
History of Shrine Architecture: Studying Cultural History of Sufi Shrines in Colonial Punjab

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Abstract

This article surveys the current trends for studying the architecture of Sufi shrines and proposes a historical method for writing cultural history of Sufi shrines of colonial Punjab. Cultural, social and architectural historians, and cultural anthropologists use various methodologies for this purpose, I will highlight the pre-suppositions and methodological limitations of these approaches. The proposed historical method for studying Sufi shrines derives certain features from each approach discussed in the article, thus attempts to historicise sacred architecture by engaging the role of patrons, builders, images and inscriptions within the larger political and social context in which building was constructed.

Works of Pakistani cultural and architectural historians, such as Kamil Khan Mumtaz,¹ KK Aziz² and Ghafer Shahzad³ focus either on religious meanings or stylistic aspects of architecture. These are interesting ways of explaining architecture. However, the contemporary scholarship of architectural history has developed new theoretical frameworks and methodologies based on the critique of techniques which Pakistani historians still use

uncritically. Each methodology developed for writing architectural history has its own academic and cultural context thus cannot be borrowed as such. Considering this constraint, I propose here a methodology by making use of various techniques of cultural anthropology, art and architectural histories.⁴ I divide this article in two sections: the first section explains contemporary approaches to the study of sacred architecture and the second portion suggests a method for studying nineteenth-century Sufi shrines in colonial Punjab.

(I)

In the 1960s, two French scholars, Louis Massignon⁵ and Henry Corbin,⁶ argued that Sufis' teachings deeply influenced artisans' lives and works in the Middle East and Persian regions since the tenth and eleventh centuries. For them, this relationship manifest in the visual language of various art and architectural forms, well understood by general public and artisans but is neither theorized nor articulated by art and architectural historians. This thesis found a considerable audience in the West and fascinated many historians.⁷ The discipline of Islamic art and architecture, which was a product of nineteenth-century Orientalists' discourses, had by then established itself as a branch of history in the western universities. In the 1960s and 70s, most of the Islamic architectural historians were preoccupied with the notions of "Islamic" and "un-Islamic". They were also searching for common principles necessary to explain sustained artistic traditions in a trans-regional context. The thesis of Massignon and Corbin provided them with useful insights to further their project of explaining trans-regional artistic culture of Islam. Cultural and architectural historians such as Keith Critchlow,⁸ Titus Burckhardt,⁹ Hossein Nasr,¹⁰ and Annemarie Schemmal¹¹ expanded this theme to explain Islamic architecture.

These historians approached Islamic architecture as an ideological tool for highlighting eternal principles or the divine plan. This approach is normally called perennialist. They employed "symbolism" as a methodological tool to explain referents of different signs used in religious buildings. A Romanian anthropologist, Eliade's methodology equipped them to make use of mythology as a mediating agency between scriptural principles and human experiences. They considered symbolism a language of religion which God used to communicate his message. While emphasizing the nature of timeless art and architecture Nasr suggests, "there is nothing more timely today than that truth which is timeless, than the message that comes from tradition and is relevant at all times. Such a message belongs to a now which has been, is, and will ever be present. To speak of tradition is to speak of immutable principles of heavenly origin and of their application to different moments of time and space".¹² For perennialists, analytical and methodological tools used in contemporary practices of architectural history cannot explain the eternal principles in religious buildings, as Burckhardt puts it, "a form, though limited and consequently subject to time may convey something timeless and in this respect escapes historical conditions, not only in its genesis---which partly belongs to a spiritual dimension---but also in its preservation, to a certain extend at least".¹³

Architectural historians such as Gulru Necipoglu,¹⁴ WK Chorbachi¹⁵ and Oleg Grabar¹⁶ severely criticise the perennialist approach on the basis of de-contextualization, ahistoricity and absence of scientific precision. Necipoglu contends that these architectural historians uncritically employ the concept of *tawhid* (divine unity) to further the idea of eternal principles, they ignore time and space and become victims of overgeneralizations. Similarly, Chorbachi challenges the relationship of geometry and Unity of Being in perennialists' texts and calls it historically baseless and a scientific fallacy that such simple geometrical forms can be

regarded as symbols of divine presence or absence. In the same way, Graber in his article, "Symbols and Signs in Islamic Architecture", criticizes this perspective because of the absence of scientific precision, and the claim of the uniqueness of Islamic art and architecture. He stresses that without engaging the contemporary context and available literature, this approach cannot be considered for writing art and architectural histories.

