by scholars that staunchly challenge each other's remarks.

### **IDENTITY OF SHAH AND SACHAL**

Identity formation is a crucial phase in every child's upbringing. Although throughout an individual's life, one assumes many distinct roles and therefore categorized among different identity groups (including 'student', 'professional', 'workers', etc) yet some identities that are borne by individuals in the early phase of their life, often take precedence over other temporary identities acquired in the later phase. Some of these rigid or non-compromising identities include ones gender, religion, caste, sect, regional affiliation and nationality.

Similarly when scholars have studied the poetry of Shah Abdul Latif and Sachal, they too have many a times given much emphasis on who they were or to which religion or sect did the poet belong to. This debate becomes much more interesting in the context of Sufi poets since it is widely known, visible and understood that these poets have gone to great lengths to enlighten the path of search for truth and guided their fellow humans to not to astray themselves by worldly developed distinctions that disunite people.

The Sindhi Sufi poet Sachal Sarmast has escaped much of the literary interpretation over his own identity due to his avowed claims of unity that denied the idea of superficial barriers created amongst humans in the form of religious identities.

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<sup>48</sup> Khoso, F. M., op. cit., p.7

Sachal tells the whole truth, be mindful of chums' chumminess,  
Whoever forgets unity, his very existence is in shame.<sup>49</sup>

(Sachal)

Sachal Sarmast once said, "He (God) is everywhere and in each and every phenomenon. He has come here just to witness His own manifestation."<sup>50</sup>

His teachings have often been compared with Mansur al-Hallaj, the Sufi martyr who ecstatically proclaimed, "I am the Truth." Hallaj is a favorite symbol in the poems of Sachai Sarmast<sup>51</sup>. Rather than blindly following tradition, Sachal urged people to seek the truth directly. (Add debates what does 'Anal Haqq' mean) Sachal Sarmast taught a vision of Unity called Wahdat al-Wujud, which others have compared to the great non dualist teachings of Advaita Vedanta within Hinduism and Zen/Chan within Buddhism. He is an astute example of the eternal struggle between orthodoxy and those who confess the unity of all the being.

Unlike Sachal, Shah's poetry has nurtured many interesting debates around his own religious identity, what influenced his poetry and his undergoing formal education.

Shah was born a Sunni Muslim yet nevertheless from his writings it appears that he was sympathetic to some Shi'ite practices and beliefs. Additionally in his Risalo he has contributed an entire chapter on the Karbala incident. This incited a debate among scholars whether Shah was a practicing Sunni or a Shi'ite. One incident in this regard is commonly asserted:

Shah Abdul Latif was once asked if he was a Sunni or Shi'ite? He answered 'in between'. When his questioner told him that there was nothing 'in between', Shah Abdul Latif replied

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<sup>49</sup> Joyo. I., op. cit., p. 11

<sup>50</sup> Poetry Chaikhana Blog. (2011, Aug.) Sachal Sarmast – We are, what are we? Retrieved from <http://www.poetry-chaikhana.com/blog/2011/08/01/sachal-sarmast-we-are-what-are-we/>

<sup>51</sup> Schimmel, A. (Spring - Summer 1971) Mahfil, Vol. 7, No. 1/2, pp. 71-80

that he was that ‘nothing’. In Sufi terms this refers to fana (nothingness or self-annihilation).<sup>52</sup>

Also effort has been made to identify Shah with either one Sufi order or with the other. According to some scholars Shah Abdul Latif belonged to the Qadiriyya Sufi order since Shah was inspired by the concept ‘wahdat al wujud’ – ‘unity of being’. At the same time countering claims argue that Shah was an Uwaisi Sufi.<sup>53</sup> The notion of ‘Wahdat al wujud’ predates Islamic history and as aforementioned finds its roots in earlier teachings of Advaita Vedanta, Buddhism and else. Hence there has been considerable controversy amongst Hindu and Muslim scholars as to the debt owed by Shah Abdul Latif to Hinduism and Islam, with both sides on occasion adopting extreme attitudes. It is necessary to view this debate in the context of Shah’s journey with the yogis. Since the reasons for their separation are unknown, scholars having different dispositions have brought forth distinct narratives for the same account.

One of the scholar’s Shahvani, although agreeing that Shah loves long for yogis as visible from his two chapters devoted to the yogis however stringently asserts that ‘Shah Abdul Latif had the heart of a Muslim who could not get satisfaction by worshipping potsherd and bricks.’ Similar view is presented by another scholar Mirza Qalech Beg who stated that since Shah did not approve of the practices of yogis which he saw at first hand and that after arguing with them he left them. Defending the other side of the coin, some Hindu scholars including Ajvani and Jotvani reverted back arguing that Shah’s poetry has always been popular among Hindus because it reflects the influence of Vedantic and yogi thought on the poet.

The two examples quoted below give the reader an insight into the extreme stands taken by some scholars when debating reasons for Shah’s break with the yogis.<sup>54</sup>

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<sup>52</sup> Khoso, F. M., op. cit., p. 24

<sup>53</sup> Khoso, F. M., op. cit., p. 32

<sup>54</sup> Sayed, D., op. cit., pp. 114 - 118

He (Shah Abdul Latif) went to see the Hindu shrine of Nani, where with his Sufi miracles he insulted and degraded the faqirs so as to make them realise their mistake. Ignorance being their innate nature, they (yogis) planned to hurt him. When he realized this, he dived into the earth and came out in his own country.

(Din Muhammad Wafai)

A man who could don the garb of Hindu jogis, wander with them for years, make pilgrimages to sacred places of Hindus, a man who broke, without the slightest compunction, the Islamic injunction against Sama' or dance – music, a man who went out of his way, in that era of bigotry, to pull out from a crowd of fanatic Muslims a poor Hindu whom they were proceeding to convert forcibly to Islam, could hardly be regarded a Muslim.

(Ajvani)

Aside from these extreme accounts there are other interpretations too; like that of the German scholar Schimmel who stated, 'though Sufis and yogis apparently belong to two different religious systems, each group being sincere seekers after Truth, voluntarily set out on a difficult path and welcome suffering and affliction.'<sup>55</sup>

Dr. Durr E Shahwar Syed, after presenting arguments of earlier scholars points out that 'fundamentally, for Shah Abd al-Latif religion was a personal matter, which unless a man felt from within his heart, no matter how much he prostrated himself and held fasts in Ramadan, would be of little value'. A couplet from Shah jo Risalo to uphold this remark would be:

Though a Kalima-reciter, you aren't yet faithful,  
As deceit, duality and Satan are there in your heart,  
In appearance a Muslim, in actuality an idolater you are.<sup>56</sup>

(Shah Abdul Latif)

More in depth analysis in reference to the debate discussed above will be presented in the later chapters of this research.

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<sup>55</sup> Schimmel, A., op. cit., pp. 210-222

<sup>56</sup> Joyo, I., op. cit., p. 94

Another element in Shah's life that often leads to debate among scholars is his status of education. There is no proof of his handwritten account and additionally a famous narrative is often repeated in reference to his academic training: 'when Shah Abdul Latif was six years old, his father sent Shah Habib sent him to Akhund Nur Muhammad Bhatti for tuition. When the latter asked the child to say Alif – A, he repeated it. But he refused to say Be – or B saying there is no Be. (Alif stands for Allah, which meant that as a child he was well aware that there was only one God).'<sup>57</sup> Hence the argument goes, in the book *Tuhfat al-Karim*<sup>58</sup>, the historian and scholar Mir Ali Sher calls him ummi – meaning illiterate, but emphasising that all knowledge had been inscribed on his chest by God. Whereas the German scholar, Ernest Trumpp<sup>59</sup>, who published *Shah jo Risalo* in 1866 refutes the above stance stating that only a learned person could have articulated his thought so exquisitely as what is witnessed in his *Risalo*.

## **SUFISM AND BHAKTI MOVEMENT**

A lot has been discussed and deliberated either refuting or upholding the claim of influence of Advaita - Vedantic thought on Shah's *Risalo* and Sufism in general. This argument needs to be placed in the context of Indian Subcontinent where people practicing different faiths have co-existed for centuries and are bound to interact and have direct or indirect influence on each others' personal as well political lives.

Sufism as well as the well known Bhakti movement developed in reaction to the dominance of orthodox and institutionalized Islam and Hinduism respectively. While Sufism never challenged the allegiance to the Quran, given that Hinduism is not the religion of the book, the Bhakti movement can be understood in relation to a framework of radical opposition to Hinduism. Although arrived in the picture earlier, they shaped themselves into a popular mass movement only during 14<sup>th</sup> century and onwards. Sufism became a mass movement during Nizamuddin's lifetime, and the moral principles laid down by the early Chishti saints

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<sup>57</sup> Sayed, D., op. cit., p.16

<sup>58</sup> Mir, Q., Sher, A. (1957; 388) *Tuhfat al-Kiram*. Trans. Ahmed Mir Makhdum, Hyderabad, Sindh: Culture and Tourism Dept.

<sup>59</sup> Trumpp, E. (1866; vii) *Shah jo Risalo*. Leipzig

significantly shaped the ideals of Muslim society of the time. At the same time anti-caste Bhakti movement also flourished as a counter challenge to the spread of Sufism.<sup>60</sup>

The interchange of ideas between the Sufi and Bhakti thought and practice was inevitable. Both being essentially non-sectarian, 'they owed a great deal to Vedantic monism and their belief in monotheism brought them closer to Islam than to traditional Hinduism.'<sup>61</sup> Be it Kabir, Bulleh shah, or Sachal, their permeability across each other's cultural terrains, across experiences of interiority and politics, and across the elite and the marginalized was a powerfully enabling factor in enhancing their dynamic relevance and their longevity. Source of inspiration for their artistic expression were experiences of none other than women, underprivileged caste groups, artisans, wanderers and social reformers / warriors. From these examples the possibility of dissent against the established orthodoxy of Hinduism and Islam emerged, as did the literary, cultural and spiritual convergences that led to the simultaneously varied and intermingling cultural flows of the Indian Subcontinent. It can be hardly overstressed that the liberalising power of Sufism, Bhakti and Sant traditions, for almost a whole millennium, lies paradoxically in the fact that none could be restricted to the notion of a definable, contained, or autonomous movement.<sup>62</sup>

Commonalities are visible throughout the literature available, from the literary figures often used as symbols: viraha (separation), Milan (meet), hijr (journey) and ana-I haqq (I am the Truth), to use of secular legends and folk tales of Heer Ranjha, Sassui Punhooon and Radha Krishna, among other aspects. The similarities overlaps, or the osmosis is evident in the poetic imagery of Sufi and Bhakti poetry. They resonate in a sweeping range of literature, from the works of Shah Latif and Sachal Sarmast in Sindh to Bulleh Shah and Nanak in Punjab and Khusrau in Delhi, from Tukaram in Maharashtra to Kabir in Awadh, or the faqirs and Bauls in Bengal.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> Panjabi, K., op. Cit., pp. 8 – 13

<sup>61</sup> Sayed, D., op. cit., p.107

<sup>62</sup> Panjabi, K., op. cit., pp. 2, 3

<sup>63</sup> Ibid., 28

If this congruence of different faiths and cultures is seen in respect to Sindh and Sindhi Sufi poets, it is evident from the history of Sindh the factors that influenced the culture and practices honed by its people today, are not limited to the borders within which Sindh is geographically or politically delineated today. The centuries long political dominance of practitioners of distinct religious and philosophical thought (Aryans, Greeks, Iranians, Arabs, Vedantic Buddhists and more) gave birth to the intellectual world of Sindh too, inter alia, what may be loosely described as a kind of double reaction or ambivalence in the form of disappointment and weariness with ‘religiosity’ but resigned belief in ‘religion’ so much so that general conciliation and toleration vis-a-vis other religions and sects resulting from this ambivalent attitude became a cornerstone in the development of Sindhi culture.<sup>64</sup> Moreover, Shah Abdul Latif and Sachal Sarmast were brought up in a period when cordial relations were created between Hindus and Muslims by pioneer figures such as Kabir and Nanak;<sup>65</sup> latter also visited northern Sindh and both in their struggle to preach love unity and peace, attracted many followers who then associated themselves with Sufi centres.

## **ONGOING CRISIS IN PAKISTAN AND RELEVANCE OF SUFI MESSAGE**

The unfolding crises in Pakistan has caught everyone’s attention around the world; local and global media is flooded with breaking news and headlines from Pakistan, highlighting massacre of thousands as a consequence of horrendous chain of blasts throughout the country, continuous human right violations, hostile relations with India, a continuing war in Afghanistan and hijacking of political and public spaces by Taliban. The data compiled by the South Asia Terrorism Portal (SATP) depicts that since 1989 the people killed in 2,601 different incidents of sectarian violence in the country total 3,821.<sup>66</sup> The country is facing an extremely challenging situation in which extremism, terrorism, sectarian divide, corruption, exploitation, targeted killing and extortion seem to undermine the Pakistani social order.

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<sup>64</sup> Jyo, I., op. cit., p. 30

<sup>65</sup> Sayed, D., op. cit., p.107

<sup>66</sup> Khokhar, K. (2012, Sept 30) Sufism and Pakistani Society, *Dawn Newspaper*. Retrieved from <http://dawn.com/2012/09/30/sufism-and-pakistani-society/>

Amidst such perplexing and horrific ground realities, some vocal members of the Pakistani civil society have endeavoured to hold on to the rich traditions like Sufism at disposal to the Pakistani people, urging the masses to revert back to that sacred tradition in order to escape the prevailing intolerance and brutality. The culture of Sufi shrines is a dominant facet of Pakistani society and appeals to the majority.

It is utmost crucial to take into consideration the political, social and economic development in Pakistan since its inception, to carve out the changing role played by Sufi shrines, as an institution that transmits social education to its devotees.

As previously discussed, the shrine culture was enthusiastically patronised by various Muslim dynasties that ruled the subcontinent, and it became a vital part of the belief and ritual system of a large number of Muslims in the region. After partition, ‘Pakistani rulers from 1947 till 1977, openly patronised influential Pirs (head of shrines and Sufi orders), to blunt the political challenges posed by the advocates of the more puritanical strains of the faith.’ This policy also attracted the urban middle-class youth; ‘just like the middle-class hippies of the West (in the 1960s) – who had chosen various esoteric Eastern spiritual beliefs to demonstrate their disapproval of the ‘soullessness’ of the Western system – young, middle-class Pakistanis (in the early 1970s), increasingly started looking upon Sufism and the shrine culture as a way to make a social and political connect with the ‘downtrodden and the dispossessed,’ and to show their disapproval of the figurative ‘mullah.’<sup>67</sup>

This trend was short lived and the country witnessed profound changes in its outlook to Sufism, under General Zia Ul Haq rule. ‘The latter found it hard to introduce certain harsh Islamic laws in a scene steeped in centuries-old traditions of ‘folk Islam’ revolving around the shrine culture. This culture was not attuned to the interpretation of jihad that Zia was using to boost up his regime’s aggressive stance against the Soviet-backed government in Afghanistan. The widespread shrine culture’s passiveness and looseness constituted a problem for Zia. As a response, his dictatorship went about building a number of new mosques and madrassas (mostly paid from Saudi ‘Petro-Dollars’), and headed by puritanical

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<sup>67</sup> Paracha F. N. (2012, Oct 25) Upsetting Sufis, *Dawn Newspaper*. Retrieved from <http://dawn.com/2012/10/25/upsetting-sufis/>

and radical religious leaders.’<sup>68</sup> There onwards not much of reversal policies have been witnessed and the religious factions have maintained a strong hold over religious and political institutions including Sufi Shrines.

