

# DEVOTION

## AND ICONOGRAPHY:

### THE FIGURES OF POPULAR PIETY IN THE INDUS VALLEY



Shop selling posters etc.

One of the first things a foreign traveller observes in Pakistan is the dynamism of pictorial production. Pictures are everywhere: on walls, on trucks, on buses... Books, and even documentary films have been devoted to this genre of public art.

This paper though, focuses on a more controversial specificity: the popular iconography related to devotion. The use of the word 'devotion' is meaningful and it will not be restricted to the Sufi image. Other forms of devotion, such as Shia devotion or Hindu devotion will also be included. Crossing the so-called religious barrier seems to be the better way to evaluate the iconographical legacy of the province of Sindh; knowing that it mirrors the diversity and the treasures enshrined in its culture and history.

The topic of devotional iconography did not deserve much attention. In South Asia, one can find many publications on the Mughal or Rajput Miniatures but popular iconography is not seen as a fine art. This paper therefore wishes to give a brief introduction to this popular art. The first part will be devoted to general information related to the perception and the creation of these images. The second will introduce the main figure of the posters of the wise man, in the form of the Sufi. However, due to paucity of data and the complexity of the question, one cannot find definitive statements on these matters.

Usually the specialists do not even use the word 'iconography' for coining the posters. It looks like this word was to be used only for 'noble' art. From Grecian origin, the word 'icon' only means an image. Iconography is consequently the study of various figurative representations. Although in Pakistan one could also find it on trucks as well as on some rickshaws, the most common shape of popular iconography is the poster on paper. It is interesting to note that contrary to miniatures, there is no precise and unique word used for this production. Pierre Centlivres and Micheline Centlivres-Demont use the word 'stamp' (French *estampe*) with the meaning of 'printing



on paper' (Centlivres et Centlivres-Demont 1997: 11). In Pakistan, different words are used for the stamps: *manzara*, *taswir* or *sindri*. The most common word is nevertheless *poster-e-dini*, or religious stamps (prints).

The stamps are chromolithographies on paper, with different formats ranging from 7 x 5 cm up to 80 x 62 cm. The most common format is however 20 x 25 cm. The different sizes of the posters come from the different uses. The smallest are to be kept in the pocket, while the middle range ones are to be hung on walls at home. Most of them are produced in Punjab, and a few in Sindh. *Dargahs* are the main places around where a few shops sell such posters. There are also specialized shops in different bazaars of Karachi, like Jodia Bazaar, which mainly sells different kinds of Quranic calligraphies, footprints of Prophet Muhammad (pbuh), representations of Mecca, and other sacred places of Islam. These shops mainly sell non-figurative stamps. In South Asia, it is to be noted that the stamps are often used with the narration of the storytellers. In Peshawar for instance, they are sold in





the Qissa Khwani Bazaar, which is the bazaar of the storytellers (Centlivres et Centlivres-Demont 1977: 17). Another interesting point is how people react when asked these questions. They state that these are not real representations but only products of the imagination.

It is difficult to know the origin of the figurative representations because industrial processes now produce them. Nobody seems to know where the models and patterns come from, or when they appeared in the market. In the French colonies of North Africa, it is probably due to the influence of the famous Images d'Epinal.<sup>3</sup> In Turkey and in Egypt, popular iconography is said to have appeared in the markets at the end of the 19th century, although their mass production really began in the 1940s. In the Indian subcontinent, it is possible that the production developed with the coming of the first press. Lithography appeared in Karachi in 1853, but there is no evidence that it was also used for printing these posters.

In his work on the mystical imagery of Algeria, Zaim Khenchelaoui put forward the hypothesis that these posters can also be understood as an indigenous resistance against colonization. The French governor of Sub-Saharan Africa (Khenchelaoui 2005:14) forbade them in 1908. Though nothing allows us to draw a comparison with South Asia, there is another important query: was the *poster-e dini* influenced by European religious figures? In the second half of the 19th century, the Christian missionaries distributed many pictures of Jesus, and other Christian religious figures. It is possible that the indigenous posters were printed in response to this challenge. A sharp study of the composition of the representation would be necessary to go further.

It is true that figurative representations are condemned in Islam, not by the Quran but by some *Hadiths*. This interdiction was nevertheless twisted by the miniaturisation: this process meant that the real was not created, not even represented as such. Miniatures were mostly a profane activity, although there are different samples where the Mughal emperors are

drawn in the company of Sufis. However, it does not seem that a real miniature tradition has developed in Sindh, even if some Sufi masters used to be pictured before the advent of photography.<sup>4</sup> The closest miniature production was in the princely state of Kutch. The *raes* (wealthy) of Kutch used to be represented, but in the typical Mughal posture of the half-length portrait. Moreover, as we will see, the stamps of popular iconography do not follow this pattern.

