

Book Review

Khan, Hussain Ahmad, *Artisans, Sufis, Shrines: Colonial Architecture in Nineteenth-Century Punjab*. London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 2015.

Artisans, Sufis, Shrines: Colonial Architecture in Nineteenth-Century Punjab is a pastiche of Punjabi folktales, sketching the nature of Sufis-Artisan relationship, and the Sufi Shrines as reflection of Muslim identity in Nineteenth-Century Punjab now covering considerably large geographical chunks of Pakistan and India. The chapters foreground the colonial art education and architecture from the visual archives of colonial time exhibitions and generate numerous critical perspectives on the intricate relationship among the colonizers, the Sufis and the artisans. The Sufis, the Muslim mystics, take a very strong exception to the colonial assimilationist and “reformative” influence over indigenous culture. The colonial Positivist liberal approach to art and culture was countered by Sufis’ individualistic and essentialist shrine architecture and local mystic carnivals.

The religiously, culturally and historically decontextualized Anglicist colonial art school as a source of exerting colonial power and extending cultural hegemony through eclectic art education, Hussain details, falters and struggles in view of administrative problems and students’ lukewarm responses. The Sufis’ distinctive shrine architecture, prototyped by the case study of Khawaja Suleman Taunsvi’s shrine that is interlaced with paradisiacal imagery and Qur’anic inscriptions, rivaled the British officials’ collage and mosaic model drawing on Hindu temple, Sikh

gurdwara, and Sufi shrine traditions. The local Punjabi artisans mistrusted colonial exhibitions that could transfer their skills to their European competitors.

During the decadence of Mughal Empire in the nineteenth century, the Sufis vied for the driving role of revivalist and protector of Muslim mysticism, art, culture and identity while showing fidelity to the Arabic and Persian cultural traditions and fostering a demand for a Muslim state. Both the contenders, the colonial administrators and Sufis, have had strange case of interdependence approaching each other cautiously in order to watch over their interests. However, the Sufis' anti-Sikh and British activities led to the demolition of numerous shrines.

The writer traces the medieval Punjabi folktales in oral tradition (from thirteenth to eighteenth century) like *Raja Risalu* that represents marginalized, diffident and docile indigenous laboring communities, and eulogizes a Sufi, *fakir* (ascetic mendicant), a *jogi* (hermit) as *deus ex machine* helping the troubled people against the oppressors—*qazi* (judge), king and *chaudheri* (noble). He promotes Sufi-artisan relationship based on a shared worldview constituted on the concept of *baraka*, a phenomenon of spiritual uplifting and communion of a being with a larger part of universe, and further interprets it in the light of Peter Berger's concept of *nomos* indigenized by Sufism as a binding and all-embracing force fostering unity in an outcast community at the verge of anomie by rejecting economic and social stratification. The focus of research is, predominantly, the Chishti order of Sufis, their patronized art form and the allied concepts of *khanqah* (shrine), *dhikr* (remembrance), *sama* (listening to music), *mela* (carnival), *urs* (the death anniversary of a Sufi saint), *dhamal* (Sufi dance), *baraka* and *nomos* that retained distinctive Muslim cultural identity and paved way for the creation of Muslim country.

This book is an important contribution to the debates around colonial art, colonial discursive practices and cultural legacy in Pakistani academia, that, most of the times, center

on descriptive approach to cultural history failing at material and archival evidence.

Mirza Muhammad Zubair Baig
Assistant Professor, Department
of Humanities, COMSATS
Institute of Information
Technology, Lahore, Pakistan.