In spite of such developments, the positive role played by shrines is hardly disputed; ‘it is the meeting place of the masses, the rich and the poor, the rulers and the ruled and served as a humanising force in the society at both cultural and spiritual levels.’ (Director Unesco Dr. Kozue Kay Nagata)<sup>69</sup>

Shrines constitute an important facet of Sufism, providing a visible space that symbolizes harmony and tolerance. However, in order to analyse the role and relevance of Sufism, one must distinguish the role played by shrines and the message conveyed by Sufism. As observed from the aforementioned literature, institutions can be used and misused according to the needs and interests of persons in authority.

It is strongly felt by many proponents of Sufism, that this tradition if kept alive and practiced in sync with the core principles that Sufism imbibes, conflicts in Pakistan can be curtailed. A reverent scholar Azghar Ali Engineer points out reasons why Sufism should be practiced: ‘Sufis love Allah, not fear Allah. Love is the central doctrine for them premised on the concept of Wahdat al-Wujud (Unity of Being); demolish all walls of separation between one faith and another and make love of all human beings the base of their religion. Love not only leads to tolerance but also demolishes all movements based on extremism and exclusive truth.’<sup>70</sup>

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<sup>68</sup> Ibid.

<sup>69</sup> Dawn Newspaper. (2011, May 29) Sufism binds diverse cultures, *Dawn Newspaper*. Retrieved from <http://dawn.com/2011/05/29/sufism-binds-diverse-cultures/>

<sup>70</sup> Engineer, A. A. (2012, Sept. 7) The Allure of Sufism, *Dawn Newspaper*. Retrieved from <http://dawn.com/2012/09/07/the-allure-of-sufism/>

Another scholar, R. A. Nicholson upholds: ‘Societies cannot be reformed by old and rusted ideas. However, Sufism doesn’t preach you ideas rather it instigates you to revive values that can never be old or rusted but are universal.’<sup>71</sup>

Many similar views have been shared by other scholars as well as individuals from various backgrounds, who believe that in order to confront the situation at hand, it is imperative to seek guidance from the teachings of great Sufi saints.

When Abida Parveen, the enchanting mystic singer, was asked to share – how Sufism perceives the complex composition of underpinning conflicts in the Subcontinent region, she responded as follows:

‘The message of Sufism is so powerful that even if one individual understands, it will have a profound impact.

What is visible to our eyes is not the real conflict. We have to break the barriers that have been constructed within our hearts. All of us have distanced ourselves from truth – that is the real conflict. This can only be confronted through soul purification. Internal barriers have been built within residents of India and Pakistan; if those barriers are broken down, then external barriers will automatically wither away.’<sup>72</sup>

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<sup>71</sup> Usman Hajweri, S. A. (1999) *Kashf Al-Mahjub*, Trans. Nicholson R. A., New York: New York Press

<sup>72</sup> NDTV. (2012, Jan 13) Singer Abida Parveen talks about the power of Sufi music. Retrieved from <http://www.ndtv.com/video/player/prime-shows/singer-abida-parveen-talks-about-the-power-of-sufi-music/225251>

## CHAPTER 3

### RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The objective for the study and the research questions (as elucidated in the Introduction), were derived from the available literature and my own understanding of the subject. In this chapter, I elaborate on three aspects that shape the core of my research endeavour: understanding phenomenology, qualitative methodology and personal experiences from the field.

#### PHENOMENOLOGY

In order to give importance to the way in which masses have understood and interpreted Sufism rather than concerning oneself only on the scholarly interpretation of Sufi poetry, I have taken substantial support from the study of phenomenology, which gives eminence to qualitative study than quantitative results.

‘By dealing with people faced with values, principles, norms, and rules of different kinds throughout a period of dramatic changes, I have reached the conclusion that the dynamics of norms and their interrelation with specific life situations in which the individuals are involved should be the conceptual framework in which phenomenon or even more generally the normative transformations our socio-cultural world is undergoing, have to be approached.’<sup>73</sup> This observation clearly illustrates the significance of distinct subjective realities of individuals residing within societies and how they reflect on the norms or notions they engage with. In this respect applying ‘phenomenology’ becomes essential since this approach offers a lens that values subjective meanings, questions the taken for granted set of knowledge, emphasizes on individual lived experiences and encourages the ‘We-relation’.

Alfred Schutz, pioneer of the study of phenomenology claimed: ‘our societies are threatened in many ways, but the greatest menace is probably the least visible one: conformism, with its

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<sup>73</sup> Copoeru, I. (2008) A Schutzian Perspective on the Phenomenology of Law in the Context of Positivist Practices, *Springer Science + Business Media B.V.*, p. 270

many facets and roots.’<sup>74</sup> The ‘We-relation’ as compared to the ‘they relation’ is described as follows:

‘In the They-relation I draw upon my stock of knowledge according to which there are “people” who are “typical” clerks, policemen, etc., and who do “typical” things as clerks, policemen, etc. I do not care how they “feel” about being clerks and doing police work, how, in other words, how they experience their (ongoing) conduct in a subjective context of meaning.’<sup>75</sup> They are treated as mere types and not unique individuals, whereas in ‘We-relation’ requires personal involvement and subjective scrutiny. Hence the social scientist is an indirect social observer, who leaves his / her own direct experiences aside.

A ‘norm’ - warns Schutz, has a certain meaning for the norm-giver and the norm-addressee.<sup>76</sup> Like, law cannot produce a better world by itself, but people who understand how law works can, similarly the message of Sufism cannot translate into practice unless people who understand the message do so.

Therefore what is crucial is to understand and inquire what the subjective realities of the individuals are; how does any knowledge that is imposed from outside translates into practice by the people within their own life worlds and subjective realities. It is essential to observe how Sufism or the stock of knowledge created by Sindhi Sufi poets has been interpreted and used in daily lives by the people themselves.

## QUALITATIVE METHODOLOGY

The primary objective of this study is to document the perspectives and experiences of participants, both, living in the vicinity of shrines and followers of Sindhi Sufi poets. In an effort to prioritize the opinions of the participants giving primacy to their subjective realities, a qualitative study is best suited for the purpose. This was coupled with perspectives on concepts such as role of religion, use of shrines, ways of promoting Sufi knowledge and more

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<sup>74</sup> Schutz, A. (1932) The dimensions of the social world, in A. Brodersen (Ed.), Alfred Schutz, collected papers, *The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff*, Vol. II, p. 30

<sup>75</sup> Ibid., p. 45

<sup>76</sup> Schutz, A. (1964) Some equivocations in the notion of responsibility, In A. Brodersen (Ed.), Alfred Schutz, collected papers, *The Hague: Martinus Nijhoff*, Vol. II: Studies in social theory, p. 276

related paradigms in order to have an insight into how participants belonging to distinct life worlds shape their understanding.

Through the participant's experiences and narratives, multiple meanings of 'Sufi' and 'message of Sufism' emerged. The surfaced meanings were then incorporated under various themes that aim to provide an enriching understanding of diverse characteristics of Sindhi Sufi poetry to the reader.

In the process of listening to narratives of participants and their shared experiences, my own reflections have formed an integral aspect of the research. My ability to delve deep into surrounding realities have enriched sharply and the process of self-introspection begun. I have shared some of my personal learning's at the end of this chapter.

## **RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHOD**

### **LOCATION**

The geographical area of study is primarily two locations: the shrine of Shah Abdul Latif situated in Bhit Shah, Sindh, Pakistan and the shrine of Sachal Sarmast, situated in Daraza, Sindh, Pakistan and in their neighborhood towns and cities. Since the study concerned the interpretation of the aforementioned Sindhi Sufi poets, the area of study chosen has been limited to these two sites. However the research attempts to engage with wider issues surround Sufism and the views of participants regarding all those aspects have been taken into analysis. Another reason for choosing these sites is that I myself belong to the province of Sindh and wish to contribute to enhancement of the available literature in respect to the understanding and relevance of Sufism in Sindh and elsewhere.

### **PROFILE OF THE PARTICIPANTS AND SAMPLING**

The participants were selected through purposive sampling; a diversity index was developed in an effort to include responses from individuals pertaining to distinct backgrounds. In addition snowball sampling method was used to incorporate views of those, whom the participants connected the researcher with.

I interacted with participants who were either vendors placed in or around the shrine, the visitors to the shrine, singers who recited kalams (couplets) of Shah and Sachal, residents

who lived in the vicinity of the shrine and individuals from neighborhood city who had read the writings of these Sufi poets.

### **DATA COLLECTION PROCEDURES**

The main component of this research is the responses received by the participants. Three ways were used to retract information: non-participatory observation, in-depth interviews and recording oral histories. Coherent with the ethics of research that the researcher shall not intervene in any way in the natural course of action in the field, non participant observation was a part of the process of data collection. I made an effort to spend a lot of time with the participants and met them more than once in order to better observe their surroundings and the professional roles played by them (like the vendor or the shopkeeper). Simultaneously with some participants in-depth interviews were conducted in order to record various perspectives and to have an opportunity to ask them to connect the emerging themes (like relevance of Sufi message and through which mediums can it be promoted). In addition, undertook oral histories with those participants who wished to share an account of their personal experiences and how poetry of Sindhi Sufi poets acted as a refuge for them to appreciate their lives and feel strengthened.

All of these interviews were digitally recorded and transcribed with the consent of the participants.

### **TOOLS OF DATA COLLECTION**

To facilitate my interviews I used a semi-structured interview guide. This was prepared keeping in mind the research questions and the information retrieved from the available literature; included broad questions based on themes with a focus on how they view these poets and the way the message of Sufism has transcended into their lives and modernity (attached in the annexure). However it is important to mention that when interviewing participants I did not necessary follow the prepared structure of the interview guide since narratives of the participants carried their own flow and links were made that were not necessarily all included in the guide. This semi-structured process allowed me to grasp a better understanding of participants view point and at the same time the latter felt free to shed light on multiple themes that were connected to the ambit of Sufi thought and practice. As a result new themes constantly emerged and became part of my questionnaire for interview

with the next participant. One of the most crucial debates that came to fore as a consequence of this semi-structured interview is the debates that arose regarding notions like ‘pirheen’ and ‘tasawuf’ as discussed in the analysis section.

## **DATA PROCESS AND ANALYSIS**

All the interviews with the participants were conducted in Sindhi. I then translated these transcriptions into English. Emerging themes were highlighted within each transcription and after coding the broad thematic areas which were common to all interviews were brought to fore followed by analysis that was undertaken keeping in context the responses, available literature and my own interpretation.

## **ETHICAL CONSIDERATION**

Apart from the procedural ethics, ethics in practice must be fully taken care of by the researcher while he/she engages in the process of research. Ethics in research as essential to be followed even if they mean on losing out on participants or sources of essential. As social research deals with studying society and human participants they have a plethora of complexities and ethical dilemmas.

Written consent was difficult in the concerned setting due to various reasons, hesitance from participants’ side to sign any paper that might bound them for what they have shared or fear of possible improper use of the written consent. Therefore, Oral consent was taken before recording any of the participant interviews.

The place and time of the interview was decided according to the convenience of respective participants and confidentiality was assured to all of them. Before beginning any interview I honestly shared with them my identity as an independent researcher associated with a university who was undertaking this initiative as a part of an MA dissertation. At the end of the interview the participants were provided with contact information in case of them having any questions or concerns they wished to share.

While transcribing the recordings conducted in Sindhi, I have ensured to translate them as literally as possible in English, keeping my subjective views aside. Having said that, throughout this research keeping my views detached at all times during the interviews as well

as during transcription has equipped me with patience and a skill of listening that has been an essential learning for me.

### **LIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY**

Studying Sufism or any philosophical school of thought in particular requires a thorough understanding of a complex composition of nuances attached to that thought. The ambit of Sufism in general and Sindhi Sufi poetry in specific is dynamically vast and profound in meaning; it carries with itself many layers of concepts, notions and symbols from all aspects of an individual's life. Hence no study alone on this extensive subject can be elaborate enough to bring forth all dimensions necessary to grasp.

Limitations include as follows:

Although I belong to the geographical area of Sindh, I am not well equipped with the Sindhi language that being one of the biggest limitations in this study since understanding of Sufism lies emphatically within the writings of Sufis; i.e. in the form of poetry. As discussed in the Literature Review, if language is the medium of communication, poetry is the most profound and symbolic expression of that language, possessing the ability to encompass multiple meanings in just a few words. Therefore I always had to rely on English translations. Being aware that core meanings are often lost when poetry is translated into foreign language, the best source for me was translation into simple Sindhi instruction by the participants and reading literature in respect to the contextual realities in which that poetry was written.

Secondly, paucity of time has been one of biggest challenges while undertaking this research. It has indirectly and directly contributed to many other limitations: a small number of participants contributing to the data collected and only two shrines were visited; limited engagement with the field – a necessary element for any qualitative study undertaken from the perspective of phenomenology; limited grasp of the vast depth and length of accessible knowledge on the subject; and inability to thoroughly engage with the poetry itself.

Another crucial limitation in this dissertation is the missing gender dimension; aside from a few visitors to the shrine who participated in this research, I did not get a chance and was unable to create an opportunity for myself to interact with the women who resided in the vicinity of the shrines. Since Shah Abdul Latif has narrated all folktales from a perspective of women, highlighting their feelings as well as attributes like courage and determination, missing this dimension is an important limitation. Having said that, aside from direct participants I have had discussions and interacted with many women amongst family and friends who shared their views; hence those have indirectly contributed to my overall analysis.

Having listed the many limitations, it is essential to add that many notions, concepts and subjective realities have been thoroughly debated and deliberated upon throughout this research endeavour and I have learnt a lot by my limited engagement with the field and during the entire process of engaging with the subject while writing this dissertation as narrated below.

### **MY FIELD EXPERIENCES AND LEARNING'S**

I was introduced to the thought of Sufism at an early age in my life and had attended many concerts of Sufi singers like Abida Parveen. However, had never made an attempt to understand and interpret the meaning of Sufi poetry heard during the concerts or read elsewhere.

This journey began as a result of many questions that I had raised to myself during the first year of my post-graduate study; having read so many theories and philosophies, many claiming to be the panacea to problems of the world, yet disgruntled to witness and read about undergoing conflicts and rising crises throughout the world. With those perturbing questions in mind, one of those days, I chose to translate one of Bulleh Shah's *kalam* (poetry) sung by Abida Parveen, that I often used to listen to; a few couplets from that poetry have been shared in the beginning of this dissertation. Understanding the meaning of those words and being able to connect them to the nature of conflicts human kind faces today, I was

incited to dig deeper and try and find relevance of this thought in modern times; thus chose this topic as my dissertation.

