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# Guardians of a sacred heritage

by Zulfikar Ali Kalhoro — March 2, 2018

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Siting at the main door of Jhulelal/ShaiikhTahir's tomb, his Muslim devotee gestures to the Muslim women to put a scarf on their heads before entering the temple of Jhulelal as a mark of respect to the saint and on other side is a Hindu caretaker of the temple, asking Hindu women to prostrate before the shrine. When I ask him which religion he belongs to, it turns out he carries dual identities. He smiles at my question and remarks that he belongs to both religions.

Both kinds of the devotees, Muslim as well as Hindu, are carrying forward the centuries

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Jhulelal/ShaiikhTahir is perhaps the best example in the Indian Subcontinent to see both Muslims and Hindus worshipping in a shared space where the mosque and temple stand side by side. And yet there are many such shared spaces or syncretic shrines in Lower Sindh especially in the districts of Thatta and Badin – where both Muslim and Hindus venerate the saints but never fight over the dual identities of those very saints.



Devotees at the shrine of Jhulelal or Shaikh Tahir

Jhulelal, whose shrine is located near Tando Adam town in the district of Sanghar, is also called Uderolal, Amar Lal, Darya Pir, Khawja Khizr, Zinda Pir and Shaikh Tahir. Generally, for Muslim devotees, he is Shaikh Tahir and for Hindus he is known as Uderolal and Jhulelal. The structure takes the form of a fortified shrine/temple complex. Within this fortified shared space are the shrine of Jhulelal/ShaiikhTahir, a mosque, a temple, a domed well and another shrine containing the sandals of Uderolal. The cult of sandals and foot prints is common in many religious communities in both Pakistan and India. It was equally important among Jains, Hindus, Buddhists and Muslims who built structures over the footprints as a mark of veneration.

According to legend, Uderolal was born in Nagarpur, a town famous for ceramics and

Hindus. There are two version of the story, in one he rides out on his horse and in another he sits on a palla fish to reach Thatta by travelling on the water of the Indus – thus becoming known as Jhulelal. Popular iconographies show him riding a horse and wielding a sword, apparently challenging the despotic rule of Mirkh Shah, an imaginary ruler whose name is missing from the actual list of dynasts who ruled over Thatta from the thirteenth to the eighteenth centuries. Another iconography shows him on a palla fish – this one became the most popular depiction and now he is almost always identified with that image.

Later on during the reign of Sammas, Arghuns and Tarkhans, the Ismaili dais (preachers) spread their doctrine while continuing the use of dual identities. This confused people so much that they started considering them Hindus

There is a possible interpretation regarding the fictional rule of Mirkh Shah: that it might have been a reference to the Sunni persecution of Ismailis, which took place at the hands of Ghaznavid rulers and governors in Sindh and Multan. Many of the Ismaili *dais* (preachers) in Sindh concealed their true identity and thus carried dual identities to save themselves from possible persecution at the hands of Ghaznavid rulers. One knows from the documented history of Sindh that during the eleventh century, when Soomras were the rulers of Sindh, Ismailism was the state religion. One of the Soomra rulers, Khaffif, was defeated in a battle and converted to Sunnism from Ismailism by Sultan Mahmud Ghaznavi. Later due to internal strife amongst the Soomras over religious affiliation, Pithu or Pithadeva the Soomra king fled from Sindh to the Barda Hills in Porbandar, Gujarat, and lived amongst the Mer Hindu community. Today he is venerated as Patha Pir Dada. Patha Pir Soomro became Kuldevata of the Odedra Rajput lineage of Mer, hence he was called Patha Pir Odedra – not to be confused with Pir Patha or Patha Pir of Thatta, as he is also worshipped in Gujarat, Kutch and Mumbai (Maharashtra) in India.

In the aftermath of the Ghaznavid attack on Sindh, many mystics from Ghazni came with Sultan Mahmud to settle in Sindh. They were later called by local people as 'Gajani Pirs' – a reference, apparently, to Ghazni. The shrines of Gajani Pirs are located in the districts of Badin, Umarmkot and Mithi.



Jhulelal travels atop a palla fish in the Indus

Later on during the reign of Sammas, Arghuns and Tarkhans, the Ismaili *dais* (preachers) spread their doctrine while continuing the use of dual identities. This confused people so much that they started considering them Hindus. One of the sons of Pir Sadruddin, Pir Tajuddin, whose tomb is located in Tando Bagho, was known by his Hindu devotees as Prahlad – a devotee of Vishnu, a Hindu deity. Likewise, in the fourteenth, fifteenth, sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, there emerged many dual-identity shrines in the religious landscape of Sindh. Mangho Pir was called Lala Jasraj by his Hindu deities,

across over two dozen such shrines which carried dual identities.

It is also interesting to observe that the term Jhulelal is also used for Lal Shahbaz Qalandar, a saint who himself carried dual identities – with Hindus calling him Raja Bharthari. Bharthari's nephew Gopi Chand was also called Pir Patho by Sindhi Hindus. Pir Patho's shrine is located 25 km from Thatta. Many Hindus in Tharparkar, especially in Diplo, have constructed astanas or small temples dedicated to Pir Patho.

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Jhulelal/Uderolal is also identified with Khawja Khizr and many shrines have been built in his honour in Sindh. I will discuss the cult of Khawja Khizr in Sindh in another article.



The shrine complex of Jhulelal

There are many shrines in Sindh where Hindu devotees take care of the shrines of Muslim saints. The Hindus have also built imposing structures over the simple graves of Muslim saints in many parts in Sindh.

Unfortunately, the tomb at Nasarpur town, which marks the birthplace of Jhulelal / Shaikh Tahir, is now occupied by a family that has done some damage to the structure. Once it was open for Hindu pilgrims, now it is closed to them. The Government of Sindh's Culture, Tourism and Antiquities Department ought to immediately make sincere efforts to rescue it from the occupants and possibly convert it into a 'Shared Heritage Museum' where the artifacts of a pluralistic religious heritage should be on display.



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Jhulelal or Shaikh Tahir, he is a personification of traditional Sindhi values of tolerance and harmony. These are values which need to be upheld today more than ever, as a wave of militant religious intolerance sweeps our lands.

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