

The Sufi Paradigm and the Makings of a Vernacular Knowledge in Colonial India

روزا نمازون، اي پڻ چڱو ڪم،
او ڪو ٻيو فهم، جنهن سان پسنجي پرين ڪي
(سر آسا، 4)

Namaz and Fasting are indeed good deeds
But there is some other wisdom
By which to behold the Beloved

— Shah Abd al-Latif, *Risalo Shah
Abd al-Latif urf Shah jo risalo,
Volume I*, ed. H. M. Gurbakhshani,
Karachi, 1923.

Michel Boivin

The Sufi Paradigm and
the Makings of a
Vernacular Knowledge
in Colonial India

The Case of Sindh (1851–1929)

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Entrance to the Town of Schewan, on the Side of Lal Shabbaz's Tomb, Lieutenant William Edwards, Sketches in Scinde, London, 1846, Hand-colored lithograph, 27 × 37.5 cm

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I started this journey many years back, about 15 years ago, and since the time I have devoted to this issue is significant, I had many opportunities to present different steps of the research in various places, such as Paris, of course, but also Karachi, Mumbai, Miami, London, Rajkot, Heidelberg, and others. I am thus very thankful to all of my colleagues, students, and other scholars for their comments and questions. These engagements were so helpful for me in clarifying my construction and discourse.

Over the years, I have published a number of papers, in French and in English, regarding the issue of the making of a new vernacular knowledge in colonial Sindh (see Boivin 2005, 2011, 2015a, b). The first resulted from a lecture I delivered at the University of Saurashtra in Rajkot (Gujarat). The proceedings were published long ago, but I have never found an opportunity to see my paper published, although I have seen it quoted in other papers. This is so interesting, to see the venture of academic papers. Nonetheless, since then, the data under study has been expanded quite a bit, and the gradual elaboration of the issue has compelled me to reframe the perspective many times.

In this respect, an unexpected step in the completion of this book was the discovery in the British Library of a handwritten book, or more exactly a catalogue, named the *Catalogue of Sindhi Books*, which contains about 2000 references regarding books in Sindhi, most of them printed in the late nineteenth century and the early twentieth century. It offers living evidence of the intense debates that occurred in Sindh regarding ground-breaking issues around the areas of society, religion, community, and nation. Furthermore, it is not that this collection had been

underestimated; it has rather been totally neglected. I warmly thank the staff of the British Library in London: Martin Moir, Marina Chelini, and Nur Sobers-Khan. Another mine of gold for my research was the Sindh Archives in Clifton, Karachi. Here, again, I want to warmly thank the staff and especially my friend Akash Datwani. After I had identified the role played by the Theosophical Society in the making of the Sufi paradigm, I was greatly helped by my friends from the Theosophical Society in Karachi and Hyderabad. Despite the difficult conditions they face in these times of religious radicalization, they shared their archives without any restrictions: may they be witnesses to my immense gratitude.

In Mumbai, I am very grateful to Chhaya Goswami for her constant availability to help me and for her guidance in the Maharashtra State Archives. Regarding Mirza Qalich Beg's work, I was lucky to meet his grandson Mirza Aijaz Ali Beg, who generously shared the catalogue he had made. It would be a surrealistic challenge to mention all the people with whom I have exchanged thoughts and information about the Sufi paradigm. Nevertheless, I want to mention that I have also greatly appreciated the help provided by Saba Halepota, Kamran Kumbher, Yogi Sehni, and Uttara Shahani.

NOTE OF TRANSLITERATION

No academic attempt has been made to transliterate the vernacular words in this manuscript. There is no universally accepted system for Sindhi, and my conviction is that people who don't know Sindhi will not know it better through the use of transliterated words. And those who do know Sindhi will know the word, be it transliterated or not.

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