Due to lack of command on Sindhi language, I faced a lot of difficulties in the initial stage while trying to understand the writings of Sachal and especially those of Shah Abdul Latif; reading their translated work was not satisfactory since it became difficult to contextualize to the era in which the poets lived and literal translation often failed to convey the original message. The most enriching part of working on this dissertation was my travel to interiors of Sindh province. Although had travelled earlier but this time there was a purpose and an urge to understand the Sindhi history from Shah and Sachal's lens.

I was overwhelmed by witnessing the humbleness and respect with which participants welcomed this initiative and contributed significantly by sharing their experiences as well as bringing the poetry of Shah and Sachal alive by explaining the historical context of the poets as well as responding to my questions by reciting poetry at many intervals from the works of Sufi poets, and more importantly, patiently translating the meanings of those couplets in simple Sindhi language upon my request. In this entire trip, the most memorable experience was my visit to Sachal Sarmast's shrine. For the first time in my life, I witnessed graves of believers from different faiths rested in peace together under one roof. This in itself is a startling example of 'unity of being' that is avowedly advocated for by Sufi poets.

Analysing the collected data and writing the dissertation was equally an enriching experience. Shah Abdul Latif possessed the art of capturing human feelings and artistically expressing them through his poetic narrative; feelings that we all experience but hesitate to share out of our subjective set of inhibitions. Throughout this process I indulged in many debates and discussions with my friends and most importantly with myself, pondering upon questions of 'my identity', 'purpose of existence' and alike. A lot of churning-within took place; that in effect has substantially contributed to overall analysis made in this dissertation.

## CHAPTER 4

### UNDERSTANDING SUFISM AND ITS PRACTICE

The philosophical thought of Sufism in general and Sindhi Sufi poetry in specific have contributed significantly in respect to their awe-inspiring poetry, exquisite narration of history and message for the principle of universality, as thoroughly discussed in the earlier chapters. What Sindhi Sufi poets left behind for Sindhis' and entire humanity is unequivocally spellbound however what is more crucial is how what they desired to convey has translated into practice by the people of present day Pakistan.

Understanding Sufism today is very crucial especially when many scholars and erudite persons have reiterated the contribution of Sufi poets by speaking vociferously against the multifarious nature of conflicts one encounter's today. While devotional literatures in South Asia presents essays based on meticulous scholarship, they deal with individual work or poets, or regional manifestations in specific periods, rather than in terms of their relationship to each other or their relevance today.<sup>77</sup>

In order to grasp the relevance of Sufi thought in everyday lives of people, this chapter as well as the subsequent chapters record reflections on all facets of Sufism discussed in the Literature Review chapter, from the perspective of the participants to this research. The participants were asked various questions which revolved around their understanding of Sufism and how they saw its relevance in their daily lives as well as concerning the socio-economic and political developments in effect around them.

This research is undertaken with the understanding that reading is more of a creative act in which readers create and generate meanings out of their own experience and history of reading. Hence who interprets and how who interprets varies significantly depending on his/her experiences and life world.<sup>78</sup> Values, interest and power: these three are essential

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77 Punjabi, K., op. cit., p. 18

78 Saleem, A. *Melodies of Shah Abdul Latif Bhitai*, Hyderabad: Culture and Tourism Dept.

factors related to each individual that significantly influence his/her interpretation and analysis of information available.

## **WHO IS A SUFI**

The most vital question to begin with, is how one understands Sufi and thus the philosophy of Sufism. In an effort to analyse the relevance of Sufi thought, it is first crucial to decipher how participants have been introduced to Sufi's by their family and surroundings.

When asked this question to the participants, many distinct observations were made; for some, Sufi's were wanderers who abstained themselves from all worldly matters, whereas for others, they were ones who stood sturdy against superficial conflicts and vowed their support for peace and self introspection.

A common characteristic of Sufis that came forth from many participants was that, a Sufi always refers to God as his/her beloved; longing for the eternal love. Unlike the orthodox practitioners of religion who define a relationship between an individual and God premised on fear; focusing merely on following rituals without emphasizing upon the essence behind such rituals, Sufis relationship with God is premised on love and admiration. According to one of the participant's a Sufi speaks to the beloved, 'whether I am good or bad I am yours and I find you wherever I look.'

Self exile or isolation from the world is a contested practice often connected with Sufis. According to one participant, 'self exile' is important but that does not mean a Sufi is not connected with the masses. This response is better elaborated by Abida Parveen, 'the reigning queen of Sufiana kalam', who in Poet Gulzar's words is introduced as follows:

"Sufiun ka kalam gaate gaate ab Abida khud Sufi ho gayin, un ki awaz ab ibadat ki aawaz lagti hai" (Singing Sufi music for so long, Abida herself has become a Sufi now. Her voice sounds like a prayer in itself)

She, during an interview in Delhi was once asked:

Q: How do mystics like yourself adjust with the real world?

Response: Real world is this only. If you take out mysticism from life then there will be no humanity – because mysticism acts as the source of strength for humanity.

Q or Comment: If you see the structure of a conventional and traditional life; that has nothing to do with mysticism!

Response: How?

Comment: Your life is very unconventional; you possess a special gift / skill that connects you with *Rab* (God), so do you feel that day to day life is ordinary and boring?

Ans: No! It is not like that. '*Har cheez se nibhana, yeh fiqr diya hai rab ne – sab ka fiqr ki jiye.*' It is not enough to get absorbed or lost within oneself only. It is the message of God that one has obligations towards his/her family, neighbour and community at large. This is also *tasawuf*<sup>79</sup>; if one does not have spiritualism within and does not listen to him / herself than how will that individual listen to another. Its' my view that these structures are all relationships of spiritualism; it is like one tree with many branches. Spiritualism is present everywhere, in all relationships.

Q: Throughout your career did you face any obstacles in this male dominated world?

Ans: The world in which I reside there is no concept of male and female. Gender in itself is also a barrier that inhibits the true message from reaching individuals.<sup>80</sup>

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<sup>79</sup> The notion *tasawuf* will be discussed towards the end of this chapter.

<sup>80</sup> NDTV. (2012, Jan 13) Singer Abida Parveen talks about the power of Sufi music. Retrieved from <http://www.ndtv.com/video/player/prime-shows/singer-abida-parveen-talks-about-the-power-of-sufi-music/225251>

Similarly Kabir points out in his poetry “Tu ka Tu”<sup>81</sup>

In man and woman one resides,  
who could call them two?  
As a baby you start to cry,  
The baby sitter you, only you!

Analysing responses of Abida Parveen, one can understand the importance of mysticism to a Sufi’s life; that runs on principles of universality and see’s no difference between one individual to another knowing that all in their manifestation have emanated from the same source and are no different. What the participants called ‘love’ for God, Abida Parveen described the same as mysticism and considered that as a core for Sufi thought.

The question of ‘who is Sufi’ will be addressed again towards the end, once all other facets that Sufism advocates for are discussed in the themes and chapters that follow.

## **WAYS IN WHICH SUFISM IS PRACTICED**

Any medium or knowledge be as positive as it may be, unless that is used for a righteous cause and put into practice in everyday life, that approach loses its significance over time or more dangerously it can be used by power mongers to suit their interest, who then interpret the available thought and literature according to their fulfilment of needs. Sufism in practice can equally not escape the possibility of adulteration and misuse. Therefore it is significant to inquire from participants their views regarding the ways in which Sufism is practiced in contemporary Pakistan.

South Asia has a repository of dargah’s and shrines named after Sufi and Bhakti poets; their eminence is unquestioned today due to the popular appeal they hold. One of the dominant characteristics of this region is its diversity, in terms of heterogeneity of faiths, sects within religion, regional languages, caste – sub-caste and more. The reason for which shrine’s have

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<sup>81</sup> You Tube. (2011, March 15) Tu Ka Tu. Retrieved from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WRtI0LrtdsE>

gained wide popularity is, that within this extremely diverse population, shrine acts as an institution where people from all faiths and backgrounds are open heartedly welcome, therefore creating a space that speaks not of superiority of one group over another, instead preaches love for entire human kind.

Although the role of shrine is to date, avowedly stated, as the one mentioned above, in contemporary era with, innumerable formal political boundaries drawn within south Asia, different interest groups having a stake in many institutional structures put in place, and increasing commercialization of life in general; the purpose and role of shrine has also altered in many ways.

The participants have shared their views and concerns below:

‘You wouldn’t find Sufism in these shrines. It’s used for entertainment purpose. In today’s era where Sindhi’s do not have mediums for entertainment: public parks, no hotels, cinemas, there is no other place for them to go except shrines. Also there is an increase in madressa’s, religious intolerance; these shrines are coming under patronage of such intolerant practice.’<sup>82</sup> In addition to that, the concept of Gadi Nasheen – Pirs (hereditary heads) is contradictory to Shah and Sachal’s philosophy, who valued all human relationships and not power flowing in a hereditary channel (blood relationships).

Today many myths have been attached to visiting the shrine of Shah and Sachal. Many people believe that Latif will give them children, solve their daily issues and do some miracle.

When asked one of the participant’s: ‘Who told you that you should visit Sachal’s shrine and why should you visit?’

He responded: our elders tell us that Sachal was a very superior being. When Sachal used to get angry he used to take the form of a lion. One lady once went to Sachal Sarmast and started laughing in his shrine and abused him. At that moment she became paralyzed. She was taken home and then back to the shrine; read many verses from Quran and then only she became fine. This means we should never abuse such amazing personalities.

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<sup>82</sup> Resident in the vicinity of the shrine

Another participant drew a connection between individuals, Pir's, Sufi poets and Allah: He said, 'Yes what they ask for they receive; Pir's say to Allah and that's how people who ask Latif receive it.'

Often in an effort to speak about an individual's greatness, having insufficient and accurate knowledge one delves into creating stories that are highly exaggerate, like in the case of the aforementioned myth attached to Sachal's superiority. Again, superiority has been considered in physical sense or what is visible to our naked eye, instead of the superiority of thought or having an artistic expression that enables others to think critically and analyse their surrounding environment. One of Sachal's couplet is well suited here to envision how he would have responded to such statement.

Mazhaban mulkan mein maroon munjhaya  
Sheikhi, Peeri, Mureedi behad bhulaya  
Ke nimazon very parhan Kin mandar vasaya  
Odo ki naya, Akal wara ishq da

Religions made people confuse  
All engrossed into practices, some became Sheikhs, Peers and Mureeds (followers)  
Some fulfilled their obligation of namaz and some resided in temples  
No educated being followed the path of love

For some participants it was an honour and a privilege to be born in the vicinity of these shrines; one participant stated, 'People are coming from distant places to visit this shrine – there must be something special that's why they are coming.' Another participant shared that he visited every shrine and read verses from Quran in there, pointing out that 'it's about the intention with which one individual goes'. Whereas the response of singers reciting Latif's kalams was as follows: 'This is a pure city. Our role is to ensure that the visitors feel this place as a sacred one and spread the message further. People come here without any invitation – this is *roohani* (spiritual) pull and of no commercial value – fakirs sing for themselves and not for money.'

The responses recorded above show the diversity of thought the participants held, hence came their varying narratives. While for some, shrine is a place that attracts attention because of its sacred essence, others believe that this space has been highly commercialized and or hijacked by political / religious institutions.

### **SEARCH FOR GOD / TRUTH**

Since Sufis have always been considered the true seekers of Truth and God, it was quite relevant to ask the participants – what they felt where God is, and what does it symbolize.

Finding God and Truth to reveal the mystery behind creation of the universe, is ostensibly a never ending search that has bewildered many thinkers and people from all over the world. From belief in mythologies to keeping faith in religion, and to taking refuge in development of science and technology - waiting anxiously for it to unravel the unknown, humankind has made relentless effort and has struggled tremendously. Millions of people have also been victimized and terrorized to gallows of death during this endeavour; be it in the form of blasphemy assertions on thinkers like Galileo and Nicolaus Copernicus, or during the escapades of Christian crusaders into the continent of Europe, expansion of Islamic missionaries into the Subcontinent, the infamous 30 year prolonged religious wars in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, or incidents of terrorism in the name of faith, and other countless incidents. Yet not satisfied and the uncertainty continues; some individuals have forged themselves under the garb of newly created identities, calling themselves Secular, Marxist, Atheist, Agnostic and several more, whereas others have retained the religious identity they acquired at birth and choose to believe with the stock of knowledge they have been brought up with. Disharmony and intolerance comes to fore when one group disagrees with the claim of another since some claim that their God is true while others claim that their interpretation of God is true, often leading to dispute and havoc especially when violence is used as tool to forcibly make the other agree.

In this entire debate of existence of God and Truth, the philosophical school of Sufism has lots to contribute. It paves the path (as reiterated many a times above) for an individual to travel within his/her own self in order to find answers to the unknown. The best way to approach this query is through the medium of poetry in the words of revered Sufi poets themselves, shared by the participants:

Pehi jan par mein  
Kayim ruh rihan  
Ta na ko doongar deh mein  
Na ka kech kaan  
Punhoon thyus paan  
(Sur Sussui)

Sassui, the heroine in one of the Sindhi folk tales, travelled miles in search of her loved one Punhoon. At one point Sassui sits down, completely tired and exhausted; meditates within. In her meditation she saw no camel on which Punhoon was taken away, nor felt worried about anything else. She realized that in the love of her beloved she herself has become Punhoon.

Allah Allah sho kareen  
Allah tun paan  
(Sachal)

In another couplet, Sachal claims. ‘Why repeat Allah so many times. You yourself are Allah.’

In every body, my Lord  
No vessel is empty  
I revere that body  
Which reveals the Lord  
Oh God your godliness pervades every body  
Like the red unseen in the green henna leaf  
My love’s radiance is ruby-red  
Wherever I look – red, red!  
When I set off to search for red,  
I became red myself!  
Everyone wants that red jewel  
It’s in everyone’s pocket  
But you didn’t search it in your own pocket

And left this world empty-handed

(Kabir)<sup>83</sup>

From Shah Abdul Latif's symbolic love between Sassui and Punhoon to Kabir's narration of hidden red in the Hena leaf, and Sachal's proclamation of '*Anal Haqq*' (I am Truth), all three have, but in different expressions conveyed that search for God / Divine Truth ends 'within' an individual and described it as a relationship that is premised on love and purity of heart.

When inquired where to find God, one of the participants, who was a political worker in his youth shared his personal experience. 'When I faced extreme conditions Latif gave me spiritual support, in torture cells, jails, and while dealing with issues in the house. I used to just come and sit in these walls (Shrine). My temporary torments used to get healed just by sitting (neither reading nor singing). From past 100 years, we have Risalo of Latif but I felt the importance of this book in the past 12 years.'

His favorite bait:

Na umeediye je nijhre

Te hi pas Allah

Chitho rab ji rah

Par muradan makfi kayi ..

