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Sufis of 16th-century Sindh



by Zulfiqar Ali Kalhoro — August 17, 2018

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Katiar tribe became popular because of two most eminent saints that the tribe produced in the sixteenth century – Shaikh Bhirkio and Miran Katiyar.



Floral designs in the painted mosque of Shaikh Bhirkio

According to modern Sindhi writers, Shaikh Bhirkio is believed to have been associated with one of the Sajjada Nashins of Bahauddin Zakiriyya's shrine. But one does not know the name of that caretaker whose disciple Shaikh Bhirkio became. It is not evident from any of the manuscripts that he was a disciple of BahauddinII, a Suhrawardi saint from the family of Bahauddin Zakiriyya, as claimed by one of the Sindhi writers in recent times. We also come to know that some other popular Suhrawardi saints of Sindh were also connected with the Suhrawardi family of Bahauddin Zakiriyya. Two of the eminent Bhatti brothers Makhdoom Ahmed and Makhdoom Muhammad of old Hala also belonged to Suhrawardi silsila of Multan. Their father Makhdoom Ishaque Bhatti was the first person from the family to become connected with the family of Bahauddin Zakiriyya.

Both brothers, Makhdoom Ahmed and Makhdoom Muhammad, were the contemporaries of Shaikh Bhirkio. In these manuscripts, there is more information about his miracles than the history of the family and disciples. These miracles had been recorded in the manuscripts namely *Bayan-al-Arifeen* by Shah Abdul Karim Bulri (grandfather of Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai), *Hadiqat-ul-Aulia* by Syed Abdul Qadir Nasarpuri, *Tufhat-al-Kiram* by Mir Ali Sher Qani Thattavi and *Tazkirat-al-Ashiqeen*. According to *Hadiqat-ul-Aulia*, the manuscript written by Syed Abdul Qadir Nasarpuri in 1016 AH/1607 AD, Haroon Sammo was the chief disciple of Shaikh Bhirkio. The author also mentions many miracles of the saint and believes that the entire region of the Samavati pargana in Nasarpur became known the stronghold of Shaikh Bhirkio's followers. Several people enrolled themselves as his disciples. Moreover, he writes that Shaikh Bhirkio was a majzub and a man of learning. He used to sit near a riverbank and pray day and night. Once he stayed there for several years and became literally a skeleton by fasting. In one of the manuscripts, there is story in which a certain saint taunted him as to why he was not a disciple of any Suhrawardi saint of Multan – as every eminent saint in Sindh was associated with them. As legend has it, Shaikh Bhirkio disappeared suddenly on hearing the words from that saint and appeared before a Sajjada Nashin of Bahauddin Zakiriyya's shrine with bowl of milk at Multan. This miracle shows that he was powerful himself but as a true Sufi he respected every other saint of his time. But it is evident from the manuscripts that he was not a disciple of any of the Suhrawardi saints of Multan. Due to this story, later on, modern Sindhi writers associated him with the Suhrawardi saints of Multan.



The tomb of Shaikh Bhirkio, decorated with glazed tiles

Syed Abdul Qadir Nasarpuri does not say anything about his association with the Suhrawardi saints of Multan. If one reads all the manuscripts written in the seventeenth, eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, not a single manuscript talks about his association with the Suhrawardi saints of Multan. Later in the 21st century, based on the story of his appearance before a Sajjada Nashin of the shrine of Bahauddin Zakiriyya, some Sindhi writers have begun regarding him as a disciple of a Suhrawardi saint from the family of Bahauddin Zakiriyya.

Another Persian manuscript *Tazkirat-al-Ashiqeen*, written in the nineteenth century, also does not say anything about Shaikh Bhirkio's association with the Suhrawardi saints of Multan.

We know that in the sixteenth century, when Shaikh Bhirkio was a popular Sufi saint, the Suhrawardi saints of Multan had great influence in Sindh. Some were directly connected with the Suhrawardi saints of Multan and others were associated with Makhdoom Nuh of Hala, whose Sarwari Jammāt became dominant in the Suhrawardi silsila in sixteenth- and seventeenth-century Sindh. This Sarwari Jammāt has still a larger following in Sindh.

The shrine of Shaikh Bhirkio is located 20 km northeast of the town of Tando Muhammad Khan. This is one of the magnificent shrine complexes in the entire Tando Muhammad Khan district. There are two mosques and a tomb at the Shaikh Bhirkio shrine complex. A domed structure is built over the grave of Shaikh Bhirkio. The interior of the tomb, once decorated with glazed blue tiles, is now simply whitewashed. The exterior of the tomb is adorned with blue and ochre Hala ceramics. The nearby three-domed mosque's exterior is also decorated with blue tiles. On the contrary, the interior of the mosque has also been whitewashed. Only the mihrab has the painted names of Allah. The second mosque adjoined with the three-domed mosque is noted for woodwork and mural paintings. The front of the mosque has wooden pillars with wooden lattices over them. The walls of the mosque are decorated with Arabic calligraphy and floral designs. The floor of the mosque is decorated with blue ceramics.

The Hindus of Sindh also venerate Shaikh Bhirkio, and regard him as 'Raja Vir' – the dual identity of the shrine has many things to tell. The landscape of all of lower Sindh is dotted with shrines carrying dual identities. A majority of dual identity shrines are associated either with the disciples and deputies (khalifas) of Bahauddin Zakiriyya and his family or with the Ismaili sect.

The author is an anthropologist and has authored three books: 'Perspectives on the art and architecture of Sindh', 'Memorial Stones: Tharparkar' and 'Archaeology, Religion and Art in Sindh'. He may be contacted at: zulfi04@hotmail.com

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