Constructing Islam on the Indus

This book deals with the medieval history of Islam in the Indus Valley, bringing to light a previously hidden narrative of dialogue and contestation among Isma'ili and Imamiyah Shiites, Sufis and Sunnis. It represents the first serious consideration of Shi'a esotericism in material and architectural terms, as well as of pre-modern conceptions of religious plurality in rituals and astrology. The author undermines the received narrative of Shi'ism, and particularly of Isma'ilism in the area being marginalized by Sunnism by the thirteenth century, and shows its continued existence in the guise of Sufism. This is an argument that has often been stated but never before demonstrated in such a fulsome way, and certainly not by claiming that an Isma'ili–Shi'a–Sufi polity continued to exist well into the Mughal times.

Sufism has long been reckoned to have connections to Shi'ism, but without any concrete proof. The book shows this connection in light of current scholarly works on the subject, historical sources, and most importantly, metaphysics and archaeological evidences. The monuments of the Suhrawardi Order, which are derived from the basic lodges set up by Pir Shams in the region, constitute a unique building archetype. The book's greatest strength lies in its archaeological evidence and the metaphysical commonalties between Shi'ism/Isma'ilism and the Suhrawardi Sufi Order, both of which complement each other. In addition, working on premise and supposition, certain re-analysed historical periods and events in Indian Muslim history serve as added proof for the author's argument.

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Constructing Islam on the Indus

The Material History of the Suhrawardi Sufi Order, 1200–1500 AD

Hasan Ali Khan

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Dedicated against Falsehood…

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Foreword

In their rapid spread across Asia, Africa and southern Europe from the seventh century CE, Muslims came to work with many local cultures and local religious traditions. Often, Muslims came to express their faith through these local cultures, using local myths and local idioms to express their meaning. At other times, they might work closely with local traditions, fashioning a multi-faith harmony. Sufis were usually at the forefront of the process of interaction; their success was, to a large extent, measured by the number of local supporters they could attract. Theoretical underpinning for the process was found in Ibn al-'Arabi's idea of *wahdat al-wujud* (the unity of being) which spread rapidly from the thirteenth century. At times, the shari'a-minded found fault with these local expressions of Islam, declaring them to be *shirk* or rejections of the oneness of God. But the shari'a-minded were relatively few and local expressions of Islam were usually powerfully intertwined with local social and political power. For the greater part of Muslim history, Islam was expressed through local cultures and in harmony with them.

From the eighteenth century, the manner of Muslim engagement with local religious traditions came increasingly to be challenged. The source was the great movement of revival and reform which spread throughout the Islamic world, its main starting points being the teaching of Muhammad Ibn 'Abd al-Wahhab (1703–1792) in Arabia and Shah Wali Allah (1703–1762) in South Asia. Among the targets of this movement were all forms of behaviour that could be interpreted as challenging the oneness of God: the worship of trees or stones, the following of customs which had no sanction in Islamic law. A common battleground was behaviour at saints' shrines; no one should behave

in a way which suggested they were worshipping the saint. At its extreme, the movement of reform became opposed to Sufism itself. Debates about the interpretation of Ibn al'Arabi became more frequent. Reformed Islam became increasingly exclusive rather than inclusive. The process of reform, in various manifestations, has continued down to the present.

Hasan Ali Khan is concerned to lay before us the world of inclusive and pluralistic religious practice which existed in the Indus Valley up to recent times. He tells us how Isma'ili *da'is*, who were helped by Fatimid power to enter Sind and the Multan region, came to work with Suhrawardi Sufis to create a *Satpanthi*, or 'True Path', tradition of worship including Sunnis, Shi'as, Hindus and Christians. Their inclusive purpose was demonstrated in the site plans and original designs of buildings of the Suhrawardi Order in Multan and Uch. He uncovers for our attention a distinctive building archetype, which the Pakistani awqaf department would have appeared to have tried to conceal by remodelling, which had entrances for different faiths, that from the north, for instance, being reserved for Hindus. Further examples of inclusiveness in the archetype lie in its decoration: the Shi'a panjatas concealed from common view in the upper storey of the tomb of the Suhrawardi saint, Rukn-e-'Alam, at Multan; the Latin cross niches in the Surkhposh *khanqah* at Uch; the snake, symbolic perhaps of the close connections Jahangasht had with Hindu yogis, which curls round the tiles in the mihrab of his *khanqah*; and the Hindu trishul placed on top of the tomb at Multan of Ali Akbar, who was both a Suhrawardi Sufi and an Isma'ili *da'i*. Hasan 'Ali Khan expounds and interprets for us an extraordinary record of pluralistic religious practice.