He explained, if you wish to see Allah, you can see him in entire state of hopelessness. God is ready to be revealed but it is us who don't wish to experience his existence. We are constantly repeating the name of Allah in our prayers and elsewhere, but our focus is entirely on the wazeers (people in power). For example: We get ill later but have all preventive methods / infrastructure ready at hand (ambulances, medical aid box, etc). But if someone who does not have any of these mechanisms of prevention: you can only see the existence of God in such situations.

Another participant claims, 'the way religion is practiced today it has increased the ego in humans.' Everyone is busy racing with one another, 'I need to do so many Haj, visit Ganga,

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<sup>83</sup> You Tube. (2011, March 15) Tu Ka Tu. Retrieved from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WRtI0LrtdsE>

follow traditions and make my way to heaven. Amidst this competition, people often forgot the initial practices and words of the Prophet, instead what they remember is 30 days of fasting, keeping a beard, etc. Tasawuf calls for inner cleansing and not mere practicing what is zahir (visible). If one loves God, the individual need not boast of his/her practices but must pray in solitude – so that the person and God become one and same.

I see my existence as mere matter, should serve Allah.

Serving Allah is not only by praying and fasting ...

Rozo, Namaz parh change kam (Fasting and Praying is important)

Par anya koi byo fahm jensa pasje pirheen khe (But one must hone another skill to reach the destination)

(Shah Latif)

Shah Abdul Latif clearly asserts in the above couplet that, although rituals are necessary, but to come close to God, one must make more effort.

From the proclamation of *Anal Haqq* (I am Truth / God), many Sufi poets have also gone beyond saying ‘God resides within’ to ‘God resides everywhere’.

According to Abida Parveen, God was the hidden jewel that has become known through mysticism; world is not without a purpose and no creation exists without a purpose. There is no place, where Rab does not exist:

“Yaar ko humne ja baja dekha (Have seen the beloved everywhere)

Kahin zahir kahin chupa dekha”<sup>84</sup> (Sometimes visible, sometimes hidden)

In sea, earth, all forms

I see you only you!

Kabir says, listen seeker

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<sup>84</sup> NDTV. (2012, Jan 13) Singer Abida Parveen talks about the power of Sufi music. Retrieved from <http://www.ndtv.com/video/player/prime-shows/singer-abida-parveen-talks-about-the-power-of-sufi-music/225251>

I have found the guru as is, where is!

(Kabir)<sup>85</sup>

These couplets can be understood if the reader emphasizes upon the symbolic meaning of these expressions rather than its literal translation. What the poets intend to convey is that once an individual falls in true love with God, he / she can then see God's reflection in every place and everything, akin to the saying 'where energy flows life grows'.

### **ALIF / NUKTA**

An important contention that came to the fore while putting forward scholarly perspectives regarding Shah and Sachal's identity as discussed in the earlier themes, was whether Shah Abdul Latif had undergone any formal education or not. Some scholars narrated a story from Shah's life that is often repeated in this context, that he refused to study any letter after A, since A stand for Allah.<sup>86</sup>

It is well understood to any reader of Sufi poetry that every couplet has two meanings: zahir (literal) and batin (hidden) where the latter is much more emphasized upon Sufi poets often used symbols and metaphors to convey their message. Similarly, in my understanding the aforementioned narrative in respect to Shah's academic training is also stated symbolically; it does not mean that Shah in reality refused to learn more alphabets, instead it means that Shah understood the essence of the nukta (dot) that remains hidden behind 'Alif' (a single line). To elucidate this further, Bulleh Shah and other Sufi poets have also been attributed a similar narrative where they refused to study any other alphabet other than Alif or A.

If one observes carefully; when a pen comes into contact with a piece of paper, the first image drawn on the paper is a dot (nukta) and then one draws a line (Alif or A). That dot is referred to as God or Truth which once drawn into a line gets hidden. Hence the effort of Sufi thought is to understand and realize the significance of that nukta (dot) or Alif (A).

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<sup>85</sup> You Tube. (2011, March 15) Tu Ka Tu. Retrieved from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WRt10LrtdsE>

<sup>86</sup> Pg. 17 In Chapter 2 Literature Review, Identity of Shah and Sachal

Hence Bulleh Shah like other Sufi poets in the following couplet emphasizes on the significance of understanding Alif (A):

Parh parh ilm te faazil hoya  
Te kaday apnay aap nu parhya ee na

You read to become all knowledgeable  
But you never read yourself

Bhaj bhaj warna ay mandir maseeti  
Te kaday mann apnay wich warya ee na

You run to enter temples and mosques  
But you never entered your own heart

Larna ay roz shaitaan de naal  
Te kadi nafs apnay naal larya ee na

Everyday you fight Satan outside  
But you never fight your own ego / evil intentions

Bulleh Shah asmaani ud-deya pharonda ay  
Te jera ghar betha unoon pharya ee na

Bulleh Shah you try grabbing that which is in the sky  
But you never get hold of What sits inside you

Bas kareen o yaar

Stop it all my friend

Ilm-oun bas kareen o yaar  
Ik Alif teray darkaar

Stop seeking all this knowledge my friend  
Only an Alif is what you need to understand<sup>87</sup>

Similarly Shah Abdul Latif contributes:

Akhar parh Alif jo  
Warak bya visar  
Andar tu ujar  
Panha parhande ketra

Shah addresses to his followers: one needs to understand the significance of Alif and enlighten the self; there is no need to gain all the knowledge of the world while forgetting what lies within.

One participant remarked:

Kupe ryan pare thya  
Budhi budhaon  
Unhe khe aon hiyer disi aoon

I withdrew myself from all negative traditions  
What I had never heard I hear now  
The dot (nukta) was revealed to me

The concept of Alif or nukta (dot) is central to the philosophy of Sufism. One of the participant claims ‘Alif does not mean Allah (as religious scholars quote) instead refers to the dot that is symbol of humanity and unity among all beings.

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<sup>87</sup> You Tube. (2006 Dec 20) Abida Parveen Sings Bulleh Shah. Retrieved from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IH8BgubvXWM>

## DEBATES – TASAWUF AND PIRHEEN

The study and interpretation of philosophical school of Sufism by individuals from diverse backgrounds have attracted various distinct accounts of interpretation as well as some debates that seem to have continued since its inception. In this section, an attempt has been made to delve deep into some of the notions that are found to be highly contested when reading scholarly writings on Sufi poets. Therefore participants were inquired regarding what view they held in respect to the following notions, central to Sufi thought.

*Tasawuf* is the central theme around which the Sufi thought revolves. It is unequivocally agreed that the heart and core of Sufism is the understanding of tasawuf; and to date the interpretation of this notion is contested as in the case of the interpretation of Alif or nukta (dot) discussed above. When interviewed participants, distinct views came to the fore, some were as follows:

Tasawuf is all about an internal experience - a journey of soul - physically (what is visible) is not of importance.

Sufi ser sabhin jo  
iya ragun mat pai

The above couplet implies Sufism is a process that goes through the veins of a human being. Thus the meaning of tasawuf is 'unique to every individual who experiences it.

Another participants remarks, since humans came into existence, there have always been negative and positive forces; tasawuf is the force that creates balance and equips an individual to control and fight his / her evil intentions and remove the superficial significance of 'I' or ego from within.

One argued that, we in our everyday lives witness practice of tasawuf in the form of protests for demanding justice, fighting for the truth and else. 'Tasawuf in essence is the commitment towards a cause'. Said that, the participant remarked that more discourse is needed around this theme and more interpretations should arise as a result.

In words of Abida Parveen, Tasawuf or mysticism is a river that is one of a kind. This river only flows in the direction of that individual who desires it and is thirsty for the same. This interpretation goes along the lines of one participant who says ‘mysticism is the essence of religion; at some instances one calls it Sufism, Vedanyat or Tasawuf.

***Pirheen*** is another notion that is often used in Sufi poetry. During the entire reading of Shah and Sachal’s poetry among other Sufi poets, one finds recurrent addressing to ‘Pirheen’. Like the notion deliberated above, this term is equally contested; for some it refers to Allah, for others it means Rab, destination, loved one, cause and more. Giving references from the poetry of Shah and Sachal, the participants contributed their understanding of ‘Pirheen’ as presented below:

In Sur Sassui, Shah Abdul Latif says to Sassui, ‘now the sun has set Sassui, you have travelled the entire day; you should rest.’ To which Sassui responds, ‘what should I rest for? I haven’t yet reached my *pirheen*. Here ‘pirheen’ is described as the beloved who is Sassui’s destination.

Similar to aforementioned reference, in another couplet from Sur Sassui, Sassui exclaims that such is the situation that how much I drink, the thirst does not quench. I only can see and think of my *pirheen*, according to the participant referred to the destination or loved one.

‘Pirheen is nothing dangerous’, says one participant; ‘unfortunately today religious people have made God appear as someone dangerous; if you do this, God will punish you. However one who is Sufi or secular or a complete human being one for him / her *Pirheen* is God that resides in every individual; it is the spirit of human being. Therefore if you look at it with love then the relationship with *pirheen* will be created one that is defined by love. But if you built a relationship that is premised on fear, then you become distant from your *pirheen*. A sufi say’s, whoever I am good or bad, I am yours. With you my relationship is such that I see you wherever I go.’

Hik kasar dar lakh

Kore karsi kursyun

Jedhan karan parakh

Tedhan sahib samoon

The participant explains the above couplet as such: ‘There is one palace with many doors to enter and 1000’s of windows. From every door and window I see pirheen. Some argue that pirheen could be a destination or truth as well, not only God. In my understanding, Pirheen according to Sufism is ‘absolute’; Sufi’s also consider humans as God – since God resides in humans, hence treats them as one. God here is a symbol of truth / destination.

Another participants contributes by saying, ‘I see my existence as mere matter hence the purpose of my life is to serve Allah. Where pirheen is wahid (singular) then the poet refers to Allah, at other instances pirheen could be destination, target or else.’

In the entire chapter, it is evident that majority of the participants have considered Sufi’s relationship with God premised of ‘love’ and ‘exploring oneself’. They have recurrently quoted Sufi poets to reiterate their stance regarding all facets discussed above: who is Sufi, where to find God, the essence of Alif, and significance of tasawuf and pirheen.

## CHAPTER 5

### SUFISM AND HUMANITY

While Chapter 4 establishes the understanding of Sufi and its core premise, this chapter, aims to analyze how participants respond to the universal appeal acquired by the philosophy of Sufism. What are those values imbibed by Sufism that has made it a global figure; one that vows to preach humanity in total. Several themes have been highlighted and the responses of participants are presented for the same: how they perceive Sufism understands ‘empathy’, ‘human nature’ and ‘normative stands.’

#### EXPRESSIONS OF EMPATHY

If language is a repository of the whole experience of a nation or a society, poetry is repository of its more important experience. This is true because the art of poetry capacitates the poet to express the hidden meanings in a beautiful manner (often with use of metaphors and symbols with which a reader can connect to) and share the experiences of historic events and incidents of their time by presenting the well preserved and captured feelings of individuals that experienced those moments. Shah and Sachal have been attributed highly for similar traits thus in order to understand the relevance of their writings today, one must ponder if people of Sindh and Pakistan do connect with those expressions.

No interview with the participants was complete without them sharing a few couplets from Shah and Sachal’s poetry whenever they desired to share their understanding about the poets. Therefore this research has tried to bring all those shared thoughts about human feelings together under this theme.

Je kas yaad kiya  
se war (husband) wani wankar (area) mein  
Jaltu jareeki pandh mein  
Adyun adh thyas  
Wani keth puniyaas

.....

(Sur Sassui Punhoon)

Sassui says, may be Punnhun has remembered me.  
I am an old woman, tired while travelling.  
My speed has become faster, maybe he is longing for me.

It is often said that if someone **remembers** you, you do feel it and your body responds to it actively.

Khuyi (tiredness) ja khayani  
Te vikh (effort / koshish) vejhi ki  
Shik e shinai  
Pandh mirai pawai

(Sur Sassui Punhoon)

I am shattered and almost in vain by this travel, Sassui says to herself. However, in this situation, the effort she made, made it possible for her to reach her destination. There was so much of distance to travel but the emphasis made is on the **final steps** which had so much power in them.

Shah Abdul Latif in the above two couplets has beautifully captured feelings of Sassui while travelling distances without food and water to find her loved one, Punhoon. Latif uses Sassui as a metaphor to tell people that if they are committed to their cause, the cause will itself help them reach their destination, emphasizing especially on the final steps or last inch of effort where one should not fall weak and shall remain persistent in their search.

One participant begins his account of Shah Abdul Latif by saying that he is not a Sufi; by that he means Latif was not one who just wandered into the wilderness and chose to stay in solitude, instead 'he is the one who has made a lot of effort to make us get rid of many unwanted and wrong practices. To do this he made reference to characters in this world; like Marui for showing the love for one's own homeland; Sohini's character for commitment and Sassui's character for struggle. In these stories there is a message for us. Bhattai wants us to

be happy in whatever positions we are in this world. He does not differ in any way between Hindus and Muslims - you must have felt this’.

Latif has touched upon all kinds of feelings: pain, pleasure, courage, bravery, struggle, agony, and more. Other shared couplets include:

Moonte akhyun wada thora laya

Tantul pirheen pasan

Je kharan

(Shah Abdul Latif)

These eyes have blessed me with wonders. Even when I am looking at my foe (enemy) I still can see my destination / lover in that.

Shah through his narration of all folk tales has premised his message on the principle of love. Love means commitment to the cause; seeking the divine truth and working towards ones destination. Hence by the above couplet he intends to say that when one is so involved in his / her destination, then where ever one sees, one can see the destination everywhere and there is no enemy or obstruction that can hinder his/her path from seeking that.

Similar to the notion of ‘enemy’ (often viewed as an obstruction) ‘pain’ is equally seen as a hindrance and a negative phenomenon. However Shah Abdul Latif, views pain as a necessary and positive element for one to value the feeling of pleasure. Therefore he mentions his indebtedness towards yogi’s who influenced his writings greatly:

Everyone has some bit of pain

I have loads of it

According to one participant, in each of Shah’s poetry there are two meanings: zahir (literal) and batin (hidden).

Paraeen indo hot

Par aaon bhi kuch ag bari thyan

Matan chahin khan baloch aa  
Hina kamini maan keen na thyo

Literal meaning:

A friend will come by himself  
But I should also make an effort  
Otherwise he will think all the effort is made by him

Batin (Hidden) meaning:

Speaking for God. God has given us so much and forgives us  
We also should commit ourselves to our duties  
Then we shall reach our destination

Although Shah Latif advocates for reaching ones destination, at the same time he is cognizant of the fact that many times, we desire things until we get them, and once acquired we forget to value them. Hence in the couplet mentioned below Shah say's, its' better that I am always in this search and value this struggle and God's existence as it is.

