



## *A Brief Account of Sūfism and its Socio-Moral Impact on Sindhi Society and Culture*

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### Abstract

A brief account of Sūfism and its Social Relevance discussions based on practical exposition of Sūfism could play an effective and healthy role. Leaving aside the debate whether Sūfism is different only in degree or form in comparison to the non-Sūfism, this study is going to address the brief account of Sūfism and its moral exposition. In order to explore the moral vision of Sūfism, it is necessary to examine the aims and practices of Sūfis, their specific conception of religious knowledge and the popularization of their moral vision. By expounding the vision of Sūfis, the study will be concluded by analyzing the social-moral relevance of Sūfism in the current scheme. Among many speculations about the origin and starting of Sūfism, one is that Sindh/Indus Valley is the birthplace of this highly developed school of thought and life. Pre-Vedic society of Sindh was completely Sūfi in its outlook. From the Muslim conquest of Sindh to the later Mughal rule, we come across a number of Sūfis, but their social contribution seems to be highly individualized and purely spiritual in context. Sindh, which had been contributing towards the evolution of Sūfism in the whole world for the last 3000 years, was ripe enough to get back that message in fully developed form, back from the world in its own environs and appeared a unique Sūfi in the history of Sūfism in Sindh.

Objectives of this study are to examine the socio-moral impact of Sūfism in Sindh society and its impact on traditions and customs in Sindh, the role of Sūfism in promoting religious harmony and peace, and finally, the relevancy of Sūfism in the modern scientific and global society. This study is qualitative in nature. Literature on Sūfism with special reference to Sindh culture and society is systematically studied by doing both historical research methods and secondary data analysis of books relevant to the topic.

### Keywords:

Culture and Society, Sufism, Sindh Society, Literature, Socio Moral Impact.

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## **Sufism**

Taṣawwuf or Sūfism, is the Islamic mystic or the philosophical aspect of the Islām way of life. It has its origin in the formative periods of the Islamic culture, it was a movement that could be identified as a heavy spiritual tendency that aimed at developing closeness between man and his Lord. While mainstream Islamic practice salivates legalistic compliance to the external code of conduct, Sūfism is more inclined towards spirituality that entails purification of the heart and the soul's quest to find divine love and oneness (Charan, Wang & Yao 2018). Sūfism has its origin from the Arabic word 'sūf,' which translates to wool; therefore, the early Sūfis dressed in woolen garments as an indication of their Dictionary of Islām Chapter 4: Sūfism and Its Critics 40 poverty. The movement itself is generally regarded as reacting to the developments of the materialist conception of caliphate states, which has offered the introspective way of devotion, meditation, and purification of the self (Leghari et al., 2017).

An essential idea among the Sūfis was that of the intimacy with divinity by means of direct experiences and existential change. Sūfis mostly pay a lot of attention on tawḥīd, which is the oneness of God and the centralized effort to eradicate the nafs or the ego perceived to hinder love of the divine. Sūfis practice the act of Remembrance of Allāh called dhikr, singing and dancing in the form of qawwālī and meditation to focus on the divine instead of the mundane (Manzoor & Shah, 2018)."

### **Historical Background**

"Sūfism is known to have gathered structure between 9th and 10th centuries, the foundation was set by al-Ghazālī and Rūmī for the formal formation of the ṭarīqas. These orders extended across the whole of the Islamic world from North Africa to India and Indian subcontinent and were localized in every area they penetrated. Chishtī, Qādirī, Suhrawardī, and Naqshbandī became famous in the Indian subregion since Sūfism has a great impact on the societies' and religion's nature in the region (Batoool, 2016)."

### **Sufi Order Institutions in Sindh**

As with other parts of Pakistan, Sindh has long been considered the 'land of Sūfis' where several shrines and Sūfī centres are situated. The orders such as Chishtī, Qādirī, Suhrawardī, and Naqshbandī have greatly influenced the social, moral, and cultural profile of the area. These orders introduced altogether different religious worldviews and activism which was relativized to the locale, making Sūfism an inherent tradition of Sindhi society.