On the other hand, it is well known that the cult of the icons is a main feature of Hindu devotion. In Sindh, popular iconography appears for instance in some *pathis*, or booklets published in the 19th century. They were usually related to religious or folkloric topics, such as the story of *Sassi and Pannu*, and also local deities like Udero Lâl. The pictures look to be drawn only for decorating the first page of the booklet. No color is used, and the drawing of the character is done in a typical naïve style.

It is finally to be noted that vision is a key concept of Hinduism. The darshan of the deities "*brings good fortune, well-being, grace and spiritual merit to the devotees, especially if they go to the temple early in the morning just after the deities have woken up*" (Fuller 1992: 59). It is believed that the deities also see the

Lithography



followers. In Hindu iconography, Shiva is in particular often represented with a third eye in the center of his forehead, from which his terrific powers flow. There is, to a lesser extent, a concept of vision, or *didar*, in some Islamic traditions like Ismailism, Bohraism and Sufism. But this is the interior vision, the spiritual organ by which one can be taught the esoteric knowledge from a master.

Signs - in either script form or poster form - nowadays



saturate big cities. Moreover, political leaders in Pakistan use photography as a political instrument. Every rally organized by the MQM shows big posters of its leader Altaf Husain. Some Shia communities also use the portraits of their religious leaders, like the Aga Khan - the leader of the Ismailis, or the Syedna - the leader of the Bohras. Consequently, though it is not possible to trace the origin of devotional iconography, it is obvious that it appeared and developed in a context where figurative images were everywhere. Around the *dargahs*, the popular stamps are sold with other objects, like necklaces or bangles, as well as amulets. It is then obvious that the representation of the saint is supposed to help and to protect. It is believed by some that as a saint, God chose him, and that through his mediation the disciple is protected. Buying a stamp also means to be pious.

Every representation is personified by a specific posture and gesture. Pierre Centlivres qualifies the aesthetics used in the stamps as "realistic-naïve" (Centlivres and Centlivres-Demont 1997: 17). In some cases, the posters seem to have been reproduced from photos. Thanks to the new techniques of printing, including offset, some pictures have been modified through different processes. Consequently, the variations

related to a single picture can be countless.

In the pose of a wise man or a learned man, is by far the most common picture. It can be found in a number of representations, but it is most of the time suitable for Sufis. It is to be noticed that some Sufi masters now sell their own photos instead of the traditional posters. In the bazaar of Sehwan, one can buy pictures of Nader Ali Shah, the *zinda pîr* of the Pathan Kâfi. One of the

oldest images is in Sehwan Sharif: it is lithography of Lal Shahbaz Qalandar. It is interesting because this representation looks like a miniature, although it is not possible to know when it was drawn, but probably at the beginning of the 20th century. The saint is praying on a prayer rug with a rosary in his hands and his white beard informs us that he is old. The inscription at the bottom of the colorless picture states that he is Hazrat Sakhi Shahbaz Qalandar. Interestingly,

the present representations of Lal Shahbaz Qalandar are quite different in composition. It is possible to understand that this picture could be seen as a kind of transition between the Miniature school of drawing, and the popular iconography as it is presently known in Sindh.

There is a lot of variety on the representations of the master of knowledge. He is usually a Sufi saint, although we can also find some Hindu deities or heroes, with a great number of them linked to the Sikh tradition. Among the Sufis, there are usually three basic elements: the central character, a building, being most of the time his *dargah*, and finally scriptures. All the scenes are strongly colored in blue, green, yellow or red. The other elements (which we will call the secondary elements), are used to identify a specific tradition to which the Sufi is attached.

One can note that there is a variety of Islamic referents. The Quran can be seen in a poster of Mohammad Haji Ganj Bakhsh. The saint is praying, with the Sacred Book on his knees, while he is looking at Sain Pir Rahman, who looks to be his main follower. The most common posture of the Sufis is nevertheless to stay kneeled down with the rosary in the hands. Other basic elements of the poster are the Kaaba in Mecca and the green dome of the Prophet's mosque - *Masjid-e-Nabvi* in Madina. Among the scriptures, there are two categories: the first allows us to know the identity of the saint, and the second category is made of religious sentences, mostly borrowed from the Quran. The *shabada*, or *kalima*, is by far the most important. Others are limited to interjections like "Ya Allah" or "Ya Muhammad" (pbuh).