Gholya gholyan malhan  
Shal na Milan hot  
Man andar ji loch  
Matan Milan khan mati thi wane

(Shah Abdul Latif)

I hope I keep on finding but shall not find the pirheen (destination)  
Life has to continue .. but if I reach my destination this struggle will finish

Poetry of Shah has a universal appeal; feelings is an expression that is common to all human beings regardless of where they are born or which faith do they practice. Being a Sufi, he believed in the philosophy of Wahadat Al-Wajud – Unity of Being, and continuous struggle in life. His poetry is based on local folklores and stories of love, sacrifice and courage which were popular amongst the people of Sindh and its surroundings. The heroines of his themes are women symbolizing suppressed class of society of the times abounding in virtues of

patriotism, faithfulness, fortitude and sacrifices in the face of unbearable sufferings and pain for their beloved, divine or human. Latif has beautifully depicted the feelings of women and their unwavering love for their beloved persons, homeland or even for the surrounding in which they had been raised or lived. He also chose lower caste of trades and vocation and their lives appreciating their hard work and craftsmanship. Because of his vast travelling in and around Sindh, Bhattai was fully aware of the customs, traditions and values of all walks of life in Sindh and its nearby regions. He has depicted the sufferings and difficulties of them in such a nice and practical way that as if he was an eyewitness to their hardships.<sup>88</sup>

## **HUMAN NATURE**

During my undergraduate studies, I remember attending many discussions that debated the characteristics of human nature. Similar debates have been carried out for over centuries; Thomas Hobbes in his book 'Leviathan' describes life in the state of human nature is "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish and short" while Plato considered human nature as an "empty slate". Witnessing the catastrophic wars in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and before, coupled with continuing fatal man-made destruction throughout the world, many individuals have come to believe that human being in its essence is violence, competitive and thus what shall prevail is 'survival of the fittest'. Keeping this ongoing discourse in mind, it is crucial to highlight the understanding of Sufi thought in this respect.

The participants in this research presented three points of views:

Madiyun kande maan  
Kadhen kadheen ...  
Changi jenge chith mein  
Se hadya na thya hera  
Je jadeen ja guman  
Te .....

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<sup>88</sup> Khoso. Faiz Muhammsd, op. cit., p. 7

If one's guman (thought) before achieving a particular task is that 'No! it won't happen or that person won't help', then that task will never successfully be achieved. It is the belief with which an individual works that makes all the difference. Often due to suspicion and negative thinking we do more wrong than otherwise. The participant continued: 'Similar is said in Quran: Allah saeen bande je guman watan guzre to' (Allah travels through a person's thought / belief). Therefore what is stressed upon is to have positive intentions in your heart and feelings that are positive for everyone around you. 'Such wisdom and guidance is filled in Latif's writings.'

Another participant claims, although from Sufi understanding human nature is nice and positive but when the question arises of practicing the same in the contemporary world, the rules force individuals to become negative; greed grows and 'will to control' and 'over-power' others magnifies.

The third view that arose was as follows:

Hu chavani tu na chao  
Wata waraye  
Ag agrai jo kare khata so khaye

Whatever he says you do not respond negatively  
Let it be  
One who leads this war will suffer

The participant quoted the example of how USA today is asserting with the propaganda of democracy and increasing its weapon industry. Even if the former is using violent means for its aggression, the victims should act in restraint; must fight against injustice but not use coercion as a method to defeat the enemy.

## **NORMATIVE STANDS**

Most of us are brought up in a manner where at every stage of our lives we are often habituated to take normative stands or use axiomatic notions like right – wrong, good – bad,

positive – negative and more. This ‘either or’ understanding is created through experiences that are limited to our cultural and geographic surrounding, and once an individual travels or resides in another community other than his / her own, differences often arise and their use of axiomatic notions is challenged.

From the participant’s perspective, Latif in his narration of Sindhi folktales is mindful of not describing any character as a victim or oppressor; be it in the case of Marui who is abducted by King Umar (as explained above), or Bheejal who asks king Rai Diyach for his head as a reward for his splendid play of an instrument, or in Sur Sohni when Sohni leaves her husband for the man she loves. In all these instances, a common view does hold to see one actor as a hero and the other as the villain but Shah Abdul Latif understands that every individual plays multiple roles and instead of labelling an individual for his / her actions, Shah has focused on the feeling that those characters undergo, with which all the readers can connect to and grasp the message poet aims to convey.

Kari raat acho din	(Dark night or bright morning)
Iye sifat aa nuh	(This is only one’s perspective)
Je priheen huje	(When one is focused on his/her destination)
Uthe rang na roop huje	(For him/her there is no color or figure, but only the destination in sight)

(Shah Abdul Latif)

The participant elaborates, ‘we see everything as black / white, good / bad.’ Life is truly our perspective and if one’s thought is pure and honest then his/her approach to life will reflect the same. Human societies are diverse and complex and what is necessary is to appreciate this complexity and celebrate the diversity, refraining from imposing one’s thought on to the other.

From the perspective of participants regarding all three themes: empathy, human nature and normative stands, it is evident that Sufi thought is strongly appreciated. Thus, the next concern that this research tries to address is how participants view their purpose of life, keeping in mind the message of Sufism.

## PURPOSE OF LIFE

All participants were asked how Sufi thought has contributed to their personal lives and what aspects have they learnt which have helped them shape their purpose of life. Some of the responses included as follows:

Jeh hi kal hathan  
Sa kal na ache kadhen  
Kalori kala  
Vidho virin wathan jo

(Shah Abdul Latif)

Yesterday will never return. Do not consider one day as merely 24 hours, take it as an era. What needs to be done today, better be done by today. Shah reiterates through his poetry that, one's struggle to his / her destination shall not fail in between.

Another participant stated, 'the first step is to understand their message and then to put it into practice. I try that I respect humanity and be nice to everyone.'

One of the faqeer's reciting Shah's kalam's stated: 'My purpose of life is to spread the message of Bhattai, but haven't been able to achieve it yet.'

Shah Abdul Latif says, (according to one participant)

God has thrown me in the pond  
And asks me not to get wet  
Has bestowed me with all the beauty and luxuries  
But the test is to save myself and keep myself pure  
This is tasawuf, piousness and purity

'The purpose of our existence is to be sincere to that cause, while God is testing our power of love'.

Lastly, it is important to add Abida Parveen perspective: ‘Mysticism and spiritualism is such a source of strength that it makes the individual neutral, and when one becomes neutral, that individual can contribute well in this temporal reality.’

## CHAPTER 6

### PREVAILING CONFLICTS AND ROLE OF SUFISM

During the age of Shah and Sachal, as discussed in the Literature Review, Sindh was experiencing turbulent events engulfed with internal strife coupled with foreign domination. Pakistan today seems to be in no different position or worse, grappling persistently with innumerable issues; extremism, terrorism, sectarian divide, corruption, exploitation, targeted killings, extortion, regional dispute and the list goes on. The country has been politically divided once in 1971, demonstrating the weakness of its ideological stance that gave birth to the country in the first place in 1947. Since its inception it has been marred with political instability; subdued by entrenched dictatorial rule and its economy and politics have further disrupted by constant indirect foreign intervention due to its strategic positioning during the Cold War and the post Cold War era. Within these harsh political and economic realities lies the social fabric of Pakistani society that is equally unstable and vulnerable to an extent that even a single flame ignited from within the community or without can create havoc; this remains true because of height of intolerance demonstrated by all sections of Pakistani society, be it towards individuals practicing other faiths or belonging to other sects within Islam or pertaining to different ideological positioning. Moreover, aside from differences in political identities, discrimination on the basis of natural attributes, like gender are equally evident; injustice towards women is highly embedded in the society, its presence is felt through witnessing local traditions like Karo Kari (honor killing) to Constitutional enactments like the Hudood Ordinance.

In Chapter 2, it has been quoted that many scholars and learned individuals believe, the philosophical school of Sufism if translated into practice can profoundly alter the catastrophic conditions in Pakistan and promote the message of peace and tolerance in the society bedridden at present with intolerance and extremism. Therefore the first question that comes to mind is, what is Sufism embodied with, which can act as a panacea to contemporary issues of Pakistan? In the previous chapter, the participants responded compassionately quoting couplets from Shah and Sachal's poetry that guides an individual's purpose in life. The aim in

this chapter is to investigate how Sufism can act as a tool to confront the complex nature of conflicts faced by Pakistan today.

According to participants, Shah Abdul Latif is known to have countered extremist beliefs and patriarchal structures through his narration of folktales presenting them through a women's lens. In Sur Sohnee, by supporting Sohnee and crediting her with courage, for leaving behind her husband (whom she was forced to marry in the first place) and travelling in search for her lover, Bhittai broke the tradition of entirely blaming the girl for bringing shame to the family and exhibited his stance against forced marriages; a common tradition to date practiced in Pakistan.

In another narration - Sur Moomal Rano, when Rano sees his wife Moomal sleeping with her sister (disguised as a man), Rano does not make her Kari (killing the girl accused for adultery) but merely keeps a stick between Moomal and the stranger, leaving it as a sign that he came, saw and left. This made Moomal awe struck and realized the grave mistake she had committed. Although Shah through his narration did not ignore Moomal's mistake and discouraged such action, at the same time Shah demonstrated that punishment can be given in other ways and not by murdering someone, as the tradition prevails.

In Sur Murui, Marui a resident of small village Malir, was taken away by force and wedded with King Umar. The participant claimed that, in Sindh, if a girl is abducted it is considered one of the gravest crime. However in Shah's narration, even though Marui's suffering and longing for her people and home have been strongly exhibited, Umar at the same time is not demonstrated as a criminal who rapes her, but as the story goes, allows her to go back when he realizes Marui's determination and sacrificing courage. Through this story Shah exhibits many factors; he was aware that multiple feelings emerge within a human being but it is incorrect to simply label an individual 'good' or 'bad', 'right' or 'wrong' for their actions. Immoral and uncalled for actions should be condemned however one should differentiate between an action and the individual in entirety.

Sachal, on the other hand has exhibited his position regarding religious intolerance very avowedly, the medium being his ardent poetry:

Maa johi aahyan sohi aahyan  
Ko kiyan chahe ko kiyan chahe  
Waqt iya thai vel  
Dui door kan  
Kadh mazhab man maan  
Hindu Momin saan mili  
Muhabbat ja ker mel  
Mathan thyai avel  
Olahon sijh na ubhre

I am the way I am  
Some wish this way some wish that way  
This is the time  
To get rid of differences  
Take out religion from your heart  
Meet both Hindu Muslim together  
Love each other  
Don't get late  
Otherwise the Sun might not rise again

One participant states, Sachal's understanding was adamantly clear. He indicated people of Sindh that Western interference is soon to come. 'You are breaking yourself in sects, religions, caste .. you will have to pay a huge price for this.'

Name is an essential part of our identity today, it instantly communicates to the other – the religion, caste and sect of that individual. Sachal in his life targeted that very identification, first by changing his birth given name, from Abdul Wahab to Sachal Sarmast (intoxicated with truth) and then giving a new identity to one of his disciples Muhammad Yousuf, renamed as Nanik Yousuf.

In Sachal's poetry one has many a times found condemnation of orthodox practitioners whose spoken words differ from their actions. This practice is well premised in Pakistan

today where a lot of emphasis is placed on practicing rituals while the essence behind those rituals / tradition is misplaced.

Sachal says:

Aalam lekhe rozo rakhande  
Par hin khawanh di aafat  
Kaan tukur de wich masjid te  
Kaan tukar te bang salata

He condemned practices of those followers who kept rozas (fasted mornings for an entire month of Ramadan) but ate heavily in the evenings when received an opportunity, ignoring the ethos behind this tradition.

Dozaq darko (Hell is the threat)  
Bisht dilaso (Heaven is the console)  
(Sachal)

Woh jannat sade kis kam di (Of which use is that Heaven)  
Jite tu nazar na aaveen (Where I can't see you)  
Woh dozaq lakh vishtu ta change (That Hell is million times better)  
Jite tu aaveen ta jaaveen (Where you come and visit)  
(Bulleh Shah)

Sachal and Bulleh Shah both have urged believers not to fear Hell and love Heaven, rather what is crucial is to seek for Truth. In this respect Bulleh Shah continues:

Mandir dhade (Break the Temple)  
Masjid dhade (Break the Mosque)  
Dhade jo kuch dhenda (Break whatever comes in your way)  
Bas kisi ka dil na dhadin (Never break a human's heart)  
Rab dilan wich vasda hai (God resides in that heart)

One participant referred to traditional times and shared: ‘Temples and Mosques have always existed together side by side but during Aurangzeb’s regime extremism found refuge. ‘Culturally too, we used to attend Hindu traditions and they used to attend ours.’ The entire divide and creation of Pakistan was problematic – more Muslims today live in India than in Pakistan. Once there was a majority of Muslims in Pakistan, the sectarian divide came to surface ... followed by visibility of sect within sect and India became our enemy and atom bombs created; a complete diversion from vital concerns and issues. ‘I always condemned the “two nation theory”.’ In a region where all faiths and sects have lived together in harmony for time immemorial, where is the space for theories like two nation theory. ‘Has Allah created a different aspirin or paracetamol for Hindus, Sikhs, Christians and Muslims? Everyone has the same cure! Living sources for all are the same... same blood... same birth and death cycle. ‘God has not discriminated – it is our created.’

Sufis / faqirs have always tried to preach this truth...

Bholan be khe mulkun  
Adam asli nahe  
Malkan bhi sidha kya  
Wah miti

Why create this confusion that who is Adam  
You are made of clay  
We are all human beings

Sachal says:

Sach tha mard chavan  
Kenkhe waren na  
Koori dosti jo dum bane na

It is truly said  
But no one likes it  
The power of truth is needed

Another participant contributed: ‘Main theme of Sachal’s poetry is anti-religious. When religions came humans became classified. Humans by nature are same. Humans become human again when he/she learns about his/her natural attributes.’

When inquired how Sufism can contribute today, one responded: In the wake of terrorism, intolerance and utter hopelessness, Sufism is a weapon that can end these features. But the political framework in this country has done away with so many good subjects. The culture of politics here has ruined the religions as well as Sufism. Many have failed to understand Sufism and those who did, have failed to transfer this knowledge to the next generation.

It is in these times of total solitude, personal interests and comforts wrap up sensitive minds like spider’s cobweb rendering them vapid and dull and letting their greatness fall away; treating literature as an item of merchandise.<sup>89</sup>

It is well demonstrated through the aforementioned responses that Sufis considered the root of all conflicts as identity crisis; failure of human beings to understand their true self. More will be discussed in respect to ‘Identity’ in Chapter 8.

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<sup>89</sup> Joyo. Ibrahim, op. cit., pp. 34, 35

## **CHAPTER 7**

### **PROMOTING SUFI KNOWLEDGE**

Once conscious that this plethora of knowledge has failed to transmit from our forefathers to generations of today, it becomes relevant to ponder over reasons for this failure as well as inquire ways in which one can promote this knowledge in Pakistan, ensuring that this enlightening tradition meets modernity for its own benefit.

