

ARTISANS, SUFIS, SHRINES: COLONIAL ARCHITECTURE IN NINETEENTH CENTURY PUNJAB. By HUSSAIN AHMAD KHAN. pp. 210. London, I.B. Tauris, 2015.
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Arts, crafts and Sufism occupy an important place in the political imagination of 'liberal Pakistan'. They offer cultural complexity, a celebration of beauty, and above all a sense of historical rootedness at a time when such values are beginning to crumble under the combined onslaught of Gulf-style consumerism and religious fundamentalism. For many Pakistanis, a Saudi-inspired and transnational neo-Islam already provides an identity that needs no history and local specificity. Their country is 'al-Bakistan' (there is no letter 'P' in the language of the Holy Qur'an), as faux Arabic bumper stickers proudly proclaim. For the 'liberals' in contrast, preserving the historic and the local has moved to the very centre of self-expression. Feeling largely excluded from mainstream politics they revel in cultural activities, from reviving Sufi poetry and song to cataloguing and protecting historic monuments. The National College of Art (NCA) in Lahore is an institutional bastion of this sensibility, and its history stands at the very heart of Hussain Ahmad Khan's original and suggestive book.

Contemporary cultural politics is not Hussain Ahmad Khan's stated topic – in fact his account rarely goes beyond the late nineteenth century when the NCA was first established as the Mayo School of Arts – but his larger argument scarcely makes sense without reference to the present.

The Sufis of Punjab, Hussain Ahmad Khan posits, were leaders of anti-colonial resistance, first militarily and later, after the British had taken control, culturally. They were also major patrons of arts and craftsmanship, with close connection between certain artisan families and Sufi Saints. The work of these artisans, therefore, was inseparable from a spiritual dimension, which can be decoded and 'read' through an analysis of Sufi architecture. The British, in contrast, had an 'Utilitarian', 'positivist' and 'scientific' approach to arts and crafts, which they sought to impose on local culture through institutions like the Mayo School, as well as through prize exhibitions, and museums. They failed. Local craftsmen, guided by their Sufi beliefs, did not easily succumb to such Western impositions but retained their spiritual artisanal practice.

This is an inversion of the standard narrative about Sufis and their culture. More often than not, they have been regarded as accommodating, pietist and peaceful – representing the kind of Islam which Westerners would love to do business with. This is precisely one of the reasons why violent Jihadists bomb Sufi shrines and Sufi gatherings as part of their war against the West, and why Islamic identities that draw strength and persuasiveness from their juxtaposition to the West have tended to take a very negative view of Sufism and everything associated with it. Hussain Ahmad Khan's account reverses this standard validation. On the back of his history, 'liberals' can celebrate the Sufis with a sense of pride in Muslim self-determination and a clear anti-colonial conscience. The Sufis, and not the shrine-destroying Jihadists have been the true champions of Muslim identity, the true resisters to the encroachments of Westernisation. Khan revels in a delicious historical irony unlikely to be lost on contemporary Pakistani readers, when he points out that the British, like radical Islamic extremists today, deliberately destroyed shrines to crush the spirit of their opponents.

These are bold arguments — and considering Pakistan's current woes — politically important ones. But do they stand up to the standards of scrupulous scholarship? There is no doubt that Khan is an accomplished historian. His chapters on the debates surrounding the establishment of the Mayo School of Arts, and of colonial exhibitions and museums, is solidly based on archival work, attentive to nuances and discrepancies in the record and in synch with much of the contemporary literature. This is not necessarily always the case when it comes to his discussion of the Sufis, however,

around which his larger argument is built. Here, Khan relies almost exclusively on secondary sources, and not always the latest and most sophisticated ones. K. A. Nizami's outdated and contentious suggestion that the Chishti Sufi order was inherently anti-colonial is accepted without criticism. More generally, evidence for the Sufi's alleged role as anti-colonial freedom fighters relies on a cherry-picking of examples and conjecture more than a historian should normally be comfortable with. The notion of the militant Sufi is as misleading as a generalisation as the notion of the 'quietist' one.

Overshadowing solid work on colonial education policy with an under-supported claim about Sufism limits the overall persuasiveness of this book. The subtlety and quality of the scholarship on colonial debates about arts and crafts is lost by reducing a great diversity of opinions to crude and misleading categories of 'science', 'Utilitarianism' and 'positivism' which are primarily required in order to make the depiction of the Sufis as anti-colonial heroes work. Khan himself is clearly aware that men like Lockwood Kipling (Rudyard's father and principal of the Mayo School) cannot be easily squeezed into some form of textbook post-colonialism. Kipling realised very quickly that the emphasis on art theory demanded by some colonial educationists did very little to enhance an already very accomplished craft practice in Lahore. The 'Orientalist' tradition in its many forms was always much more powerful in Punjab than in other parts of India, exemplified by men like G. W. Leitner, Kipling's contemporary, who is not mentioned in the book.

The all important link between the artisans and the Sufis throws up some intriguing questions of its own. It is unsurprising, that shrine architecture would include references to the ideological world of the Sufis, as Khan demonstrates with the help of close art-historical readings. But does this also prove that the artisans who built and decorated the shrine were themselves part of a Sufi worldview in more than a very general sense? They would have also made other artifacts – mosques, townhouses, furniture, household goods, funded by other kinds of patrons? Such possibilities are too easily overlooked based on the assumption that only the Sufis somehow represented the true Islamic spirit in times when political power lay with non-Muslims. On several occasions Khan posits connections rather than establishes them, often on the basis of general literature about Sufism or general geographic sources like Gazetteers or local histories. What would be required to make this argument stick are detailed family histories and concrete case studies. There are short but important references to interviews with artisans themselves. They should have been more substantial. There is a potential gold mine of information that proper oral history techniques could have unlocked to provide a much more solid foundation to Khan's observations.

All considered, this is a book that historians of Punjab ought to read — not the least because it advances our knowledge about one of Lahore's most well-loved and important institutions. To deploy history like this as a weapon in Pakistan's culture wars is a more tricky business. No doubt, arguments need to be punchy and simple to reach a wider audience and Hussain Ahmad Khan's take on the Sufis undoubtedly fits the bill. But then one could argue that the real political value of history lies in its demonstration that reality is infinitely rich and nuanced, particularly when the task is to confront an enemy that belongs to who the great art historian Jacob Burckhardt once called the 'terrible simplifiers'. <Markus.Daechsel@rhul.ac.uk>

MARKUS DAECHSEL
Royal Holloway, University of London.