



SACRED SPACES

A Journey with the Sufis of the Indus

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IMAGES OF SOUTH ASIAN SUFISM

Ali S. Asani



Manuscript of a divan of Hafiz.
Unknown artist, c. CE 1540–1550.

*Divine knowledge is revealed to Lovers,
What do Mullahs and Kazis know about it?*

*Hear, O Kazi! The refuting argument of Love
We have love and you have knowledge,
How can you be reconciled with us?*

Sachal Sarmast'

South Asia is home to the largest concentration of Muslims in the world. Historically, Sufis and Sufi institutions have played a key role in the transmission of Islamic ideas and practices in the region. Consequently, most South Asian Muslims have traditionally understood their faith through the lens of Sufism. A term that most people commonly associate with spirituality or mysticism, “Sufism” is better understood as a complex cultural phenomenon that is closely intertwined with many aspects of South Asian Muslim societies. We can, therefore, discern its influence extending far beyond devotional practice into the realms of politics and economics. Sufism in South Asia has affected the lives and thought of a wide spectrum of individuals—from emperors and statesmen to philosophers, calligraphers, and musicians.

The most obvious impact of Sufism, however, lies in the realm of popular culture. Sufi poets rank among the pioneers in the use of local languages, popular folk idioms, music, and the inclusion of metaphorical imagery into devotional compositions, thereby influencing the lives of millions of ordinary men and women. As early as the thirteenth century of the Christian era (CE) (the sixth century of the Islamic, or Hijri, calendar [AH]), Sufis began composing short verses for the *sama*, a ritual that involves



the singing of poetry with music and, on occasion, spontaneous dancing. Intended to make listeners and participants forget their material existence and experience spiritual ecstasy by finding God, the *sama* has always attracted large crowds of Muslims and non-Muslims alike to Sufi shrines—the sacred spaces that are the subject of this volume.

I opened this essay with two verses by Sachal Sarmast (d. CE 1826; AH 1241), a prominent early nineteenth-century Sufi poet of Sindh, currently the southern province of Pakistan. Written in the Sindhi language, these verses capture vividly the spirit of Sufism. On one level, the lines express the voices of ordinary people against the religious establishment, challenging the authority of *mullahs* (Muslim religious scholars) and *kazis* (Muslim religious judges) to interpret Islam on the basis of their learning and scholarship. In these verses Sachal rebukes those who conceive of religion merely in terms of rites and rituals, rules and regulations that must be meticulously followed. But the message that always lies at the core of Sachal's poetry is not rebellion but passionate love of God. As the verses suggest, for Sachal—as for Sufis generally—the surest way to experience and know God is not through knowledge of religious law and theology but by totally immersing oneself in passionate love of the Divine. Like Rabia al-Adawiyya (d. CE 801; AH 184), the woman mystic who ranks among the earliest Sufis to promote the idea of selfless love of God, Sachal was critical of those who worshiped God out of hope of Paradise or out of fear of Hell. Such worship, he felt, was ultimately egotistical for it was self-centered, not God-centered. For him, the only way to worship God was from altruistic love, loving God for God's sake, without any ulterior motive. Viewed from this perspective, *islam*, in its literal sense of “submission,” meant submission of the human ego to God out of unconditional love, a love that was passionate and self-consuming. Indeed, Sachal was so overwhelmed by this love that the sobriquet *sarmast*, or “intoxicated one,” was attached to his name.

Sachal was one of hundreds of poets in the Indian subcontinent who chose to express key concepts of Sufi Islam in verse form. They composed their poetry in the various vernacular languages understood by the masses rather than in Arabic, Persian, and Sanskrit—cosmopolitan languages that were closely associated with scholarly and religious elites. Their verses were often fused with other aspects of popular culture, and especially with music. For centuries, folk poetry has been an important means of transmitting and disseminating religious ideas in South Asia and singing is a form of worship that continues to characterize popular religious life in the subcontinent. Significantly, the use of this music and verse flourished principally among those Muslim groups who favored a mystical and esoteric interpretation of