A few general responses received while collecting data were as follows: ‘their poetry should be translated in more languages,’ ‘responsibility lies with the faqir’s who recite their kalam’s to translate the poets message in simple language to the listeners,’ ‘learned scholars who have read these poets should make an effort to spread awareness among people.’ At the same time, one participant said, it is not possible to share this stock of knowledge today, sharing his personal inhibition as such: ‘If I tell my own children they will consider me crack and mad. Truth is always sour and not sweet.’

This chapter looks into the various mediums through which the philosophical thought of Sufism is, and can possibly be promoted to all sections of society in Pakistan. Three mediums have been carefully taken into consideration: formal education, role of music, and theatre and story-telling. Participants have shared their views regarding all the mediums and their present day expressions (especially music); that have contributed significantly in shaping popular appeal of Sufism among many individuals.

#### **FORMAL EDUCATION**

Modern nation state is premised on the principle of social contract whereby the citizens have chosen representatives amongst themselves, known as the ‘government’ that ensures to protect the fundamental rights enshrined in the constitution as well as set up institutions that are then responsible to cater to the needs of people. Provision of education is one of the most incremental institutional responsibilities of the state, one that aims to empower its citizens with approach and skill set with the purpose of empowerment of self. Therefore it is crucial

to observe how the state has responded so far to its duty and what changes can be brought into the curriculum to ensure that study of Sufism is added as one of the prime components of its teaching in Pakistan.

The rhetoric of ‘education’ being the medium or tool that will change the lives of many and will empower Pakistan to develop and flourish has long been made by politicians and policy forerunners. However even a cursory glance at the budgetary allocation towards education for the past five decades in Pakistan evidently shows that it is the least cared for. Education must not be viewed from a naïve perspective – that suggests each one has the liberty to attain education and it will solve all problems of a society. It is in fact a highly politicized process whereby the powerful sections of society administer cautiously: what curriculum to teach, in what language and who will be the beneficiaries. As a result, majority of Pakistan’s population has been left out of the economic development that our policy makers fervently speak of.

Additionally, ‘History’, i.e. an important unit of any nations’ curriculum; is the foundation on which a country builds its ideological premise and takes it as a lesson to learn from. Many participants have shared their concern, how the history of Pakistan has been so reprehensibly distorted to suit the interests of incoming dictators and accompanying policy makers.

‘There has been a blunder in history books of Pakistan,’ one participant comments. ‘The Mughal emperor who spoke for Hindu-Muslim unity, Akbar, has been portrayed as a heretic, while obscurantist ruler - Aurangzeb is acclaimed as a pious and heroic Muslim emperor.’ The participant reflected back to his days of early education, in the 60’s and commented: ‘Our syllabuses were always so liberal, we used to read Hindu writers (no discrimination) and the important thing was what is written rather than who has wrote what.’

In respect to the two poets, the participants claimed as follows: In Sindhi subject we do teach Sachal however it is limited; it should be more elaborate. In respect to Shah Abdul Latif, texts today fail to apportion much significance to his writings; there are only 4 to 5 baits (couplets) available in text books - more need to be provided and with better translation.

Some efforts to inculcate this knowledge into the formal curriculum has already been made, as quoted by one of the participants who himself had served 10 years as the head of the Sachal Chair at Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai University, Khairpur, Sindh. He responded: ‘during my 10 years tenure on Sachal Chair I tried my best to make Sufism popular amongst the youth so that they understand the concept of “tasawuf”. It was the first time in the history of the university that a Shah, Sachal, Sami conference was organized, which I facilitated.’

When asked, how their poetry can be embedded into the curriculum, the participants said that the incumbent government should take the initiative and this stock of knowledge should be taught under the title of ‘mysticism’ in order to include all perspectives including that of Sami, Kabir and Rumi. Another participant further stressed that if individuals are introduced to the Sufi thought and practice during childhood, it will have a huge impact on their lives. Another comment made was: there is no zahiri (visible) credit from this education, implying that in today’s practiced ‘product curriculum model’ every degree holds a certain monetary value and the students looks for a reward in terms of a job that pays well. The participant thus made it clear that, such will not be the case if one is imparted Sufi education; which instead speaks of empowerment within rather than material gains.

## **ROLE OF MUSIC**

Aside from formal education, other mediums can, and have also contributed in spreading the message of mystics; especially musicians.

Music and dance have been used by Sufis to attain an ecstatic state known as *wajd*, 'which means, literally, "finding," i.e., to find God'.<sup>90</sup> Although music and dance are considered to be a central practice in Sufi tradition, many orthodox practitioners of Islam have avowedly denounced such practice and have even labelled many Sufi poets as heretics due to this. In light of such high criticism against music and dance, it becomes essential to try and understand scholarly views as well as the views of participants regarding the same.

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<sup>90</sup> Schimmel A. (1975; 178) *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*. North Carolina: University of North Carolina Press

Overall many participants felt that music acquires a central role in conveying the message of Sufism to its followers: ‘music has a huge impact on listeners’, ‘when Shah Abdul Latif recited his couplets, he used to ask faqeer’s to sing to him the couplets in the form of a raag’, ‘contemporary musicians play an influential role in spreading the message of Sufism – it is easier to understand’, ‘if music is played with true intention then it gives relief’.

Coke Studio is one such platform that aims to preserve and re-introduce traditional music by inviting singers to play music from around the country, in all local dialects (attracting many local singers that were erstwhile under-valued) and plays traditional music with contemporary instruments, in effect attracting many listeners including young and old. This platform has helped in unearthing music that was lost in the past and has indiscriminately untapped music from all distinct cultures of Pakistan including the vast tradition of Sufism.

When asked whether Coke Studio is only for commercial benefit, one of the participants commented as follows:

‘Coke studio is not commercial; it is a positive thing. It would also be great to have morning Sufi shows on television and radio to further spread this cause.’

Amidst this positive development, there are elements that inhibit this culture of learning because of power dynamics and interference by dominant institutions, as shared below.

One of the participants shared an incident with discontent: ‘A renowned singer who recites Latif’s poetry was invited once by Coke Studio. They performed using modern instruments and playing it in classical style. However later, the Gadi Nasheen of the shrine expressed concern arguing that Latif’s poetry should only be recited in the four walls of Latif’s shrine, otherwise the purity of his poetry will be challenged. Now imagine such short sightedness and limited mindset.’

According to reading from scholarly writings, an incident has been shared that once a group of prominent orthodox religious figures came to Shah Abdul Latif and told him that singing and playing music was un-Islamic and was not permissible. Shah, without indulging into arguments with them narrated them a story:

*There is a tree, which is very useful for the well-being of the people, but there is scarcity of water. Unless it receives water it will wither away, causing great harm. But there is no water except a filthy pool, now would you suggest that we should let the tree wither away or pour some filthy water on it to save it? All of them agreed that they should save the tree with filthy water. Shah Abdul Latif told them that in his heart was a tree of Divine Love, which was watered by listening to music. When the music stopped, it started to wither away.<sup>91</sup>*

The group could not find any other point of argument, so they left disappointed.

Annemarie Schimmel has rightly made an observation: ‘Music does not give rise, in the heart, to anything which is not already there: so he whose inner self is attached to anything else than God is stirred by music to sensual desire, but the one who is inwardly attached to the love of God is moved, by hearing music, to do His will.’<sup>92</sup>

A similar feeling was shared by given by Abida Parveen when she was asked to respond to orthodox criticism in respect to music, she responded: music brings people together; in the entire world, people are in search of Truth – God. The path of mysticism travels that journey and endorses pain as a necessary element and a positive element that one must experience for search of truth.<sup>93</sup>

It is essential to create more platforms that bring alive Sufi music and promises a wider reach.

## **THEATRE AND STORY TELLING**

Sufi poetry, especially that of Shah Abdul Latif and Sachal, which is encapsulated in Sindhi folklores and succeeds to create an emphatic feeling among listeners and readers, must be

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<sup>91</sup> Khoso. Faiz Ahmed, op. cit., p. 25

<sup>92</sup> Schimmel. A., op. Cit., p. 182

<sup>93</sup> NDTV. (2012, Jan 13) Singer Abida Parveen talks about the power of Sufi music. Retrieved from <http://www.ndtv.com/video/player/prime-shows/singer-abida-parveen-talks-about-the-power-of-sufi-music/225251>

exhibited through more mediums other than music and curriculum. Individual learning revolves profoundly around feeling; one must feel the message that is to be delivered, unless that experiential process takes place, the listener will remain only a non-participant observer.

Theatre and Story-telling among other mediums of expression play a stupendous role in spreading awareness and taking on challenging issues with such ease, ensuring that they connect with their audience and keep their performance context specific.

Keeping in mind the complex language used by Sindhi Sufi poets, especially Shah Abdul Latif – whose artistic and symbolic expression carries great depth, it is essential to translate the meaning of his poetry in simple context ensuring a wider public receives the message. One of the participants has correctly shared the complexity of Shah's and Sufi message through the following couplet, while appreciating the depth of the same:

Har har hath na paye  
Har har hath na paye  
Hiya gandh chundriya na chade  
Kore widha ketra  
.....

In literal terms, the couplet says that there is a knot that one is trying to unknot but no matter how many times I try with my hands it refuses to untwine. The participant explains that Latif's poetry has always more than one meaning; this knot is a symbol for the Truth or set of mysteries that has made many humans wonder; it will not untwine so easily and by mere struggle of hands. 'This is a complete philosophy in itself. It is often said for Albert Einstein that, he came to unravel the secrets of life but as soon as he untied one knot he was surprised to find so many other knots.'

If Sindhi folktales (narrated by Shah Abdul Latif) are converted into street theatre acts, plays, art exhibitions and else, they can have a lasting impact on its audience as well as have a wider reach among masses that cannot necessarily attend musical concerts and other upscale events. The message of Sufi thought can be reiterated as a companion to each act in which ever form presented.

## CHAPTER 8

### SUFISM AND IDENTITY

From the analyses made above, it is easily decipherable that Sufism has always made an effort to address issues from the lens of Identity. It is the core concern for all human beings – Who am I? Before addressing this question, it is first and foremost essential to highlight how people view the religious identity of Shah and Sachal, the identity of Sufism itself and how Sufism interacts with all faiths of the world.

#### RELIGIOUS IDENTITY OF SHAH AND SACHAL

Allama I. I. Kazi, a revered scholar, has made a very accurate observation in respect to claims of ownerships often made by individuals from all walks of life. Referring to the Muslim community, he says:

Our times boast of internationalism, and no wonder either. It was introduced religiously, officially, fourteen hundred years ago. But at heart we all remain at the utmost nationalists. The irony is, that Quran's religion itself has been transformed into a kind of nationalism. The necessary consequence is that "mine and thine" are still in full flourish. Everyone boasts of his own poets. That would not be bad if he did not run down others to exalt his own. But the true aesthetic insight is still lacking, and beauty is not admired because it is beautiful, but because the object belongs to me.<sup>94</sup>

If viewed in respect to the debate presented in the earlier chapter (Literature Review) regarding Shah and Sachal's identity, the above made statement stands entirely true. Be it author Din Muhammad's account claiming Shah's dispute with yogi's on the basis of religious practices or Advani's comment on Shah not abiding by Islamic injunctions, both have been made in haste and demonstrate an effort to compartmentalize a Sufi's identity into superficial boxes be it Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Christian or else. Both Shah and Sachal through their poetic expression have reiterated that 'I am that nothing which lies in between man-

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<sup>94</sup> Khoso. Faiz Ahmed, op. cit., p. 27

made identities’, that nothing which denotes to ‘annihilation of self’. Once that ego is removed from within, there is then no need to form identities which function only to create barriers between human souls.

Makkah gaya, gal mukdee nahin  
Pawain sao sao jummay parh aaeey  
Ganga gaya, gal mukdee nahin  
Pawain sao sao gotay khaeeay  
Bulleh Shah gal taeyon mukdee  
Jai ‘main’ nu manoo gawaaeeay  
(Bulleh Shah)

Going to Makkah is not the ultimate  
Even if hundreds of prayers are offered  
Going to River Ganges is not the ultimate  
Even if hundred times cleansing (baptism) is practiced  
Bulley Shah, the ultimate is  
When ‘I’ is removed from the heart (within)<sup>95</sup>

When asked to participants, who was Shah Latif, one of the faqirs who recited Shah’s kalam stated that (stressing that this is personal opinion), Shah was first a human being; religion is important but first become a pure human, then accept positive aspects of religion and get rid of the negative aspects of the same.

For Sachal, one participant quoted that although he was considered to be a kafir (unbeliever) by many Muslim followers, Sachal considered every human as God’s expression claiming:

Insan bazate khud Sir-e-Ilahi or Anal Haqq (I am Truth, God)

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<sup>95</sup> You Tube. (2009, Oct 25) Arieab Azhar – Makkeh Gaya. Retrieved from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TNqxejtWfM0>

One of the participants recalled how Sachal Sarmast is known for speaking his mind and voicing his opinion headstrong. He has shredded light upon the unfaithful practice by many, as in the following couplet:

Qalmein go kothain  
te napar nahin ...  
daga tunjhe di mein  
shirk aahein ... ..  
Mun mein musalman  
Ander aazir aahein

You are at all times arguing that you are learning and reciting kalma's, but this is not what is asked from you. From your outlook you are a Muslim but in reality you are not; from inside you are Aazir. Aazir was the name of Hazrat Ibrahim's father; he used to make such nice idols that people were persuaded to prostrate in front of them.

At the same time, Sachal was conscious of not only targeting the unworthy faith believers but also those who although claimed to be unbelievers but were not even honest to that:

Kooro tun kufr thin  
Kaafir matho paye  
Hindu had nahin  
jariyun .... ..  
Tilk tanhin khi lahe  
sacha je ... ..

You are also unbeliever to the unbelief you hold. If you are putting a tilk (red color) on your head, be honest to the true meaning that symbol stands for. If you are not doing that than by no means you deserve to call yourself a Hindu.

Similarly, one participant claims: 'Even though we call ourselves communists, we have made an idol of Marx - claiming that he can never be wrong.' If one is not true to what he / she is claiming then Sachal say's he / she does not deserve to even call themselves a kafir

(unbeliever). This is a common phenomenon today where many academicians and followers divide themselves into groups calling themselves Ambedkerites, Buddhists, and others often in an effort to idolize the reformer, ignore the core principles for which those individuals became who they became.

The underlying premise in both the above mentioned couplets is that what is crucial is honesty to one's own conscience while abstaining from the drudgery of rhetoric and hypocrisy.

### **IS SUFISM ANOTHER BRANCH OF RELIGION**

From the available literature as discussed in the Literature Review, many scholars have argued that Sufism is a thought that is a branch of Islam, whereas some have denied this claim arguing that although it may have emanated from Islamic school of thought, throughout the years many influences have contributed to its development. When a set of questions were asked in relation to this debate to the participants, the researcher received many diverse responses. It is essential to point out here that each participant has a distinct understanding of what he/she means when uses the word Islam; for some, they speak in respect to the practice of Islamic thought today instead of what Islam necessary holds as core principles; for others, the understanding of Islam varies as is visible from their responses.

