

***Qawwali* and the Folk Festivals: Musical Performances on Mystical Poetry**

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Abstract:

Musical performances of Sufi poetry generally known as Qawwali are very famous in Pakistan, moreover, in the southern part of the province of Punjab, which is the hub of prolific saints and poets, Sufi folk festivals are also commemorated to a great extent where local singers and intellectuals present Sufi poetry for religious ecstasy and the propagation of Sufi philosophy as well. This article expresses the recent position and penetration of Sufi music among the devotees focusing on the religious ideology and practices of Islam. This research is based on fieldwork and critical analysis of mainstream Urdu and English newspapers' website reports regarding Qawwali programs and Sufi folk festivals. The findings illustrate that the performance of Sufi poetry with music arouses mystical love, and establishes spiritual autonomy over the mundane world by describing the reality of the God and spiritual sovereignty of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and Sufi saints.

Keywords:

Qawwali, Folk Festivals, Sufism, Musical performances, Sufi Music

Introduction:

The spiritual and mystical movement known as Sufism spread throughout the Islamic world by ascetic personalities called Sufis who delivered a spiritual message of Islamic teachings to the folks through their austere lifestyle and mystical poetry (Trimingham, 1971). These saints listened and enjoyed mystical poetry in their gatherings for pleasure and to attain full attention to their beloved, God, which is known as *Sama*¹ (Sadiqi, 2010). This ritual has formed immortal impacts of Sufism on local culture and practices. Instead of disassociation of three, Suhrawardi, Naqshbandi and Qadiri, out of four Sufi orders of South Punjab to music or *Sama*, it got immense fame only through Chishti Sufis. However, listening to Sufi poetry without music is very common in all four Sufi orders of South Punjab in weekly or monthly congregations. This study has aim to investigate the penetration of *Qawwali* in south Punjab, Pakistan which is the hub of saints.

Literature Review

The musical composition in *Sama* is traced out to the thirteenth century, credited to Amir Khusrau who was the court musician of the Turkish Sultan of Delhi, Alauddin Khilji (d. 1316), and the disciple of Nizamuddin Auliya (1238-1352) who belonged to the Chishtiyya order, and had a great affiliation with *Sama* (Boyk, 2006). Later, the addition of music and professional singers in *Sama* made this performance famous with a local brand name, *Qawwali*, which is mostly arranged at the time of the death anniversary of the saint called *Urs* or on sacred days; more *Qawwali* concerts are arranged in the Islamic month of *Ramadan*. The fame of *Qawwali* has created a huge space for the Sufi religious economy in South Asia with its musical features and spiritual beliefs of the Sufi poetry and its practice in Sufi circles portrays a complete picture of this popular ritual of Sufism (Qureshi, 1986).

This sacred poetry is a very inspiring facet of Sufism that has deep penetration in lovers of God, and *Qawwali* is considered a path to attain *Wajd* (spiritual ecstasy). It is believed that this state of mind helps the seeker to focus on his beloved.

¹ “Sama” is an assembly of Sufis in which they listen mystical poetry.

Spirituality is the core objective of Sufis and Sufism whose main dimensions, faith, belief, devotion, myth and concept of salvation are addressed in *Qawwali* programs. Moreover, the Sufi personality with divine revelation makes this assembly more sacred and a source of divine blessings due to the philosophy of Sufis’ mediatory role between man and God. *Qawwali* directs toward the spiritual path of Islam to attain proximity to God. It is a form of worship which fills the heart and soul with pure thoughts and intense love, and one who indulges himself in the love of God without any longing for a reward for the internal and external world has become *Sufi* (Qadiri, 2000).