It is possible to draw a typology while considering different topics. The Sufis on the posters are more or less famous in the country. The famous Sufis of Punjab are usually pictured in a standard and rigorous mood. Baba Farid Ganj Shakar and Imam Bari Sarkar are located on the left side, kneeling down with the rosary in their hands, while their *dargahs* are on the right side of the poster. Although these pictures are strong in color, one can note that the simplicity of the representation contrasts with other more recent posters. This second category is by far the most in number. Pir Meher Ali Shah is represented sitting on a prayer rug, with the rosary in his hands and a somewhat mysterious smile. The picture is divided in two equal parts: he stands on the right, while





his *dargah* of Gotara Sharif is on the left.

In some cases, the descendants, who are the present *sajjada nashins*, surround the Sufi saint. For example, Sultan Bahoo (1631-1691 A.D.) is represented with *sajjada nashin* Pir Tariqat Hazrat Mahmud Amir Sultan, as well as others among his successors. In the same mood, some posters depict a complete narrative on the saint and his family. The whole composition of the poster is meaningful: it looks like an act of appropriation by the heirs. Who are finally the persons who manage and control the printing of the posters? Is there any copyright? In this case, it is obvious that the heirs of Sultan Bahoo use the posters to inform people, and to prove to some extent, that they are the ones in charge of the pilgrimage center.

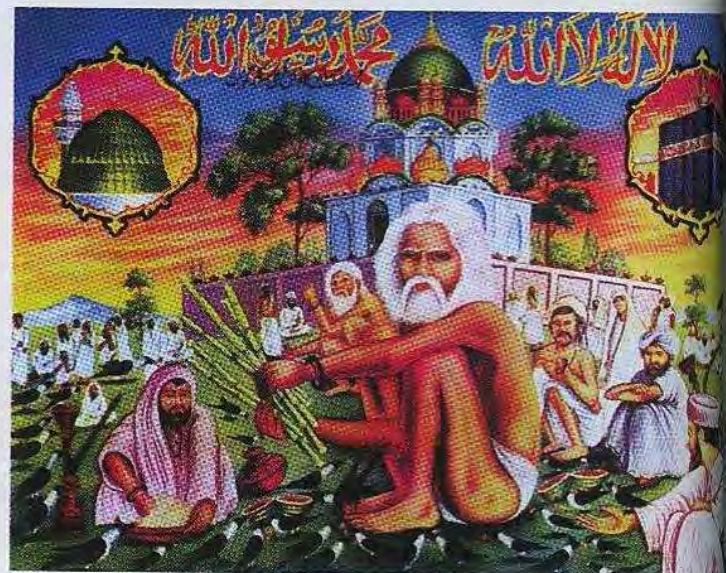
Another very popular poster picture, Ghaus Pak (the sacred refuge), is also known as Ghaus ul Azam (the great refuge). It is a *laqab* for Abdul-Qadir Jilani (d. 1166), one of the most famous Sufi saints of the whole Muslim world. Interestingly, he is the only non South Asian Sufi saint to be pictured. In the 12th century, he was the founder of the *Qadiriyya Silsila*, which is up to now the most powerful Sufi brotherhood all

thanks to his *karamaat*, a boat emerged from the sea with all the passengers miraculously safe. Abdul Qadir Jilani lived in Baghdad on the Tigris, but the river could be understood by his followers as the Ganga or the Indus.

Two posters are more difficult to categorize. The common element is that the saints are represented almost naked, like Sayyid Lal Badshah or Kanwanwali Sarkar. Sayyid Lal Badshah is clean shaven and he is very thin: one can see his bones. The landscape behind him is that of high mountains, while a lion is sitting at his feet. Kanwanwali Sarkar from Gujrat has long white hair and he is feeding crows that surround him.<sup>6</sup> The almost naked Sufis remind us of the Shivaite tradition in which nudity is a key symbol of renunciation. The absorption of Hindu elements shows to what extent the Sufi tradition was indigenized. The integration of these elements never distorted the Islamic message embedded in Sufism, but it allows the Sufis to deliver a message, which could be properly understood by the local inhabitants, knowing it was expressed with symbols they are used to dealing with. Another difficult question arises: why have some famous