The discipline of cultural anthropology has contributed significantly to our understanding of the Sufi shrines.¹⁷ Without discounting social, political and economic factors, they demonstrate how the worldviews of various Sufi communities were reflected in the material culture in Africa, the Middle East and South Asia. For instance, in *A Saint in the City: Sufi Arts of Urban Senegal*, Allen Roberts and Mary Roberts investigate the twentieth-century imaginary of the Mouridies, a religious community in Senegal, which used art and architecture to communicate the beliefs, practices and teachings of their Sufi-master, Sheikh Amadou Bamba (1853-1927). By using the relationship between images (photographs, pottery) and architecture with the text (such as Bamba's poetry, his Quranic interpretation, and the Prophet Muhammad's traditions), the authors conceptualize a worldview of the Mouridies. Any other similar studies using cultural anthropology? Might be of help: A recent book by Feisal Alkazi, *Srinagar: An architectural Legacy*, Roli books (The author draws linkages between Srinagar's architecture and that of Samarkand and Bukhara..)

Several other scholars depart from this approach and analyse "Islamic" architecture in stylistic terms.¹⁸ They discuss regional influences on various styles of Islamic architecture over time. They see buildings such as Sufi shrines, royal tombs and palaces, caravanserais, as expressions of regional architecture, the invaders' artistic tradition, the patrons' aesthetics, and the skills of individual artists or craftsmen. Post-colonial scholarship has begun to question basic categories such as Hindu, Muslim, ancient,

medieval, and modern architecture, which gained currency in the nineteenth century.¹⁹ Such scholarship stigmatizes the usage of terms such as “Hindu” and “Islamic” architecture as a colonial strategy to control India’s past in the interest of the empire and argues that religious categories, initially used by colonial scholars and administrators, articulated through the disciplines of archaeology and architecture, were later used for constructing nationalism.

Isolating architecture from its context by neglecting a consideration of contemporary religious views is an ahistoric approach. With this view, several architectural historians find a correlation between Sufi texts and architecture.²⁰ Through different case studies of buildings or periods, these scholars propose that symbolism is an important aspect of architecture, deeply embedded in the medieval architectural tradition, and reflected in medieval Sufi texts. Despite their successful attempts at developing a relation between text and architecture, and identifying similar symbols despite stylistic diversity in various regions over time, they establish the relationship between Sufis and artisans not on the basis of historical evidences but “on the logic of relationship and the agency of the spatial sensibility”.²¹ Samer Akkach’s *Cosmology and Architecture in Premodern Islam* is a case in point. He is concerned with the relationship of cosmological ideas in Sufi texts with the architectural and spatial organization. He argues that the sense of spatial ordering was consistent in pre-modern Muslim architecture despite stylistic diversity in various regions over time. (can bring in similar principles at work in temple architecture in South and South East Asia; readings: Vibhutichakrabarti, basic readings on Indian art or temple architecture will also have a mention: Vidyadehejia, roy C Craven ,etc))He suggests “to construct a new interpretative context that enables an architectural reading of mystical ideas”. This can be done by “using a tendency in spatial ordering traceable in buildings, settlements, and landscapes as a tool to frame mystical literature and to organize cosmological ideas into a

coherent whole. Within this frame, a complex conjunction of metaphysics, cosmology and mysticism is constructed and brought to bear on tectonic expressions".²² Aesthetically an interesting argument, from a historical perspective this approach does not explain whether patrons, builders and audience actually understood mystical symbols and iconography.

In contrast to this scholarship, several historians have examined the ideology or politics of architecture.²³ They argue that mystical influences or regional styles might have been important but medieval dynasties also patronized particular styles of architecture to glorify their ethnic and religious identities; for instance, in India, the sultans and the Mughals patronized Suljuk and Central Asian architecture to express their Muslim and Persian identities.²⁴ These architectural historians highlight the discordant voices, personal and political agendas of the patrons, and unstated ideological assumptions in mosque and shrine architecture. Jerrilynn Dodds argues in his study of the early medieval Spanish architecture that the relationship of ideology with architecture is not confined "to the conscious gestures of patrons"; sometimes architecture can also be a "passageway to certain collective assumptions, exploring the ways that formal solutions become the unconscious repositories of ideological struggle ... cultures react creatively when confronted with one another, and such encounters help to form a group's attitude towards its art and itself".²⁵ Similarly, Tajuddin Mohamad Rasdi, while debating the interpretations of Malay mosque architecture, suggests to consider the "political agendas, personal symbolic gestures, questionable religious practices and the effect of colonization on the masses".²⁶ In the same way, Thomas Barrie views architecture as a "cultural artefact" which represents the political, social, economic contexts, and beliefs, anxieties, fears, and expectations of a community.²⁷ These are the ideas, which I propose in the next section, cultural historians should use for writing history of shrines in colonial Punjab.