The socio-economic changes and modernization have a great impact on the alteration of tradition in the entire world and particularly the twentieth century made remarkable changes in all aspects of life. The world has become a global village due to modern technologies and this is one of the core issues of development in each and everything. Now, popular *Qawwali* has an audience of many religions, and technological and social changes in its music turned it into the secular form of the ambience outside the Sufi *Khanqah* (Boyk, 2006). Media production has changed the scenario of *Qawwali*. Indian *Qawwali* style music has made a lot of alterations in traditional values and now in Pakistan, grand concerts of Sufi poetry by traditional *Qawwals* have closed the chapter of spirituality and ecstasy by *Qawwali*. In recent times, *Qawwali* gathering has become more secular; only at shrines do common people come for divine blessing and spiritual purpose. New technologies imposed a lot of changes in *Qawwali* music composition. The music industry has been involved in spreading *Qawwali* and Sufis’ poetry for the sack of their business and their keen interest in capital reward has altered religious aspects of this Sufi genre. No doubt, new ways of communication enhanced the number of listeners and performers but Sufi devotees believe that this attitude damaged the spirit of *Qawwali*.

Music is acceptable in Islam only on its moral grounds. Ali Hujwiri² wrote in his book *Kashf-ul-Mahjob*; that a man who said that he

² The great Sufi intellectual of 11th century, and author of one of the most important Sufi treatises, *Kashf-ul-Mahjob* whose shrine in Lahore is most popular tomb of the Punjab.

doesn't like music and poetry, is a liar or hypocrite or is not a human being (Hujwiri, 2010; Siddiqi, 2010) but it is not permitted, even in Chishtis, for the mundane and non-spiritual purpose (Taren, 1989). That is why, rapid alteration in *Qawwali* performance has become a burning issue among the Sufis and their followers; and people, adherent to the traditional values, are opposing new protocols of *Qawwali*. In recent days, the spiritual form of *Qawwali* is not available, and traditional *Qawwali* is dying and likely near to end due to socio-economic reasons. It is being replaced by highly mediated and commercialized non-spiritual actors, mixing *Qawwali* elements with eastern classical music and pop. This combination of inappropriate elements put the traditional *Qawwali* in trouble (Moini, 2004) and a lot of Chishti Sufis, due to substandard *Qawwali*, prohibited this ritual in their *Khanqahs* (Sufi lodges) because they think that modern forms do not have the spirit of spirituality which was the core objective of *Qawwali*. Only in a few Sufi shrines, nowadays, organizers and performers always bow their heads to the traditional values³ set by their ancestors whereas traditional *Qawwali* performance is going on by hereditary *Qawwals*⁴ (Qureshi, 1999). In South Punjab, the custom of traditional *Qawwali* is going on only at the shrine of Fariduddin Masud generally known as Baba Farid Ganj Shakar (d. 1265)⁵ where ancient Sufi poetry and traditional *Qawwali* are presented by hereditary performers. *Qawwali* performance is a male dominant part of Sufism; however, we could find the female presentation in this field to some extent too (Abbas, 2002).

Mystical poetry always influenced human beings and created a great impact on their lives, attitude, and beliefs. Sufi poetry throughout the Muslim world made Sufi saints immortal due to the deep penetration of their poetry among the masses. Jalaluddin Rumi (1207-1273), Saadi Shirazi (1210-1291) and Nuruddin Jami (1414-1492) were illustrious Sufi poets in the history of Sufism whose works inspired millions of people. Similarly, the

Sufi poets of Punjab are revered not only among the people of the sub-continent irrespective of religion but they are also very famous among historians, researchers and lovers of Sufi poetry in the entire world. Shah Hussain (1538-1599), Sultan Bahu (1630-1691), Bulge Shah (1680-1757), Waris Shah (1722-1798) and Khwaja Ghulam Farid (1845-1901) were revered Sufi poets of Punjab whose poetry is still very popular even after the passage of the centuries.

Poetry of both expressed the love of God and Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) as well as uncertainty and fragility of the world that stimulate the listeners towards real love (Love of God), spiritual emotions and purification of inner-self. Moreover, Farid interpreted the world as an illusion and presented the concept of an ideal man called '*Mard-e-Qalandar*' (Ahmad, 2003; Ameen, 2004; Faisal, 2003). However, the use of folk stories in their poetry of Farid to explain sincerity and faithfulness in love distinguishes him in folk festivals. He used a feminine accent, and '*Sassi*', a female character of the famous folklore '*Sassi Punnun*' of Sindh, was his favourite character (Khakwani, 2004) that produce a meaningful impact in consuming the theme of the text and motivated toward struggle against temporary worries (Alam, 2007; Jatoi, 2004; Tareen, 1989).

