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978-1-107-06290-0 - Constructing Islam on the Indus: The Material History of the Suhrawardi Sufi Order, 1200–1500 AD

Hasan Ali Khan

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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 commonalities 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.

Hasan Ali Khan is Assistant Professor at Habib University, Karachi, Pakistan. He is an architect by initial training, who worked with acclaimed Pakistani architect and planner Arif Hasan. Hasan earned his PhD from the School of Oriental and African Studies (SOAS), University of London. His research expertise is in medieval Islamic history and the study of religions.

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Frontmatter

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Hasan Ali Khan

Frontmatter

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Hasan Ali Khan

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Contents

<i>List of Figures</i>	<i>x</i>
<i>Foreword</i>	<i>xv</i>
<i>Preface</i>	<i>xix</i>
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	<i>xxi</i>
Introduction	1
• Of Sufism and Islamic unorthodoxy	1
• The Ghaznawids in northern India	4
• Syncretism: Isma'ili Multan and Sind	7
• The Shi'a Century	10
• The resurgence of Sunnism under the Ghaznawids	19
1. The Suhrawardi Order	25
• A historic overview	25
• Isma'ilism and the Suhrawardi Sufi Order	26
• The Suhrawardi Order in Multan: An overview of religious and political conditions	30
• The role of Baha al-din Zakiriyya in politics	31
• Shaykh Sadr al-din 'Arif	39
• Zakiriyya's religious affiliations with heterodox Islam	42
• Zakiriyya's theological connection to the Ja'fari fiqh	47
• Shah Rukn-e-'Alam	48
• Conclusion	55
2. Shams	58
• Dispelling anecdotes about Uch	58
• The itinerary of Shams's arrival in Multan	61
• The river and the arrival from Uch	72

Cambridge University Press

978-1-107-06290-0 - Constructing Islam on the Indus: The Material History of the Suhrawardi Sufi Order, 1200–1500 AD

Hasan Ali Khan

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

viii

Contents

• The Shams ta'ziya: An Isma'ili icon in the spiritual legacy of the Suhrawardi Order in Uch	75
• The religious ceremonial of Shams's shrine	79
• Chetir and Chaharshamba-yi Suri	82
• Sakhi Sarwar	88
• Conclusion	93
3. The Suhrawardi Order in Uch	96
• Jalal al-din Surkhposh	96
• Ahmad Kabir	103
• Jahaniyan Jahangasht	103
• Sadr al-din Rajjan Qattal (Sayyid Raju)	108
• The Jalali Dervishes: Connections to Isma'ilism	110
• Conclusion	120
4. The Wilayat of 'Ali in Twelver Shi'ism, Sufism and the Religion of the Medieval Isma'ilis	123
• Introduction	123
• The concept of wilayat in Shi'ism and Sufism	125
• Ghadir Khumm, Nawruz, wilayat and Majlisi	128
• Nawruz and 'Umar Khayyam's Jalali calendar	133
• Ghadir Khumm, the concept of wilayat in Sufism, and Islamic Scripture	138
• Jafr	141
• Application of the dhikr formula to the <i>Nad-e-'Ali</i> and the <i>Ayat al-Kursi</i>	145
• Ghadir Khumm and architecture: The representation of the wilayat of 'Ali through Mars in Fatimid Cairo	148
• The wilayat of 'Ali as a building: The case of Shah Rukn-e-'Alam	151
• Nawruz and the Bibi Jaiwandi monument complex	154
• Representation of multiple religious identities in Uch: Connections with the Isma'ili Satpanth	157
• The exaltation of the Soul of God in Suhrawardi doctrine: The Crucifixion on Easter Sunday in Farvardin	159
• Conclusion	164
5. Multan	169
• Entrance and axiality in orthodox Islamic burial: The <i>qibla</i> (Mecca) direction	169
• Origins of the archetypical monument	170
• Pir Shams's lodges: The beginning of the Suhrawardi khanqah archetype	172