- **Chishtī Order**

Al-Chishtī order is one of the oldest branches of Sūfī's strings within the region and was founded by Khwāja Mu'īn al-Dīn Chishtī in the twelfth century. This is an order advocating for love, patience, and acceptance of the opposite gender in seeking divinity through music (samā') and poetry. The leading Chishtī saints of Delhi included Khwāja Quṭb al-Dīn Bakhtiyār Kākī, Nizām al-Dīn Awliyā, and others who preached non-materialism and simplicity and emphasized compassion and charity. They preached love for all people; their ideals embraced Sindh as they preached tolerance among the different religious and subsectarian factions (Batoool, 2016).

In Sindh, the Chishtī order is related to the dargāh of Ḥaḍrat Shāh 'Abd al-Laṭīf Bhittāī, who incorporated the tenets of the Chishtī order in his ghazals. The philosophical and social messages of his verses, with contributions to the mystical aspect, appeal to people even today and promote tolerance and unity among the common man.

- **Qādirī Order**

Qādirī Order was established by Sayyid 'Abd al-Qādir Jīlānī in the twelfth century, and its teachings focus on mysticism, virtue, and the poor. With its relatively liberal views concerning Sūfī methodologies, the Qādirī order attracted the attention of the heterogeneous population. In Sindh, the Qādirī saints' principles of exteriorism proved to be highly influential in the interpretation of the social justice issues the society faced.

Shāh ‘Abd al-Laṭīf Bhittāī, who was also inclined towards the Qādirī order, used poetry to raise his voice for the oppressed class and preached about virtues like ruḥānīyat, mīlsānīyat, and gustākhezī. The spirit of Qādirī, as well as the concepts of purity and service, creates a deep response in Sindhi people, for Ṣūfī constructions act as shelters for the poor and offer food and other urgent needs to overwhelmed people (Aḥmad and Chandio, 2019).

- **Suhrawardī Order**

Suhrawardī Order, founded by a person named Shahāb al-Dīn Suhrawardī, was uniquely characterized by its openness to interaction with political authorities. In contrast to the Chishtī order, which represented a more or less ‘neutral’ relationship with rulers, the Ṣūfī order of Suhrawardīs was perhaps more tailor-made to complement state support, in the sense that the Suhrawardiyya involved state officials in the implementation of their spiritual and social programs. Thanks to this relatively practical strategy, the Suhrawardī saints actively participated in administration and politics and called for ethical government.

Sindh-based Suhrawardī Ṣūfīs emphasized separating religious ideas and knowledge from social justice. These Ṣūfīs played a significant role in popularizing Islam in the region by ensuring that what the Ṣūfīs preached was harmonized with the existing traditions within the region’s community (pp. 142, Boivin, 2020).

- **Naqshbandī Order**

Among all the major orders of Ṣūfism, the Naqshbandī order is unique due to its silent practice of dhikr. The Naqshbandī order, an Islamic mystic practice started by Bahā’ al-Dīn Naqshband in the fourteenth century, lays importance on the Sharī‘a, purification of the heart, and dhikr (silent dhikr). Therefore, the Naqshbandī order, which was mainly based on self-discipline and reflection, attracts those who seek austere practices.

In Sindh, the Naqshbandī order was sought by many people desiring a structured path for spiritual growth. This order gained importance among the educated and politically active segments of society as it focused on taxonomy and silent meditation while strictly following Islamic orthodoxy. The Naqshbandī saints have been participating in socio-political issues to advance justice and ethical political leadership roles. In Sindh, the Naqshbandī order was introduced by followers of Shaykh Aḥmad Sirhindī, such as Makhdūm Ādam and Makhdūm Qāsim, as well as his descendants Pīr Āghā ‘Abd al-Raḥmān Jān Sirhindī. Today in Sindh, this order is being led by the Sirhandī family, who claim to be the descendants and spiritual heirs of Shaykh Aḥmad.