When asked to one of the vendors standing outside the shrine of Shah Latif: what is Shah Latif famous for, he responded: 'he has done some amazing work by which he has attained love of Allah.' The follow up question was, how did he do that? To which the response was, 'He must have read namaz (prayers) and done good work'.

Another participant said: 'Latif learnt a lot by travelling with yogis. All his forefathers never differentiated with others along religious lines. Hence none of them were religious people, they were Sufis. They were certainly connected to Islam but believed in as follows:

Lakum dinukum waliya din ("To you be your religion, and to me my religion")

If you speak against my God, I will not speak against your true God'.

A similar contention was made by another participant, who pointing out the influence made by yogis on Latif stated, Latif has taken many positive things from Islam however has gotten rid of some negative elements within the practice of Islam.

Kehi kaam ka pari  
Ta aeri ravish ravan  
Na ko kam kufar san  
Na ke musalmani man  
Na ka dil dozaq de  
Na ke bhisk ghuran  
Ubha iyen chavan  
Pirheen kando pehnjo

(Shah Abdul Lateef)

Observe the jogis and faqeers  
What flows within them  
Neither am I an infidel  
Nor am I a Muslim  
Neither I want your heaven or hell  
They raise their hands and ask for their pirheen

Ja Islama Age hui  
Sa suhaoon bang  
La hoti be lang  
Adam khan age thya

(Shah Abdul Latif)

The baang (azan) which existed before Islam was heard by yogi's, when there was nothing.

When asked the participants whether Shah and Sachal were poet of one religion or of entire humanity, some responded as follows:

Sachal says:

Mazhaban mulkan mein maroon munjhaya  
Sheikhi, Peeri, Mureedi behad bhulaya  
Ke nimazon vani parhan Kin mandar vasaya  
Odo ki naya, Akal wara ishq da

Religions made people confuse  
All engrossed into practices, some became Sheikhs, Peers and Mureeds (followers)  
Some fulfilled their obligation of namaz and some resided in temples  
No educated being followed the path of love

Shah Abdul Latif says:

Roza Nimazun .....  
Oo koi byo fan je san pas je pirheen

Fasting, praying is obligatory and essential  
However one needs to learn/hone other skills to come close to God

‘Working towards humanity is what should be emphasized upon’ and that is what Shah Abdul Latif has preached, not only religious teachings.

The aforementioned responses have come into reaction to the visible practice of the religion Islam hence Shah and Sachal’s couplets were quoted, that incited people to not merely follow obligations; they do not hold any water unless intentions with which rituals are practiced are not positive. Path of love and not fear, leads to the way to God.

On the other hand, there were some participants who presented a different understanding of Islam and thereby considered Sufism as the core branch of Islamic thought. One responded as follows:

‘The faqeer / dervish considers Allah not Rab-ul Muslimeen but Rab-ul-Alameen (for entire humanity, not specifically for Muslims). Similarly in Quran, guidance is laid out for entire humanity (Hudailil Mustaqeem) instead of only for Muslims (Hudailil Muslimeen).’ This

clearly implies that Islam is a universal religion and not a code of life for Muslims. Shah recognized this reality and when prays in his poetry for Sindh, he also prays for the well being of entire universe.

Saeen ma sadhaein

Kareen mathe Sindh

Par dost mitha dildar

Aalam sab abad kareen

(Shah Abdul Latif)

Oh my true Friend

Please bestow your prosperity on Sindh

But Oh my dear friend

Bestow this prosperity to the whole universe and entire humanity

A similar understanding of Islam is shared by the reverent Sufi singer, Abida Parveen. In an interview she was asked a couple of questions keeping the present state of chaos and conflict in consideration, to which she responded with her understanding of Islam:

Q: When there is violence / terrorism spread in the name of Islam or in the name of any other religion, how do you respond to that?

Ans: That is not Islam. In which ever religion, if violence is upheld – how can that be Islam. Quran states that violence and anger is haram.

Q: Do you get perturbed by the prevailing situation in Pakistan – conflict over what kind of religion should be practiced, which Islamic traditions should be followed, so on and so forth?

Ans: Islam is one formula to assist humans. Humanity does not link to religion. Where there is humanity, there is Islam. Where truth prevails and good practices occur – that is Islam. Islam is not only for Muslims, its' for all religions and all human beings; wherever you see one human being doing good for other human being – that is Islam. <sup>96</sup>

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<sup>96</sup> NDTV. (2012, Jan 13) Singer Abida Parveen talks about the power of Sufi music. Retrieved from <http://www.ndtv.com/video/player/prime-shows/singer-abida-parveen-talks-about-the-power-of-sufi-music/225251>

In my understanding one needs to distinguish between a Muslim and Islam or any individual that is born within a family practicing a particular religion and religion in itself. The latter understanding of Islam is very crucial since that preaches humanity over other aspects and if that definition of religion is accepted, Sufism or mysticism is the core / soul of that religion which if disintegrated, what remains will be mere rituals and traditions without any meaning.

### **DOES SUFISM EMBRACE ALL FAITHS**

As expressed above (in ‘How Sufism is practiced’), Sufism is popular for it advocates the principle of humanity and considers each individual equal regardless of race, ethnicity and other differences. However this question was essential to ask to participants taking into light the upsurge of radical thinking, claim of institutional Islam over shrines and reasons alike. Three distinct responses were received, though all supporting a similar stand.

The vendor in the shrine of Latif contributed by saying that Bhattai has celebrated all religions especially Hinduism; for him first is humanity. In today self interested world Bhattai’s message is very essential. And humanity also includes every being (including animals, plants and others), they all have rights in this world.

So Ram so Rahim so Bhagwan bhi tu

(Shah)

(You are all in one, with different names; Ram, Rahim and Bhagwan)

The reason mention for differences is as follows: since there is Satan we have all these factions; its’ a test for us from God and we have to win it by respecting humanity over everything else.

Another responded made a remark: Every religion is complete code of life – no religion exhibits negative aspects (Zabta-e- hayat) and Sufism (mysticism) is connectivity of life (Rabta-e-hayat), mysticism being the essence of religion (at some instances you call it Sufism, Vedanyat, Tasawuf). Some of these notions will be discussed in purview of how participants view it, later in the analysis section.

The most exhibiting observation of embracement of all faiths by Sufism, was experienced by the researcher when visiting the shrine of Sachal Sarmast in the city of Daraza, Sindh. One can find graves of Hindu as well as Christian followers of Sachal lay just next to the graves of his Muslim followers. The ashes of Hindu followers were brought from foreign lands upon their request and on their grave were in-scripted verses from Quran. Such exhibition of tolerance and oneness is hard to find elsewhere in the world, validating the stance of Sufism as a universal institution that preaches humanity.

## **CHAPTER 9**

### **SUFISM AND OTHER MOVEMENTS**

#### **SUFISM AND BHAKTI MOVEMENT**

Any phenomenon that emanates from a particular source: region or set of ideology, when it travels across time and space, it takes its own form and establishes its own meaning, whose characteristics then also might begin to differ from the attributes attached to it at the time of its emanation. This process of transformation is inevitable and stands true to all ideological movements. This change has been witnessed by all faiths – when they spread outside their place of origin and come into contact with regions, people and culture alien to them, with dynamics of power and exchange of influence, over a period of centuries each one of them embed some characteristics of each other.

Similarly, Sufism although finds its origin in Islamic theology, has transformed profoundly in its meaning as well as its practice, as and when this movement travelled across centuries and into different regions of the world. Wherever it travelled the indigenous culture and faith contributed tremendously to its own unique process of development. Therefore if one wishes to analyse Sufism, it is essential to contextualize its development in order to better analyze the various factors that lead to its becoming, as we know it today.

For the purpose of this research, the context chosen for analysis is the Indian Subcontinent region.

As thoroughly discussed in the earlier chapter, the period in which Sufi movement was introduced in the region; it played its role as a pacifier between Hindus and Muslims, while avowedly challenging the views of orthodox practitioners of Islam. During the same period, Bhakti movement was also on the rise and shared strong criticism against Hindu obscurantist faction while preaching the message of peace and humanity among all beings. ‘Sufism and Bhakti movements were elaborated through textualities that bear intimate links with specific

aspects of their growth and dissemination in lived cultures.’<sup>97</sup> Common spacial and oral textualities for both groups including ‘centrality of love’, ‘questioning orthodoxy’ and encouragement of open discourse brought them in close proximity with each other. Moreover the shrine culture, crucial to both movements became living and vibrant sites for Sufi and Bhakti interlink-age.

Although today one habitually considers literary achievements and writings by individuals as owned by a particular country or nation or its people due to well defined political borders, this fervour of possessing knowledge is absolutely erroneous. ‘The flow of literature and culture cannot be imprisoned in political categories, within the boundaries of each nation state.’ Sufi poetry that preaches universality cannot be owned by a particular culture or region; if that occurs, it goes against the very essence of such writings. Translation and interpretation of Shah Abdul Latif’s poetry has remained a point of contention amongst many scholars as presented in the earlier chapter. ‘This happens because often authors assert exclusive cultural ownership of valued texts through erasures of the elements of the ‘othered’ culture.’ In claiming such ownership, literary translation also paradoxically reduces the importance of these texts to a great extent. A demonstration of this is the comparison of Pakistani and Indian translations of ‘Shah jo Risalo’, presented in the earlier chapter; ‘the translations are polarized to such extremes that while the Pakistani translation situates Shah Abdul Latif within the Quranic tradition, the Indian translation claims him for the Vedanta Advaita and yogic traditions.’<sup>98</sup>

If observed carefully there are a number of couplets where Shah Abdul Latif’s writings seem to have been influenced by Gita as well as Vedantic philosophy. ‘The chief exponent of Advaita (monism or non-dualism) was Shankara, who believed in only one reality, a single unity underlying everything.

Shah Abdul Latif also believed in intrinsic unity between God and the Universe’<sup>99</sup>

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<sup>97</sup> Punjabi Kavita op. cit., p. 26

<sup>98</sup> Punjabi. Kavita op. cit., p. 25

<sup>99</sup> Dr. Sayed Durreshahwar, op. cit., pp. 108, 109

There are millions and hundreds of thousands of your appearances  
And each glimpse seems to be different from the other  
O my beloved! in what and how many ways shall I count them?

Gita expresses its view on letter A; a central premise of Sufism, in the following verse:

Of letters I am the letter A and of word-compounds  
I am the dual. I am verily like inexhaustible time. I  
am the Dispenser facing everywhere.

Similarly Shah quotes:

Just read the letter A (alif)  
And forget the rest of the pages  
You have only to keep your inner self pure  
There is no need to read more pages<sup>100</sup>

Examples above nowhere mean to ascertain that Shah Latif was not influenced by Islamic principles. However what stands true is that Shah was influenced by all accessible texts that spoke in favour of humanity, unity of being, purification of within and other principles central to Sufi thought.

### **SIMILARITIES BETWEEN SHAH ABDUL LATIF, SACHAL, BULLEH SHAH AND KABIR**

Throughout the analysis chapter, at many intervals couplets from Kabir's writings as well as Bulleh Shah's expressions have been quoted. It is needless to say that all four poets: Shah Abdul Latif, Sachal, Kabir and Bulleh Shah adhere to common principles and have reiterated their stand for humanity through their emphatic poetry.

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<sup>100</sup> Ibid., pp. 113, 114

In order to elucidate this claim, I have asserted a few themes central to Shah Abdul Latif and Sachal's writing and under those themes have quoted poetry of either Bulleh Shah or Kabir, demonstrating the similarity in the thought of all four poets.

### **GOD – LIMITLESS, FORMLESS**

Tasbi baati pher na bahu                      O seeker do not count the beads  
Is tasbi ka ki parhna hu                      What will happen with this thread of beads

Jera apnay naal hisab nahin karda hu      God does not practice hisab  
Uday naal hisab ki karda                      There is no use of doing hisab with God

Ek nukte wich gal mukdi hai                      The lesson is in ek nukta (dot)  
Parh nukta chor hisaba nu                      Understand the dot, forget this hisab<sup>101</sup>

Often witnessed, many believers from all faiths focus tremendously on the visible rituals and practices while ignoring the core principles that form the backbone of any faith. Sufi poets have always countered such practices reminding followers to uphold the principles and not merely practices. Bulleh Shah in the couplet above stresses seekers to leave practices like counting beads in the name of God, since God is limitless and is not One who will get persuaded by followers insisting on quantity of rituals practiced. Bulleh Shah asks followers to love God instead and understand the central concept Alif and Nukta; one discussed in grave detail in the analysis chapter.

O seeker  
There is no God in that temple  
So what's the point in beating the gong

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<sup>101</sup> You Tube. (2012 Jan 25) Abida Parveen – Kafi (Kalaam e Bulleh Shah). Retrieved from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zdq2ZGri5Ao>

In your colourful palace  
Your wondrous city

Come on my swan, my brother

A lovely cover spreads  
Over the formless king

Kabir says, think about it  
Find the sign in the sign!<sup>102</sup>

(Kabir)

Similarly Kabir addresses to the seekers of Truth; one need not go to places of worship to find God. Instead, must travel to the palace that rests within their own self, where God resides without any particular form. Concluding with urging seekers to understand the sign within the sign itself and not get misguided.

## CONFLICT

Within the heart, there is a mirror  
but no face shows  
You'll see your face only,  
when your heart's duality goes  
Everyone came from one place  
and took the same road  
Half way along, you fell into a doubt  
Suddenly divided into twelve different paths  
Sweep the inner floor  
and throw this garbage out (Kabir)

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<sup>102</sup> You Tube. (2011 Mar 10) Thaara Rang Mahal Mein. Retrieved from  
<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O9GaWgZEy9I>

Confronting identity conflicts has been one of the profound characteristics of Sufi poets, be it Shah Abdul Latif through his narration of folktales: in Sur Noori, although Noori belonged to a lower caste family, her simplicity was what King Tamachi appreciated and that elevated her position amongst other queens, or be it Sachal who emphatically raised his voice against the religious orthodoxy for supporting differences on the lines of religious identities. Similarly, Kabir in the above couplet reaffirms that everyone wishes to see their true selves but will be unable to do so unless they purify themselves from within (inner floor) by removing the ego that holds on to superficial identities (garbage) and divides humans from one another in the name of caste, class, gender, faith, region and more (twelve different paths).

Talib, Kasar Suur, Sar  
 Iye Rumi ji autaq  
 Bhane je dar firaq  
 Te manjhaeen mashadid o maanee

(Rumi)

Maulana Rumi reiterates the same message in different words:

If you break away from differences that divide humanity  
 Then within yourself you will find your God (destination)

## **ROLE OF A HUMAN BEING**

By emphasizing on different feelings individuals experience and attaching value to their lived experiences, Shah Abdul Latif in every narration and couplet acted as a guide for fellow human beings to perform their chores with honesty and commitment to cause. In the same way, Bulleh Shah and Kabir's writings, akin to Sachal's poetry have been explicit in putting forth what they understood, what is expected of human beings in this world.