Methodology

In this research, qualitative method of content analysis and field observation, have been used to investigate the role of three leading Urdu and English newspapers' websites, Dawn, Nawa-i-Waqt, and Dunya, regarding the promotion of Sufism particularly Sufi folk festivals of Channan Pir and Khawaja Fareed in Pakistan. Two years period from January 2020 to December 2021 was selected for this study. The selection of the area of South Punjab for this study is the distinction of this region for Sufism across the country. The capital of South Punjab, Multan, known as the "City of Saints" and Uch, a city of ancient shrines, are very famous and well known among the devotees and

³ Imam Ghazali (great Islamic scholar and Sufi) wrote some points which are not allowed in *Qawwali* listening;

- 1) If singer is women or immature boy will be the cause of temptation towards them.
- 2) Music instrument like drum, flute etc which are not allowed in Islamic tradition.

3) Poetry which has vulgar language and derail the audience to the imagination of God.

4) If listener heart is overwhelmed by mundane love, *Qawwali* is prohibited at this condition (Sadiqi, 2010)

⁴ *Qawwali* singers and performers are called *Qawwals*.

⁵ He was illustrious Chishti Sufi of 13th century who founded first Chishti *Khanqah* of South Punjab in Pakpattan.

historians of Sufism. This research employs an analytical approach to describe the main aspects done in this work, and the aim of using this approach is to provide complete and valid information about our selected data.

Data Analysis and Discussion

In the present days of South Punjab of Pakistan, Sufi festivals of *Qawwali* are organized by several social and religious organizations with the collaboration of local administration, Sufi circles and industrial financiers in which famous *Qawwals*, Badar Miandad, Tabrez Aziz and Imran Aziz, sons of very famous *Qawwal* Aziz Mian, and Sher Ali and Mehr Ali performed. Hundreds of devotees attended programs; enjoyed Sufi poetry the whole night and danced in a state of ecstasy. This created a picture of divine bliss. Sufi descendants, Shah Mehmood, Hamid Saeed Kazmi and Mehbob Korea, deliver lectures about the importance of *Qawwali* and Sufism. It is obvious that Sufi saints disseminated the message of God by using *Qawwali* which converted millions of people to Islam, and the purpose of these celebrations is to promote Sufi teachings and practices.

In fact, during the last quarter of the 20th century, concerts of modern and famous *Qawwals* like Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan, Abida Parveen, Sabri Brothers and Aziz Mian transformed the theme of *Sama* and *Qawwali*. No doubt, Aziz Mian and Sabri brothers were very prominent *Qawwali* singers but it was Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan who gave boom to this Sufi genre. However, now, the art of *Qawwali* is in decline and its future in Pakistan has become a question mark after Nusrat, Ghulam Farid, and Aziz Mian who introduced *Qawwali* throughout the globe. There is no such artist as Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan, Aziz Mian and Sabri brothers, although, Badar Miandad, Sher Ali, Mehr Ali and the sons of Aziz Mian are trying to fill the gap. Nusrat used to say that he modernized *Qawwali* to encourage Pakistani youth toward Islam; "Tradition should not be seen as a dead thing. It is the responsibility of

musicians to make music for the people of their time" (Boyk, 2006 p. 25).

South Punjab of Pakistan which is a hub of Sufi saints where hundreds of shrines and lodges are a sign of the Sufi golden period, we can observe several Sufi activities in the region. Another important Sufi musical culture which is not generally in focus by researchers is Sufi folk festivals that are organized in the desert of South Punjab called the Cholistan adjacent to the Indian desert Rajasthan. One more interesting thing about these events is the duration of the festivals which is one week to two months in which Sufi music and poetry are remained in focus to highlight Sufi teachings and regional history associated with Sufi personalities. The Festival of Chanan Pir⁶ is one of the prominent Sufi festivals of the region and the biggest festival in Pakistan which is commemorated for up to seven nights each Thursday at the beginning of the spring season; commenced in February (Rizwan, 2005). Temporary cities and bazaars are settled where thousands of people come from Punjab and Sindh⁷ for purchasing and selling local goods and to enjoy gatherings of Sufi poetry and traditional cultural activities (Chaudhari, 2004). But the most famous event in the southern part of Punjab is the Khwaja Farid Rohi festival which is called a cultural and literary festival where local musical performances, folk dance, seminars, poetic symposiums, and dramas are held. This festival is held in Liaquatpur where people of Cholistan gather and friends meet each other which develops a particular community. In this event, reciting of Quran, '*Mehfil-e-Naat*⁸ and *Kafi*⁹', lectures of experts of '*Faridiyat*¹⁰', camel and horse race and dance to the beat of drums are part of the festivities. People enjoy fairness and learn about Sufi teachings from researchers of Sufi poetry (Khan, 2004).

