



Sufism in Sindh: A critical review of “*Historical Dictionary of the Sufi Culture of Sindh in Pakistan and India*”

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BOOK REVIEW

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First published in 2015 by the Oxford University Press in Karachi, Pakistan, “Historical Dictionary of the Sufi Culture of Sindh in Pakistan and India”, is a publication of ‘Centre of Social Studies in Karachi series’, developed by the ‘Centre of Social Sciences in Karachi (CSSK)’. Authored by a published writer and editor, Michel Boivin, it is a commendable contribution to a field of study that has hitherto received less academic attention: *Ṣūfī culture and traditions of Sindh*. Based on 359 pages, the book is easy to follow and can easily grasp the attention of both laymen readers and scholars. Structurally, the book is arranged as follows: acknowledgements, list of entries, transliteration scheme, illustrations, maps, author’s note on transliteration, chronology, introduction, dictionary and bibliography.

Spending a considerable number of pages on writing the introduction of the book—68 pages to be exact—has allowed Boivin to spell out the complex social, religious, political and cultural contexts in which Ṣūfīsm, as found in Sindh, must be comprehended. Generally speaking, Ṣūfī concepts, many a time, differ in scholarly discourse and laymen practice. A Ṣūfī in theory will not be exactly indistinguishable to a Ṣūfī in practice. Irrespective of incommensurable similarities between the two, the former will, on several counts, differ from the later. Although this is not absolutely surmountable—giving convoluted practices, that can best be understood through experience only, certain linguistic attire, is in itself a mighty fallacy—however, Boivin’s academic training as a historian and an anthropologist helps to bridge this gap, evidence of which is thoroughly experienced while examining the book. This is to say, entries in the book have been elucidated using a dense framework of historical, linguistical and ethnographic research methods.

Boivin rightly argues that though it is not incorrect to look at Ṣūfīsm in Sindh from a broad lens of classical Ṣūfīsm, however, the greatest appreciation of the former can come only when it is understood in the regional and/or local contexts in which it has evolved over centuries. Hence, the entries in the dictionary have been documented with respect to both classical Ṣūfī and Ṣindhī Ṣūfī Weltanschauung, thereby retaining peculiarities and imbrications from both. In this fashion, readers are allowed to escape, as much as possible, the fallacy of limiting Ṣūfīsm within certain kinds of rigid boundaries. Boivin’s work liberates the meaning of Ṣūfīsm. He rightly mentions that Ṣūfīsm is not like a systematic phenomenon having definite starting or ending point. Rather, it is a complex reality in its own right.

This dictionary, in addition to the basic role every dictionary performs, provides an opportunity to serious readers to analyze how some words and phrases carry distinct connotations in different regional Ṣūfī contexts. One can compare multiple contextual meanings of a single word, and then explore their relationship to each other. Take the example of the phrase **Allāh Tohār** (roughly, *with the help of Allah*). Boivin mentions that the adherents of Miyāmwāl Ṭarīqat consider this phrase as the first pillar of religion and vocalize it prior to every action they perform. What he fails to mention, however, is that this very phrase occurs heavily in Ismā’īlī Khojki manuscripts and is also thought to be a unique textual feature in them. This failure should not mislead us; the greater merit of this dictionary lies in the fact that it has at least outlined such important phrases. It is quite possible that other religious communities might also have used this phrase. Hence, it will not be incorrect to state that each entry in this dictionary represents only the outermost surface of a deep field of study into which one can dive limitlessly. To put it in other words, Boivin’s work beautifully highlights the research vacuities in the field of study with which it is primarily concerned.

Irrespective of the fact that the book under our review has numerous merits, however, it must also be critiqued. The greatest problem of this dictionary is that albeit it acknowledges the complexity of the subject it deals with, nonetheless, it simultaneously under(mis)represents it on several counts. As far as the scope and content of this dictionary is concerned, it is not far stretched. Though the dictionary contains around 750 entries (some, of course, differing in names only), however, many crucial terms like Hussaini, Khojki etc., which one expects to encounter while studying Ṣūfīsm in Sindh, are lacking in the dictionary. Significant terms and phrases which are missing in the current edition can possibly be incorporated when a new edition of this book is published. It is quite evident from the caliber of the text of the book that it is a work by an orientalist, who has spent only a limited amount of time with the relevant communities. It appears that sometimes merely a detached observation has been made about a subject of enquiry. In fact, some claims made in this dictionary are neither reasonable nor acceptable.

For instance, on p. 78, Boivin writes that the current Ismāʿīlī Imām (Aga Khan IV) has minimized the Indian Ismāʿīlī tradition. Such baseless stances can only be taken by an outsider lacking access to proper community materials. Shāh Karīm, the present Aga Khan, has never minimized the Indian Ismāʿīlī tradition. Rather, in his *Farmāns* to his community of the Indian subcontinent and its diaspora, he has often expressed a deep sense of concern for the preservation of the Indian Ismāʿīlī traditions, especially the *gināns*. Having said that, even if Boivin has made the aforementioned remarks on the basis of the lack of academic works by Institute of Ismaili Studies (IIS), London, on the Satpanth (literally, true path) tradition, then too, they are highly misleading and must be rectified.

Moreover, Boivin's work rarely challenges preestablished research. For example, like many other scholars, he looks at the similarities between Ismāʿīlīsm and Ṣūfīsm, ignoring many important differences. It generally appears that scholars (in particular orientalists) find it more challenging to look at the differences between interdependent religious traditions. It is worth mentioning on this juncture that the information provided in this dictionary should be used with utmost caution.


I also recommend to the publishers of this dictionary that in case a new edition is ever released, the author should surely be asked to revise and rectify some pieces of information. Revisions and rectifications are required seriously. For example, the Ismāʿīlī practice of *Satī Mā Jo Rojo* (literally, the fast of Satī) is now called *Shāh Mawlā Jo Rojo* (literally, the fast of the Lord). Another example is that Boivin's view that Ismāʿīlīs worship *Amīr Pīr* is an oversimplification of a much more complex understanding that the concerned community has of the site of *Amīr Pīr*. Nevertheless, in the line of growing scholarship, which attests *Ṣadar al-Dīn* as one of the earliest poets of Sindhi language, Boivin's point of view that no Sindhi poetry can be attributed to Ismāʿīlī *Pīrs*, is by no means plausible. This alludes to the point that Boivin has not referred to the *Khojki* manuscripts which are the main sources preserving the poetry of the Ismāʿīlī *Pīrs*.

Last, but by no means the least, it must be admitted that "Historical Dictionary of the Sufi Culture of Sindh in Pakistan and India", despite all of its serious shortcomings, is a praiseworthy effort by Michel Boivin in a field which has not been viewed extensively from the scholarly lens. The publisher must be praised for making such a brilliant piece available at economical rates (around PKR. 1500). It is hoped that scholars will make best use of this publication to produce more like these in the years to come.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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