'Timeless conclave' of 57 Sufi saints



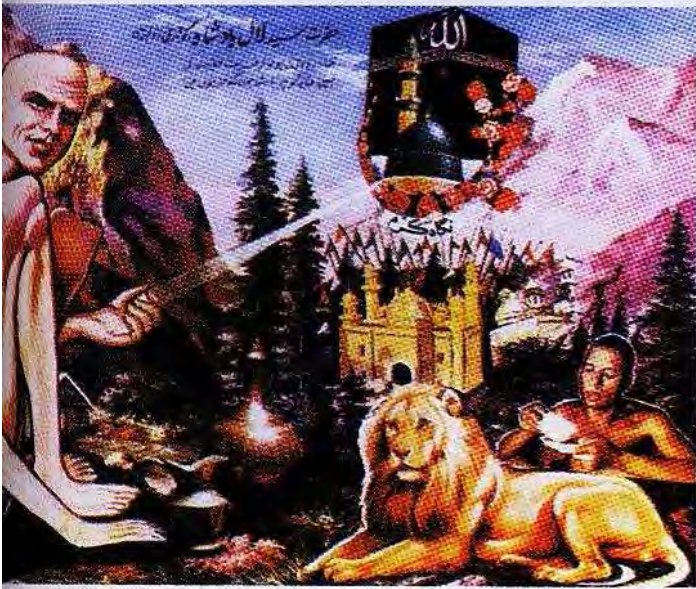
Sain Kanwanwali, the 'saint of the crows' (Gujrat)

over the Muslim world. Many South Asian Muslim communities, like for example the Memons, are said to have been converted by a descendant of Abdul Qadir Jilani who settled in India. Although there are different pictures that always depict the miracle in which, according to legend,

Sufi saints not been represented at all, while others are; either by virtue of unique posters, which are always the same, while some others are represented by different posters. For the first case, it could be that the managers of the shrines do not allow drawing a picture of the saints. For the second and



the third questions, the answer could be in the study of two cases that will allow us to form a hypothesis: Shah Abdul Latif Bhattai and Lal Shahbaz Qalandar. There is only one picture of Shah Abdul Latif. He is sitting on a prayer carpet under a big tree (it is not possible to see if it is a very big tree or two separate trees). The scene seems to be on an island, because it is surrounded by water with many lotus flowers. Near him on the left side is the *tanburo*, the stringed instrument he created. On the bottom, there is the *shabada* in big letters, colored red, and "Madina mubarak" written below on the left side. On the right is the Kaaba. I could not identify the cupola that stands just below the *shabada* though according to the poster tradition it should be Shah Latif's *dargah*. If that is the case, it could represent an old *dargah* because the present one does not look like this: the cupola is not green but white. The architecture can be coined as 'Sindhi style', while on the poster, the cupola is in a more neutral style. Finally yet importantly, the most surprising is Shah Latif's posture: he is sitting on the prayer rug, but his legs are crossed, which is a very uncommon posture in the Sufi posters. He is said to have travelled with the company of Kanphata Yogis. Therefore, could it be a reminiscence of



The ascetic Qalandar saint Baba Lal Shah (Muree hills)

a yoga posture?

The case of Lal Shahbaz Qalandar is quite different. Every year, it is possible to find a new poster in the bazaar of Sehwan Sharif. Due to the popularity of his *ziyarat*, one is allowed to think that there is a big need, and that the publishers

want to satisfy the different tastes of the clients. One of the specificities of The Qalandar's posters is that they utter a narrative related to his most famous acts, some of them being miracles attributed to him. The two main features are his flight and his dance. Usually, Lal Shahbaz stands on the right, either praying on a rug with the rosary in his hands, or praying with the Quran on his knees. On the left side, and in a smaller size, he is shown dancing or/and flying through the air. The most current inscription is "*dama dam mast qalandar*" - a chant that was popularized by a song in the 1960s.

Another very popular composition in Sindh represents Lal Shahbaz Qalandar with Shah Abdul Latif and a saint from Badin wearing a typical Sindhi ajrak. Only the name of Lal Shahbaz is inscribed, although the *dargah* of Shah Latif is pictured in the background. The three saints are nevertheless represented with the same format. The last composition, which appears in 2005, shows Lal Shahbaz with Bodlo Bahar.<sup>7</sup> Could it be that the *sajjada nashin* (heir) of Bodlo Bahar's *dargah*, maybe the one to order this new composition.

A few shops specializing in *poster-e-dini* can be found on the bazaar of Sehwan Sharif. Sufi posters are mixed with the Shia ones. In one of them, I could find the *dargah* of

Moinuddin Chishti of Ajmer. One can note that the circulation of the posters through India and Pakistan is limited, while a majority of Shia posters come from Iran or are reprinted in Pakistan.