Qawwali performers present famous poetry in Arabic, Persian and Urdu languages of Sufis of the entire Muslim world and focus on their theme of "the Unity of Being"; however, folk festivals performances concentrate on local revered Sufi

⁶ '*Chanan Pir*' (spiritual master who was brightened like the moon) of Bahawalpur district of Punjab was the prince of Hindu ruler of Jaisalmer state that was situated in Indian Rajasthan desert.

⁷ The province of Pakistan.

⁸ "*Mehfil-e-Na'at*" is a gathering for chanting praise songs of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH).

⁹ "*Kafi*" is a classical Sufi poetry of Punjab and Sindh. For detail see Sheikh (2011); page 81-95.

¹⁰ Research on Sufi poet Khwaja Ghulam Farid has become very prominent and due to its popularity and expansion it has become a discipline which is called *Faridiyat*.

poets, Sultan Bahu¹¹ and Khwaja Ghulam Farid¹², whose poetry has become a great source of inspiration for the local communities. Singers revealed Sufi stance and inner feelings about devotional love, mystical ideas, spiritual exposures, political instabilities and social problems. Even, Sufi circles and devotees sang their poetry in religious assemblies and Sufi gatherings for spiritual exercises. Their poetry has a message of asceticism and divine love and describes proximity to God as an aim of life. It stresses that inner purification is the only way to achieve the reality of life. Their poetry is inspired by the Sufi wisdom of Ibn-e-Arabi¹³, particularly by the doctrine of Wahdat-ul-Wujud (Unity of Being); even, Farid recognized Ibn-e-Arabi's philosophy as his spiritual guide (Javed, 2010; Qaisrani, 2003; Rizvi, 2004; Shackle, 2012).

Conclusion

The present form of the *Qawwali* inspires the folks in religious musical and cultural perspectives while the folk festivals focus mostly on social aspects like the teachings of equality, humanity, simplicity and harmony in the community which prompt love and respect for Sufis among the masses. Singers pay tributes to Sufi ideology, wisdom, and holiness, and declared the Sufi path the best approach for a successful life. Inspiring moral conduct, fabulous spiritual work and mystical poetry of Sufi saints have spread simplicity, humanity and sincerity in the society that induced love in the hearts of people irrespective of religion and race. Nowadays, the performance of mystical poetry with music, generally known as *Qawwali*, has combined the community for spiritual melody that also develops the beliefs and behaviour of listeners. *Qawwali* programs and gatherings diverted the seeker's attention toward the love of God and keep away them from communal activities of worldly pleasure. The performance of devotional poetry illustrates the supremacy of spiritualism with the message of divine revelation and constant belief in God. It also draws a holy picture of Sufi's extreme love and

¹¹ Sultan Bahu (1630-1691) was prominent mystic and philosopher of the seventeenth century whose poetry and literary work exerted a great impact on Sufism of South Punjab. It is said that he wrote 140 books but, nowadays, only thirty-one of them are available. All of his books except one, *Abyat-e-Bahu* that has local language poetry, are in the Persian

infinite trust in God with great heavenly reward and eternal rest that enhance enthusiasm and self-belief.

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language. He mainly dealt with the Islamic mysticism and its philosophy (Ali, 2010).

¹² Khwaja Ghulam Farid (1845-1901) was the most famous and influential Sufi poet of Saraiki language, especially in South Punjab (Sheikh, 2011), and he is very popular among Sufi folk artists.

¹³ The great Sufi mystic, poet and philosopher of 12th century.

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