

Challenging the Sufi Paradigm in the Era of Communalism

In the first two parts of this book, we have dealt with a concept, the Sufi paradigm, through which we seek to unveil the different ways involved in the making of a vernacular knowledge in colonial Sindh. After the British conquest in 1843, the British obsession was to find out how to control the country of Sindh and its population. Along the way, they planned to get knowledge under control. They suppressed Persian as the official language, selecting a Sindhi dialect as the standard language, and chose an official script. The direct goal was to educate the British civil servants and officers in Sindhi so that they would be more able to control taxes and perform other duties.

The last part of the nineteenth century faced many upheavals in various fields. The Industrial Revolution in Europe reframed the social organization in depth following the spread of liberal capitalism. In India, one of the main impacts of British colonization was to thrust the economy into a kind of pre-globalization. Especially in maritime territories such as Sindh and Gujarat, the local merchant castes mostly followed the networks following the expansion of the British colonial empire. The economic improvement conjugated with the development of education gave shape to a new social class we have named the middle class. As a global process, this evolution of Sindhi society was similar to that of other parts of British India, such as in the northern Muslim society around Delhi studied by Margrit Pernau (Pernau 2013).

In the field of knowledge in colonial Sindh, the Sufi paradigm was dominant, but this does not mean it went unchallenged by other regimes of knowledge in this very rich intellectual scene. Some new regimes of knowledge were strongly opposed to it, such as the Muslim and Hindu reformists, which were building distinct religious traditions with no possibility for bridging them. I prefer to speak of normative regimes of knowledge instead of reformist movements because, most of the time, the reformist movements among the Muslims as well as among the Hindus started with enterprises involving the codification of beliefs and rituals. Always, this process was born through the printing of sacred scriptures, both in their original sacred languages and in vernacular translations. Thus, the codification process was a kind of condition for the implementation of reformism movements.¹

Other regimes of knowledge could compete with the Sufi paradigm, these being implemented based on devotion and the performance of emotion. I prefer to use the expression devotional regimes of knowledge, rather than popular or folk regimes of knowledge. Since I am aware that, to some extent, a religion can hardly be conceived without a devotional part, I would like to explain why I did select this expression. It is to be put in contrast with normative regimes of knowledge, although I think it is obviously not sufficient to legitimize my choice. Contrary to normative regimes of knowledge, the devotional regimes of knowledge do not intend to impose an encompassing and daily way of life to the practitioners. Beyond the opposition between normative and devotional regimes, a number of characteristics can be provided which make it a distinct regime of knowledge. The devotion is a central religious practice, and especially, it is performed in religious places that are not accepted as the official prayer places in the universal religions. For example, the mosque is the normative place of worship in Islam, and the sanctuaries devoted to the saints are either not recognized as such, or considered as secondary places of worship.

Among the characteristics of the devotional regimes of knowledge, the first one is that the devotional regime is based on vernacular scriptures. Thus, there is no claim to constitute a universal, or, to quote Sheldon Pollock a cosmopolitan, regime of knowledge. The basic literary reference

¹The issue of the renewal of religious traditions in nineteenth-century South Asia has been largely covered by scholars. Among numerous studies, Van der Veer provides a kind of synthesis (Van der Veer 1994).

is vernacular poetry, rather than the Quran, or the Bhagavad Gita. It does not mean that they, both the producers and the consumers, do not know them, but they don't consider them as the first and final source for religious knowledge. It pertains to what Rita Kothari calls "non-textual" religions (Kothari 2009: 123). Secondly, the agents and consumers of the devotional regimes are not members of the traditional elite of the local society. Although of course, some exceptions are possible, they are not members of the groups of the religious specialists, for example, from the Brahman caste, or of the Sayyids. Furthermore, consumers mostly belong to non-literate categories of people. The third characteristic is consequently that these regimes were exclusively oral before the coming of the printing in the nineteenth century. We cannot find any manuscripts, as it is the case in normative regimes of knowledge. Fourth, maybe that the most important element is the importance given to vernacular music and songs, at a point that they can be shared between members of different religious persuasions. Musical performances with instruments were at the core of the practice of devotional traditions. These regimes of knowledge were expressed among groups and communities who often belong neither to the "majority" nor to the normative expression of a given religion.

Nonetheless, it is quite possible that a devotional regime of knowledge, based on vernacular culture, shifts to a normative and cosmopolitan regime of knowledge, or at another time, a regime of knowledge can be ambivalent. For example, the Shia regime of knowledge started as a devotional regime of knowledge; still, it was when the Talpur State became its main supporter. Finally, it was transformed into a normative regime of knowledge when the migrants from India came to Sindh after 1947. Consequently, a regime of knowledge can dispatch both a normative/universal religiosity and a devotional/vernacular religiosity. But in other cases, such as the Khoja regime of knowledge, the process aimed at providing a community identity, as well as dealing with issues related to authority. The competitive regimes of knowledge shared some features with the Sufi paradigm. The crucial one was their devotional orientation, and consequently the importance of emotion in its performance. In fact, the study of the devotional regimes of knowledge will play a fundamental role in the demonstration that the Sufi paradigm worked as a paradigm in the vernacular knowledge of Sindh. It is through the study of the very nature of their relationship that it will be possible to scrutinize how the paradigm role of Sufism was efficient or not.

The last chapter will continue to explore other devotional expressions that have challenged the Sufi paradigm. The contents of a regime are concerned, but also the way it is transmitted. The last chapter will also address the issue of oral knowledge in relation to the Sufi paradigm, given that one knows its making was closely associated with the spread of mass printing. In other words, the chapter will examine how oral tradition was located by the entrepreneurs of the making of the Sufi paradigm. The third part of the chapter consequently looks at the different challenges the Sufi paradigm had to face, not only regarding the other regimes of knowledge. As a matter of fact, until now, the issue of Sufism has been addressed as a paradigm.

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