Among the different Hindu communities in Sindh, it is obvious that iconography is an ancient tradition. The paintings can be on paper, textiles or even on walls. Udero Lal is mainly represented with two positions: in his youth as an equestrian, and as a wise man when he was elderly. However, in Hindu religion, the worship of the representation (*smrti*) of the deity is a main practise of the faith. Here, the images are icons. Pictorial representation plays a secondary role in the worship. In fact, the statue is the most important and 'best' representation of the god. Like in ancient Egypt, the statue of the god is regularly taken out in processions through the city, so that the followers can see it.

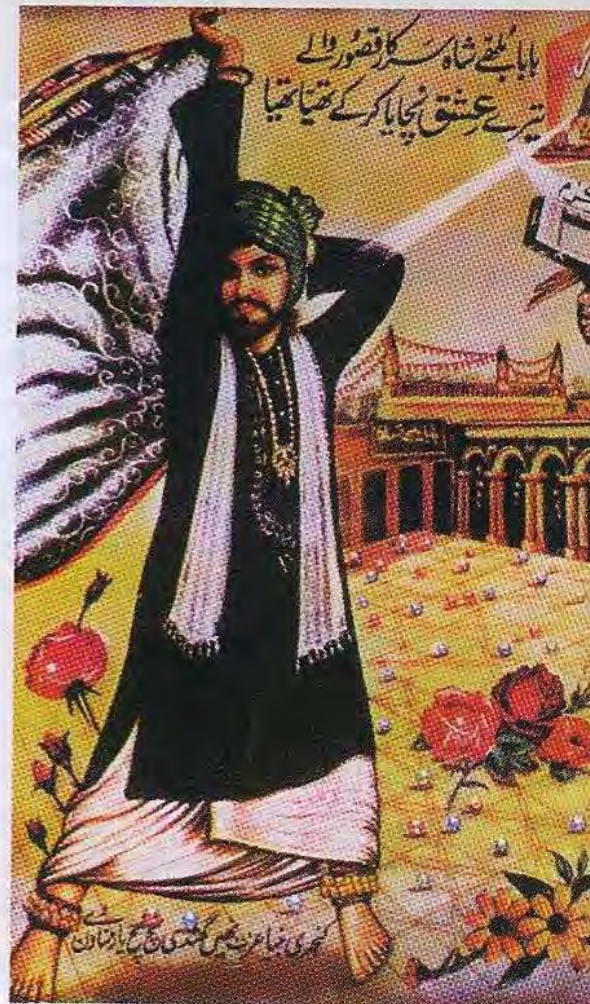
Two other Hindu pictures are very close to Udero Lal as an equestrian: Ramdeo Pir and Pithoro Pir. These two deities, like Udero Lal, are also worshipped in Rajasthan and Gujarat.



Like in the case of Abdul Qadir Jilani, one can note slight changes in the representations. They are related to the color used, but also to the background which is either a landscape or a walled city. The "divinized heroes", as Chris Fuller calls them, were obviously historical figures, who were Hindus or Muslims. The case of Pithoro Pir is very significant. According to the official tradition related by the present pir, he was a Muslim Sufi who was initiated by the famous saint Bahauddin Zakariya. Even if some Muslims can now be numbered among his followers, his disciples are mainly from the Meghwar community.

This brief paper is devoted to popular iconography as an expression of piety, but we notice that many areas remain ignored, as up to now these posters are not understood as a cultural or artistic production. Beyond the expression of the devotion, it is obvious that popular iconography reflects the way by which groups or communities utter a discourse on them, and while doing this they convey their status inside the local society. This discourse is uttered according to local aesthetic rules, which are usually shared by both Muslims and Hindus. It should be remembered that Hindu artisans could work for Muslim patrons, and Muslim artisans could work for Hindu patrons. A detailed study will be conducted later on the secondary elements like the animals, the attributes, the inscriptions... It is therefore not surprising to find common symbols, colors, and even topics. It seems however that the main distinction between the two traditions comes from the function attributed to the posters. In Sufi and Shia contexts, the picture is a support for piety and devotion. It is obvious that there is also a magical power attributed to the Sufi saint and to the Imam who are supposed to protect and heal the people. Though we can observe a great variety of roles given to the pictures, they obviously have patterns in common rather than real icons. They were probably more influenced by European pious imagery than by the Mughal tradition of Miniature Paintings. The scenes described in the posters usually depict both daily religious practises, like prayers, and extraordinary actions performed by the saint, like miracles. This dual function allows the followers to look for the mundane as well as the celestial world.

Images courtesy: Michel Boivin



Baba Bulhe Shah dancing in rapture (Kasur)

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