(II)

Hardly any architectural or cultural historian explains the ideological bases of the architecture of Sufi shrines in Punjab. Following Akkach, Roberts, Dodds, Rasdi, and Barrie, I suggest here a method for writing a cultural history of Sufi shrines, which can help in explaining the political meanings of Sufi shrines. I will consider an example of Suleman Taunsvi's shrine, built in Taunsa Shareef in district Dera Ghazi Khan, for describing main points of the proposed methodology.²⁸ Born in Taunsa, Suleman Taunsvi (1789-1851) was among those nineteenth-century Chishti Sufis who had a large following across India, Afghanistan and the Central Asia. He was a staunch supporter of the revival of Islamic culture based on the Quran and Prophet Muhammad's traditions.²⁹ Taunsvi and his immediate successors patronised the construction of shrine with the financial support of their followers, important among them were the rulers of Bahawalpur State, now located in Pakistan's part of the Punjab. Taunsvi had close connections with nineteenth-century anti-Sikh and anti-British Sufis such as Hafiz Jamal of Multan, Afzel Khan of Jhang, and Shamsuddin Siyalvi of Sargodha. He was interested in the Middle Eastern and Persian versions of Sufi traditions. He disliked English language, dress and food. One needs to understand such tendencies in a global context; anti-colonial Sufis in Africa, Russia and the South East Asia showed similar resistance to the colonial powers.³⁰

For writing a cultural history of Sufi shrines, engagement with political ideas of Sufis is important because these ideas would determine the selection of artisan builders and the style of building. Taunsvi selected those artisan families who could construct building on the pattern of Central Asian architecture. It was because Taunsvi intended to follow Persian cultural traditions and he had disliking for the colonial rule, British architecture or the late Mughal

architecture which had elements borrowed from Hindu temples. The artisan builders were aware of the *adab* (etiquettes) to be observed in *khanqah* or during the construction work. It shows how the Sufi and his artisan builders were conscious about distinguishing the "Muslim" way of constructing building from others (such as Hindus, Sikhs and British). This is a case of consciously disconnecting with cultural references in one's immediate context and re-affiliating with other localities to have affinity with a certain identity.

Source-material for studying nineteenth-century artisans' lives comprises colonial administrative record, folktales and oral traditions of artisan families, and Sufis' *malfuzat*. Colonial records (such as official reports on the condition of various crafts, exhibitions, museums, art schools) provide us with substantial information about the artisans' social, economic condition, their skills and craft practices, potential markets for their products, association with different colonial art institutions (exhibitions, museums and art schools) and Punjab's cultural institutions (such as Sufi *mela* and shrines). Folktales provide us with information on artisans' mentalities, the way artisans viewed the British and Sufis, and their own social and economic situation.³¹ Similar information can also be taken and verified from the oral accounts of artisans who trace their genealogy from nineteenth-century craft-practising families.³² Sufis *malfuzat* show the Sufi-artisan relationship and give insights into the artisans' interaction with Sufis and their influence on the former.

Source-material on artisans has a number of problems which we must consider while using these in writing history. Colonial sources are strongly influenced by the colonial ideologies, racism and gender biased analysis, etc.³³ Even collection of folktales owe to the efforts of colonial officials, who were influenced by theories such as Aryan race, superiority of white race, myths of superstitious and ancient India, etc.³⁴ In the same way, Sufi *malfuzat* are very

subjective elaborating the miracles of Sufis, eulogising Sufi practices, and providing very limited information on the social and political situation. Oral traditions of artisan families, which trace their genealogy to nineteenth-century artisans are also influenced by the contemporary situation of the narrator. Somewhere else I have discussed at length these problems and possible solutions.³⁵

After analysing the lives and ideas of patrons and artisan builders, cultural historians should focus on stylistic aspects of Sufi shrines. In most of the cases, each Sufi *silsila* (order) follows a particular style. For instance, a number of Chishti Sufi shrines are built in the late Mughal style with considerable elements borrowed from Hindu temples and Sikh gurdwara. Suharwardi Sufis' shrines follow Central Asian architectural style; shrines of Qadriyya Sufis are very simple structures.³⁶ It is here we should consider the availability of building material, artisans' skills, financial sources available to the builders, and changes in shrine buildings over time. Sometimes Sufi patrons intended to use different style but due to financial constraints or non-availability of material they could not do so. For instance; despite the Sufi community's dislike of European culture and imports, in the construction of Suleman Taunsvi's shrine in Dera Ghazi Khan district, European techniques of colour making were used, since the colours were of a low price. Shamsuddin Siyalvi and his successors followed Taunsvi's shrine architecture but they could not use blue tiles as these were not available in Siyal Shareef (district Sargodha). Borrowing of modern building material should not be considered an acceptance or appreciation of colonial ideas and of colonial science and technology; instead, this should be seen as a compulsion of patrons and artisan-builders. In other words, without comprehending the political ideas of a Sufi community, our analysis of shrine's architectural style would be flawed.