### **Sufism in Sindh: A Socio-Cultural Phenomenon**

Thus, the Ṣūfism in the Sindhī context is most fundamentally seen not simply as a religious movement but as a powerful sociocultural phenomenon indeed that impacts millions of people. Sindh has the honor to become the country of extraordinary Ṣūfī people like Shāh ‘Abd al-Laṭīf Bhittāī, Lāl Shāhbāz Qalandar, and Sachal Sarmast. These saints or blessed figures have uniquely impacted the social, moral, and cultural fabric of the region, teaching people to love, respect, and embrace diversity. They make their followers understand the importance of having a society in which no differences of caste, class, or religion are considered as valid (Aḥmad & Chandio, 2019).

Many of the key and central messages within the Sindhī Ṣūfī tradition, as with other Ṣūfīs, include concepts such as justice, equality, and the dignity of humans. They always gathered crowds from many social classes, enhancing togetherness and neutrality. The annual ‘Urs festivals are good examples of this tradition because devotees, irrespective of their religion, visit the Ṣūfī shrines to pay tribute to the Ṣūfī saints and to receive blessings (Verkaaik, 2004).

### **Socio Moral impact of Sufism**

Sufism in Sindh has played a very constructive role in countering dogmatic Islam and extremism is due to the nature of extremism that has recently raised in Pakistan. The Sufi

shrines are the places where men and women can come and seek protection, seek cure and feel that they belong to a specific community. As such, Sufism in Sindh works towards social integration and economic development by emphasizing on the teachings of the central principles of Islam, which are love, compassion, and selfless service (Hussain, 2019).

Also, Sufi education involves moral recasting within the culture, other than in the singular self. This is because the call for humility, empathy, and social justice makes followers out to be charitable, serving, and doing justice to society. For example, distribution of food in form of a Langar at Sufi sites is an indication that Sufism aims to discharge justice on society's outcasts. (Charan, Wang, & Yao, 2018)

In the contemporary scenario, Sindhi Sufism has an active role in the field of serving harmony in a society that in the grip of sectarian conflict and bigotry. Through embracing tolerance and unity, Sufi practices prevent split among people, and develop a cultural solidarity in Sindh (Ahmed & Chandio, 2019). Sufism traces its origins to Sindhi society and its social development makes it became a force for morality, tolerance and social cohesion. Suluki messages and principles therefore offered, not only religious directions, but also an ethic that is still molding the socio-cultural set up of Sindhi community today.

Land of Sufis, Sindh has a strong history related to the sufis, and sufism is considered to be the part of Sindh's culture. Religion and culture of the province is dominated by Sufism with teaching and preaching of love, tolerance and spirituality. It has such a significant role in the affairs of Sindhi especially the Sufism that dominates Sindh that its influence cuts across religious, social, cultural and even political realm, thus it is an essential component of the Sindhi people.

### **From the Beginning of Sufism in Sindh: Historical Background and Development**

Şūfism found roots in Sindh right from the beginning of the Islamic tradition, where Muslim saints and scholars classified as Şūfis started living. From Sindhī Şūfism, such iconic figures as Shāh 'Abd al-Laṭīf Bhittāī, Lāl Shāhbāz Qalandar, and Sachal Sarmast have gained prominence based on tawḥīd—the oneness of God, justice, and love and compassion for humanity. These saints employed song and poetry in passing their word and even sometimes incorporated local cultural practices in their preaching, which was in line with the teachings of Islam. Thanks to their kind of syncretism, Islam was introduced to Sindh, and the indigenous Hindus responded to it in a creative way by developing a syncretic form of Islamic spiritual experience (Ahmad & Chandio, 2019).

The 'Urs festivals—annual commemorative fairs at these shrines—are considerable social happenings in Sindh, which attract many tens of thousands of devotees across the social spectrum. These are not only religious events but also occasions of social cohesion through which not only Muslims but also other individuals assemble, thereby engendering a culture of pluralism (Manzūr & Shāh, 2018).