Je rab milda natya totyan	One can find God by reading namaz
Te rab milda daduan machian n	So can one find God in fowl and fish

Je rab milda jungle phiryan	One can find God walking in the wilderness
Te rab milda gaayan wachian nu	So can one find God in milking cows

Way Miyan Bulleya Rab Bulleh      Bulleh Shah said, only they find Rab  
Unhan nu milda  
Ate diliyan sachian achian nu      Who are good and pure at heart<sup>103</sup>

Kabir's poetry Tu ka Tu states as follows:

Do you get the secret, wise one?  
Be one towards all  
In flowers, in branches, in this entire world  
Wherever I look, I see you only you!<sup>104</sup>

Only those individuals accomplish their search for truth, who are honest in their heart and earnest in their actions when interacting with all fellow beings.

## LOVE

In Sachal's and Shah Abdul Latif's poetry one has felt the constant urge made by poets to ask the readers to travel the path of love and not fear while seeking for truth. Knowledge alone is of no use if one fails to self reflect and use it for the purpose it has been acquired for.

Kabir, like Shah Abdul Latif, Sachal and Bulleh Shah has challenged the credibility of bookish knowledge and has encouraged seekers to enter the valley of love.

“Aql ke madrase se uth, ishq ke maiqade mein aa”

Leave the school of intellect, and enter the tavern of love.

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<sup>103</sup> You Tube. (2006 Dec 20) Abida Parveen Sings Bulleh Shah. Retrieved from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IH8BgubvXWM>

<sup>104</sup> You Tube. (2011, March 15) Tu Ka Tu. Retrieved from <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WRt10LrtdsE>

“Pothi kitabein vaanchata, auron ko nit samjahvata  
Ghar ghat mahal khoja nahin, bak bak mara toh kya hua?”

You bury yourself in tomes and tracts, drone on to whoever tunes in  
You never searched the palace within, if you die jabbering who cares?

These are but few of the many examples that exhibit the similarities between all seekers of Truth, be they called Sufi poets, Bhakti poets or else. The purpose remains to embark on the journey of searching for true self using any medium made accessible to them.

## CHAPTER 10

### SUFIS OF THE CONTEMPORARY ERA

This chapter is added after giving much thought, reflection and pondering over questions that are crucial in understanding an identity of a Sufi. After having discussed the many facets of Sufi poetry: use of symbols, folk tales and poetry in itself among other mediums; as well as the innumerable factors that influenced in shaping their writings - both time and spacial textualities; it is worth asking – Who is a Sufi?

Is it someone wrapped around with particular clothing or artefacts that make that individual look different in appearance to another; or is it their faith, colour, regional identification, gender, or any other attribute that is visible by its appearance, that makes that individual stand out.

As discussed in the Chapter above, Shah Abdul Latif, Sachal, Kabir and Bulleh Shah, all quoted the same message but in different languages, using different symbols and different mediums.

Thus, what is common is certainly not their appearance, nor their regional and national identification; instead, it is what they communicate, what they wish to convey to the masses, what they preach and practice. It is the ‘thought’ that resembles between one Sufi and another, which overarches all other identities except one: *fanaa* (nothingness or self annihilation), i.e., to remove the ‘I’ from the self.

The next question that arises to my mind is, Is Sufism the study of the past; do no Sufis exist in the contemporary era? Or has the emancipatory thought of Sufism also been hijacked by the institutions of patronage where only those can be termed Sufis who belong to a particular faith, sect, hereditary lineage and other expressions of power and control?

I, with my limited knowledge and understanding, have endeavoured to quote some of the many ‘Sufis of the contemporary era’, keeping in mind the essential principles preached by the ‘thought of Sufism’.

## **IROM SHARMILA**

Twentieth century is well recognized for its achievements; be it in the form of notions - nationalism and self determination or rise of new nation-states that emerged as an avowed promise for millions to cohesively march towards a progressive and more equal society. It is needless to assert that all those promises are far from being realized and throughout the contemporary world disgruntled masses have spearheaded movements either violent or otherwise to demand their rights so compassionately enshrined in the constitution.

One such story is that of Manipur aka “a jeweled land” geographically located at the corner of North-East, India. This region has been subjected to severe government sanctioned atrocities enforced in the shape of draconian laws like AFSPA (Armed Forces Special Powers Ordinance) to curb insurgencies that evoke secessionist feelings and are directed against the state. Inevitably the atrocious crimes committed by the armed forces under the guile of national interest have given birth to many social movements; the most commendable of all is the one lead by Irom Sharmila. An observant and concerned youth who was exposed to human rights violations at an early age confronted an event in the year 2000 that transformed her course of life forever: following the attack on an official bus, the Assam Rifles sanctioned via AFSPA to shoot or arrest anyone on mere suspicion, gunned down ten civilians indiscriminately in Malom village, near the capital. This act of injustice severely haunted young Sharmila's mind who spontaneously decided to go on a hunger strike in protest.

Ideology is a fundamental premise on which a movement is built upon. Indian leaders like M.K. Gandhi have set a formidable precedent for the world to acknowledge and emulate: practice of non-violence and civil disobedience. Adhering to the same principles this erstwhile ordinary youth chose to practice 'satyagraha' (nonviolent resistance) with the aim of 'all or nothing'. She, like other Manipuri's agitated against the government to abolish AFPSA act that has put in danger several non-combatant lives since its enforcement in the 1980's. In response to her courageous endeavour, she was arrested and detained under charges of committing suicide and to date is kept alive by forced nasal feeding. Released only for 48 hours every year and kept in deplorable conditions, her social activism has been subjected to a distressing ordeal. Sharmila's persistence and unimaginable commitment to fight relentlessly for truth has won her many international human rights awards and by her own

people has received a title of 'Iron Lady'.<sup>105</sup>

### **Habib Jalib**

The struggle for 'justice' and 'fundamental human rights' has been a common phenomenon throughout the world; in Pakistan too, many individuals have fought valiantly against the entrenched dictatorial era that harnessed brutalities and suppressed opposing voice. In such authoritative times, Habib Jalib remembered as the 'Poet of masses' made his pen his weapon and expressed magnificently; discontent of the beleaguered and apprehensive masses and short-sightedness of haughty and atrocious rulers.

There is smoke of teargas in the air  
And the bullets are raining all around  
How can I praise thee  
The night of the period of shortsightedness

His poetry known as 'poetry of defiance' stood on the side of truth without compromise. He wrote in plain language, adopted a simple style and addressed common people and issues. But the conviction behind his words, the music of his voice and his emotional energy coupled with the sensitivity of the socio-political context is what stirred the audience.<sup>106</sup>

The light which shines only in palaces  
Burns up the joy of the people in the shadows  
Derives its strength from others' weakness  
That kind of system,  
Like dawn without light  
I refuse to acknowledge, I refuse to accept  
I am not afraid of execution,  
Tell the world that I am the martyr

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<sup>105</sup> Prabhakara M. S. (2010, Nov 3) Irom Sharmila... 10 Years On, *The Hindu*. Retrieved from <http://www.thehindu.com/opinion/op-ed/irom-sharmila-10-years-on/article865343.ece>

<sup>106</sup> Lets Start Thinking. (2013, Feb 25) Habib Jalib. Retrieved from <http://www.letsstartthinking.org/Pakistan/personalities/habib-jalib.asp>

How can you frighten me with prison walls?  
This overhanging doom,  
This night of ignorance,  
I refuse to acknowledge, I refuse to accept  
“Flowers are budding on branches”, that’s what you say,  
“Every cup overflows”, that’s what you say,  
“Wounds are healing themselves”, that’s what you say,  
These bare-faces lies,  
This insult to the intelligence,  
I refuse to acknowledge, I refuse to accept  
For centuries you have all stolen our peace of mind  
But your power over us is coming to an end  
Why do you pretend you can cure pain?  
Even if some claim that you’ve healed them,  
I refuse to acknowledge, I refuse to accept.<sup>107</sup>

For speaking the ‘Truth’ at a time when freedom of speech was unwelcomed, he was imprisoned several times under rule of different dictators; Ayub Khan and Zia Ul Haq. But this did not inhibit him from writing, instead he continued to compassionately express his views from the prison.

The following couplets are addressed to General Zia Ul Haq’s rule:

Darkness as light, Hot desert wind as a morning breeze  
How can I write a human as God?

From the title: ‘Hukmaran ho gaye kameenay log’

Ek nazar apni zindagi par daal  
Ek nazar apne ardali per daal

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<sup>107</sup> You Tube. (2012, Sept. 1) 1988 – Habib Jalib: Poetry of Defiance. Retrieved from [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xSjBMWI8I\\_U](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=xSjBMWI8I_U)

Fasla khud hi kar zara mehsoos

Yun na Islam ka nikal jaloos

Just take a look at your own life

And a look at the order you have created

Feel the difference yourself

Don't flaunt Islam with such a parade

Many other individuals from all walks of life and belonging to regions around the world can be added to this list; who have been preaching the Sufi thought in various forms and through diverse mediums, struggling with the masses against the oppressive forces that aim to create differences and divide humanity along the lines of superficial identities.

## CHAPTER 11

### THE ROAD AHEAD

Today's youth in the Indian Subcontinent and even elsewhere, has been introduced to Sufism by present day expressions; most dominant and far-reaching of all is music. Sufi music, be it through live concerts, films or by other mediums has the power to create the ecstatic feeling among the listeners and energize wide audiences by sharing the element of mysticism withheld in its thought.

Whether it has facilitated in spreading the message of Sufism, must be seen from various aspects; it has certainly contributed in creating awareness about the mystic attributes of Sufism and by attending Sufi concerts in spaces like shrines where people from all faiths are welcome, it has left an impact on the audience conveying the message of universality through its visible expression. However at the same time, the overarching structural realities under which present day globalized world functions, must not be ignored. Under the neo-liberal framework, commercialization of all isms (Marxism, Feminism and others) has become a common practice. It has made use of figure heads like Che Guevara and Martin Luther King a part of a popular youth culture; while their pictures hang in many up-scale restaurants and accessories sold with their caricatures, the true meaning to these symbols are often forgotten. Sufism also confronts a similar reality; although its visible expressions like the shrine culture and musical concerts exhibit elements of mysticism, the commercial value that these institutions and events hold today can hardly be undervalued.

From views of the participants to this research, it is unequivocally accepted that the thought and principles imbibed by Sufism are of much relevance today and can contribute significantly in addressing the socio-economic and political challenges faced by Pakistan and the rest of the world. Having said that, the participants have also shared their concerns regarding developments in the 20<sup>th</sup> and 21<sup>st</sup> century, that must not be ignored. These include: the increasing competitive environment with an urge among individual's that is materialistically driven; an unprecedented proliferation of sophisticated arms and weaponry, including the atomic bombs, significantly transforming the conventional ways of indulging in

conflicts; efficient means of travel and communication, that have lead isolated communities to come into contact with the rest of the world both physically and virtually.

The latter development is not necessarily negative, since it has always been a dream for many to travel to unknown destinations and interact with individuals representing diverse cultures. However, the element of caution arises when one individual or one community feels that is better than the other and has the right to dominate its opinions on to the other. This feeling of superiority and desire to enforce the subjective ‘will’ and ‘power’ over other, when coupled with the first two developments mentioned in the above paragraph can, and has lead to destructive consequences that all of us stand witness to.

Construction of ‘Identity’, from the time of an individual’s birth to their upbringing has to be carefully observed with great caution. In this entire process of growing up, there are many factors that influence the construction of an individual’s identity: religion, race, region, nation, language, political affiliation, educational background, places travelled, theories or philosophies studied, individuals interacted with and many more. Then how come it is so easy for many of us to identify ourselves as only a Hindu, Marxist, American, White, Man or else. We are all similar in our dissimilarity and the nature of complexity in the composition of influences that make us what we become.

Sufism addresses this concern by bringing to our notice, the innate qualities in all of us that makes us human and thus similar; there is no difference in individuals from around the globe in the way they experience the feelings of pain, suffering, love or else. It is at the most innate abilities of humans which Sufis hold on to and through their emphatic poetry urge individuals not to deviate from the Truth, that lies within and not without.

Lastly, it is important to elucidate here that through this dissertation I have made an effort to transfer knowledge and facts about Sufism expecting the reader to understand the information presented. However there is a paradox in place – knowledge imparted by Sufism cannot be understood like a subject of Economics or History, it has to be felt. Since Sufism believes Truth lies within and is available at everyone’s disposal; one has to make that effort to reach it by exploring within and removing the ego that inhibits this process. Hence the aim of

transmission of this literature and findings is to encourage readers to self-introspect and break away the many internal barriers created by us within us.

### **FURTHER RESEARCH**

This research has been an effort to analyse and observe the relevance of Sufi message in daily lives of masses; how, if the traditional knowledge communicated by Shah and Sachal and alike have translated into practice in the modern times. From all discussions and deliberations presented above, it can be stated that the relevance of Sufism in countering present day issues in Pakistan is certainly paramount however what is crucial is to understand how their message can be transmitted to the generations today and hereafter, ensuring its use at best.

In order to address this concern, I strongly feel more intensive research is necessary. One that takes into account the subjective realities of people residing not only in the vicinity of shrines but elsewhere in Sindh and other parts of Pakistan. Moreover what is essential is to incorporate other sections of society as well: political and religious institutions; educational hubs; media outlets; local governing bodies; and other stake holders, in an effort to understand how each one of them can contribute in creating spaces that will help inculcate Sufi principles into young minds, paving the path towards a more tolerant and humane society.

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# APPENDIX

## SEMI-STRUCTURED INTERVIEW GUIDE

### 1. Personal Particulars

- a. Name
- b. Age
- c. Religion
- d. Hometown

### 2. Shrine Visitors

- a. Why visit the shrine and how often?
- b. Do you feel connected to this place and how?
- c. Are you familiar with the history of the Sufi Saints?
- d. Perception about identity? How do you identify yourself?
- e. How do you view prevailing identity conflicts?
- f. What is the impact of this saint's philosophy on your life?
- g. Is this knowledge being transmitted to next generations and how?
- h. What is the role of music?
- i. Is this knowledge being exploited for material benefit by locals or foreign visitors?

### 3. Sufi Singers

- a) At what age you began to recite these kalams?
- b) Is singing also your source of income?
- c) How do you feel when you recite these kalams?
- d) Can you relate their philosophy with your personal life?
- e) How can these teachings be brought into practice?
- f) What is the concept of Alif?
- g) How do you perceive death?
- h) What is a human being's purpose in life?
- i) What religion do you practice and how?

- j) How can this knowledge be transmitted to others?
- k) Role of music and Commercial Enterprises?

#### **4. Residents in the Vicinity**

- a) Are you familiar with the language and the context of their writings?
- b) What role does Sufi teaching's play in understanding prevailing identity conflicts?
- c) Has Sufi philosophy been given due importance in terms of formal education?  
How?
- d) Has it impacted the minds of youth? In what way?
- e) Is this knowledge being transmitted to people outside this vicinity? How?
- f) What is the role of music or raag?