A range of attributes was required to bring this work to fruition: the capacity to read Isma'ili *ginans*; knowledge of Isma'ili and Suhrawardi thought; an architect's eye, and the author has had an architect's training, to interpret building design and decoration. Beyond this, there are two particular attributes. The first is a real understanding of astrology and the ability to relate it to architecture, site plans and religious practice. Post-Enlightenment scholars have long-dismissed astrology. Hasan Ali Khan, however, belongs to the growing band of modern scholars who give it full weight because that was the practice of the people of the pre-modern world whom they study. The second is the importance of a curious and open mind willing to follow the evidence into whatever unsuspected channels it might go. The outcome is a book, which may have aspects with which not everyone will agree, but which, nevertheless, makes a powerful case for the existence of inclusive Islamic practices in the Indus Valley over many hundreds of years, practices which were so different

from the religiously exclusive, indeed increasingly Sunni, practices of modern Pakistan. This is a major contribution to the history of the Indus Valley and also to the history of Islam in South Asia before the great movement of revival and reform had its impact.

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Preface

This book is an adaptation of the author's doctoral thesis, *Shi'a-Isma'ili Motifs in the Sufi Architecture of the Indus Valley 1200-1500* (London, 2009), which deals with the connections between Isma'ilism and the Suhrawardi Sufi Order in the middle Indus region, or rather what is now the southern Punjab region of Pakistan. In academia, Sufism has long been reckoned to have connections to Shi'ism, but without concrete proof. Quite simply, the book shows this generally hidden connection by examining current scholarly work on the subject, historical sources, and most importantly, metaphysics and archaeological evidence.

Something special happened in Multan and Uch eight centuries ago, around the time when the Mongol invasions devastated the Middle East and Central Asia. Large-scale migration from these areas swelled the numbers of Isma'ilis, and the various Sufi denominations, that pre-existed here. One such Sufi order was the Suhrawardi, which had previous connections with Isma'ilism in Iraq. In Multan and later in Uch, the Suhrawardi Order secretly collaborated with Isma'ili missionaries on a model of religious transcendentalism. In Isma'ilism this model was known as the Satpanth, or True path. The Satpanth is based on the Shi'a metaphysical concept of *wilayat*, or vice regency, of the first Imam 'Ali, and its connection to *Nawruz*, the Persian New Year. The Isma'ili missionary Pir Shams was the first to develop and apply this model to the Indian context in Multan, through religious ceremonies centred on his shrine. Subsequently, it was developed further by the Suhrawardi Sufi Order into a grand scheme of envisioning monotheism, one which has been found represented in the architecture left behind by the order in Multan and Uch. The monuments of

the Suhrawardi Order, which are derived from the basic lodges set up by Pir Shams in the region, constitute a building archetype which is unique. It is hoped that this book will play a role in revealing the covert connections that existed between Shi'ism and Sufism in the medieval era, and redefine the methodology that is used to study this relationship.

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My deepest gratitude goes to Francis Robinson, without whose help and guidance this book would never have become a reality. It is because of his scholarly patience and vision that such a niche subject is being published. In the end, I would like to thank the Isobel Thornley Bequest of the University of London for committing funds to the publication of the monograph in its infancy, and am especially thankful to Habib University, for the generous research grant that finally made this book a reality. Finally, the book would be incomplete without mention of Cambridge University Press and its team in Delhi, who have been such a pleasure to work with over the years, their commendable patience and input, leave alone CUP's own prestige as a publisher, to bring to termination this long and laborious journey.

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