Cultural historians should derive meanings of inscriptions from the buildings' immediate context. This is

very different from the approach of architectural historians such as Samer Akkach and Hossein Nasr who study inscriptions in relation with religious text (Quran, hadith or Sufi treatises). This method is also different from Valerie Gonzalez's study of Islamic architecture; who she reads inscriptions and decorative motifs from an aesthetic point of view (without engaging political meanings).³⁷ Suleman Taunsvi's shrine has a number of inscriptions which could be interpreted in the context of Sufi's struggle against the Sikhs and his dislike for the British rulers. Since he believed that Muslims should invoke blessings from Islamic teachings to cater to the needs of their problems in material world, the interpretation of inscriptions in relation to political, social and economic situation becomes more important. I will give one example of inscription to elaborate this point.

One of the inscriptions on the marble doorway (dated 1886) of Suleman Taunsvi's shrine complex is taken from the Surah An-Nas of the Quran which shows the fears of the Sufi community. It states "Say: I seek refuge in the Lord of mankind, The King of mankind, The God of mankind, From the evil of the sneaking whisperer, Who whispereth in the hearts of mankind, Of the jinn and of mankind". These verses are recited if one has some fears. Cultural historians should relate such verses with the larger political and social context of that period in which the British knowledge based on Positivism was challenging the mystical teachings; the Mughal empire was completely disintegrated and the British laws were replacing pre-colonial (Muslim) laws. I re-state my point: instead of explaining these inscriptions and images in the context of the times of Prophet Muhammad, these should be understood by considering the immediate context.

Cultural historians studying Sufi shrines must also consider the oral traditions of artisan builders involved in construction of the shrine under study. Families of artisan-builders, Rajput and Ansari, who built Suleman Taunsvi's shrine have rich oral traditions explaining their ancestors' interaction with the Sufi and his family, and mystical ideas

acquired by them.³⁸ These oral traditions also explain the mystical meanings of architectural elements (such as dome, door, or images or inscriptions) they understood from the Sufi's teachings.³⁹ Hence, by considering these oral accounts we can get a sense of meanings created by patrons and builders, instead of locating meanings in religious texts alone.

For instance, in the shrine of Suleman Taunsvi, wall-painters (*naqqash*) made an image of a plant with different types of fruits and flowers. They called it *humagol* style, meaning a flower or plant having each type of flowers and fruits.⁴⁰ The meaning of *humagol* is related to a nineteenth-century popular idea of Sufi community, *humaost* (everything), which means God is everything. If a man, who is appointed as a viceroy of God, follows the right path and acquires divine attributes, becomes *insan-e-kamil* (perfect man). So the image of *humagol* also symbolises a Sufi who is a perfect man. Either *humagol* symbolises God or a perfect man, it had political meanings, that is, the right path is the path of God, which a Sufi can identify, so the influence of Sikhs and the British should be avoided and resisted.

Conclusion

Pakistani architectural and cultural historians have largely ignored the criticism on *perennialist* approach and stylistic studies of shrine architecture. Part of the problem is that, an effective methodology for writing a cultural history of Sufi shrines has hitherto not been devised. I propose in this article a method by considering, artisans' oral traditions, folktales, political and social ideas of Sufis, Sufis' interaction with artisans, style of architecture, method of reading inscriptions and interpreting images. While employing this method, cultural historians should bear in mind the problems in the source-material, which are uncritically used by Pakistani architectural historians. Each source emerges out of a particular political context and has multiple

ideological bearings. A historian's work is to match that source with other available sources to retrieve the past event. In other words, no historical evidence (symbol, image) should be considered 'timeless' or 'boundless'.

My proposed method is different from KK Aziz's and Kamil Khan Mumtaz's approach who follow perennialists and rely on Eliade's methodology, which is now redundant among architectural historians. This method is also different from Ghafer Shahzad who studies stylistic aspects of shrines without engaging with the political interpretations of inscriptions. My reading of Sufi shrines is also different from Valerie Gonzalez's approach who views inscriptions and decorative motifs aesthetically and overlooks the context in which the building is constructed. In summary, cultural historians should study Sufi shrines within the immediate context of construction of the building and avoid ahistoric interpretations and methodologies. We should analyse Sufi shrines as reflecting aspirations, fears, ideals of Sufi community, which is only possible by engaging the perspectives of artisan-builders, the larger political situation and economic constraints.

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