### **Sufi Shrines as Socio Moral Light Houses**

Şūfī shrines in Sindh are not mere places of worship but are places of social, moral, and cultural activity. The shrines of Qalandar and 'Abd al-Laṭīf are also spiritual abodes for the suppressed and downtrodden, where spiritual succor is combined with an 'emotional' welfare. Such shrines provide spaces for ritual events, such as dhamāl—the dance, and qawwālī—the music, which are not only forms of worship but also ways of bringing people together regardless of their class or religious sect (Charan, Wang, & Yao, 2018).

Also, the langar, which is the provision of a free meal for all visitors at these shrines, is another charitable element that aligns with Şūfism's interest in the welfare of the poor. These acts are considered a continuation of the teachings of saints regarding compassion, fellow feeling, and justice (Ahmad & Chandio, 2019).



### **Şūfism as a Counter to Extremism**

Sindh has a liberal tradition of Şūfism, which has acted as a response to radical extremism. Şūfī doctrines, coupled with their call for the assimilation of other Şūfī teachings such as tolerance, contrast with the incitement of extremism by violent groups. Islamic Şūfism teaches its followers love for God, or *‘ishq-i-ḥaḳīqī*, and the unity of existence, or *waḥdat al-wujūd*, thereby decreasing the appeal of violent extremism in the area (Ḥusain, 2019).

This aspect of Şūfism as a tool for promoting unity is well illustrated during the ‘Urs festivals, where people of all religions congregate. These events serve as a policy reminder of the integrative Şūfism that is preached to counteract the rigid puritanism of religious fanatics. Şūfī practices, therefore, maintain significant roles in preaching and facilitating peace, unity, and tolerance in Sindh, especially in the context of growing sectarianism in the province (Aḥmad & Chandio, 2019).

### **Gender and Sufism in Sindh**

Notably, in Sindh, Şūfism emphasizes women’s rights in Islam, which is not usually considered in other parts of the Islamic world. Women have been quite participative in Şūfī practices as well as in the ceremonial functions of the Şūfī shrines, and the female saint, Mai Bakhtāwar, also has her Şūfī shrine in Sindh. These hallowed sites have emerged as religious locations that allow women to exercise their faith, not to mention, their power against the grueling social order that is overwhelmingly oppressive to women (Manzūr & Shāh, 2018).

The position of women in Sindhī Şūfī traditions is an example of how Şūfism has incorporated local customs, meaning that while it is an Islamic movement, it offers more social flexibility than any other Islamic standards. They found that Şūfism gave women an opportunity to join religious and social activities in a manner that increases gender parity in Sindh.

### **Sufism and Social Justice**

Historically, Şūfism in Sindh has had nothing to do with mysticism alone. Şūfis in Sindh have been known for their efforts for social justice and against suppression. It is, for example, possible to point at Shāh ‘Abd al-Laṭīf Bhittāī, who focused on social justice and human dignity, which as a rule, went against the grain of the caste discriminations existing in society at the time (Verkaaik, 2004). Most of the time, his poetry covers more about the plight of the less fortunate and the fight for the alleviation of their sufferings, enthroning the right to be treated with dignity.

Sindhī Şūfism has contained a number of social teachings through which people of the area have organized several social movements and fought for human rights and social justice employing Şūfī values. This tradition of social activism based on Şūfism continues in modern Sindh, where the slogans of Şūfis are used for social change and political liberation (Ḥusain, 2019).

### **Şūfism in Today’s Sindh**

Şūfism continues to play a significant role in meeting the spiritual as well as social needs of the people in the contemporary world, especially in regions where materialism and extremism have sprouted. The sociological study of Şūfism reveals its capacity to provide spiritual solace while also functioning as a tool for social activism. This is what some movements, such as the Hizmet inspired by Gülen, have been doing in practice: they appropriate Şūfism in ways that can answer the needs of a globalized world while keeping intact at least the core spiritual values (Rashīd, 2012).

The modern challenge of extremism, social inequality, and cultural disintegration, however, could not break the Şūfī tradition in Sindh. Şūfī saints remain an inspiring force here as well into the contemporary era toward inclusive social and interfaith justice. In terms of providing a moral framework based on compassion and human dignity, it is the most powerful force shaping the socio-cultural landscape in Sindh.

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