Contents	ix
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shah Rukn-e-'Alam: History, construction and myths • The plan and the Suhrawardi archetype • Unorthodox elements: Ground floor • The interior • The mihrab: From the exterior • Unorthodox symbols on the second storey • Conclusion 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 176 181 184 185 186 194 196
6. The Da'wa and Suhrawardi Monuments at Uch	199
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Prelude • Nasir al-din • Sadr al-din • Hasan Kabir al-din • The da'wa after Hasan Kabir al-din • The Surkhposh khanqah and adjoining monuments: Burial history and construction • The Surkhposh khanqah • The Surkhposh mosque and the chillah rooms • The Jahangasht and Sayyid Raju khanqahs • The Bibi Jaiwandi pentagram complex • The Bibi Jaiwandi complex: Construction history and myths • Site measurements for the pentagram complex • Similarity between hidden Shi'a symbolism at the Bibi Jaiwandi complex and Rukn-e-'Alam • Multi-faith symbolism on the Bibi Jaiwandi monuments • The burial symbolism of five traditions • Conclusion: Suhrawardi pluralism as architecture • One of the seven Uchs: Lal Mohra • Reassessment of the da'wa and latter day contributions: The monument of Sultan 'Ali Akbar • The complete Suhrawardi archetype • The trishul of 'Ali Akbar • The Mecca orientation of the monument of 'Ali Akbar's mother and the monument of Pir 'Adil 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> 199 200 204 207 210 212 214 215 217 221 221 223 226 227 231 234 235 237 238 240 241
Conclusion	245
<i>Glossary</i>	256
<i>Notes on Referencing</i>	259
<i>Bibliography</i>	260
<i>Interviews and Fieldwork</i>	271
<i>Appendices</i>	272
<i>Index</i>	275

List of Figures

2.1.	The site of Shams's Sun miracle in the village of Suraj Kund	72
2.2.	Shams's passage from Uch to Sitpur through the Panjnad and then on to Multan	74
2.3.	The 'Ashura boat ta'ziya in the Gilani quarter of Uch	77
2.4.	The astrological chart for 18 Dhul Hijja 10 Hijri/14 March 632. The event of Ghadir Khumm with the Sun at 23 degrees Pisces on a Wednesday	86
4.1.	The four different dimensions of wilayat as adhered to by Sunnis, (Sunni) Sufis, and the Shi'a	128
4.2.	The astrological chart of the Ghadir Khumm related Nawruz on 25 Dhul Hijja 10 Hijri/20 March 632 at 9.45 p.m., when the Sun enters Aries. Mars is placed at 24 degrees Capricorn and both the planets are in the signs of their exaltations	137
4.3.	Top left, the Arabic abjad according to al-Biruni, and right, planetary exaltations according to al-Biruni. Bottom, the hours of the day and the night as ruled by the seven planets according to al-Biruni	143
4.4.	Planetary consonants	144
4.5.	A hexagram talisman of the abjad sum of the <i>Nad-e-'Ali</i>	145
4.6.	The Rukn-e-'Alam mihrab hexagram with its recreated numbers (left), and the seven symbols of the Seal of Solomon, representing the seven planets and the days of the week (right). The original seal has been flipped here from the Arabic, to start instead from the left hand side (for English readers). In either case, the seal begins with the encircled pentagram symbol for the Sunday. The symbol for Saturn or the Saturday is on the far right	151

4.7. The Rukn-e-'Alam mihrab framed by the <i>Ayat al-Kursi</i> band running around it	153
4.8. Top left, the complex site plan as a pentagram, which is the symbol for the Sun in the Seal of Solomon, and right, an old tile from the Bibi Jaiwandi monument with the symbol for Mars. Bottom, the seven talismanic symbols for the seven planets from the Seal of Solomon, with those for the Sun and Mars encircled	154
4.9. An Islamic astrological chart used for maximising planetary benefit in alchemy	156
4.10. The Bibi Jaiwandi symbols: left, a) Baha al-Halim cross niche, b) Surkhposh cross niche, c) Bibi Jaiwandi Star of David, d) (bottom right) Baha al-Halim Star of David	157
4.11. The astrological chart of Easter Sunday, 9 April 34 CE	162
5.1. Rukn-e-'Alam, the ground floor plan of the shrine with its three characteristic entrances and the main southern entrance (facing left). Notice the entrance vestibule re-aligning the main southern entrance to the east (by facing down), and the sealable secret staircase to the upper stories from the outside (see bottom left). The lockable storage niches in the interior can be seen as depressions on the four diagonal facades of the octagonal plan	183
5.2. Rukn-e-'Alam, the main mihrab after restoration, with its deeply recessed niche. The true height of the mihrab is visible here	188
5.3. Top, details of the attributes of the symbols in the Seal of Solomon from <i>Shams al-Ma'arif</i> . Bottom, the seven planets with their ruler ships over the days of the week and their associated purposes	189
5.4. Rukn-e-'Alam, the ten (interior) inscriptions as recorded on site, located above the four inner storage niches, the three entrances, and the mihrab. These are superimposed on the architect's drawing of the plan. Notice the four double pentagrams in the drawing, with one of them located directly above the western mihrab (left), and three opposite to it	192
5.5. Rukn-e-'Alam, view of the parapet tiles with a telescopic lens; the details of the tiles are unclear from the ground level	194
5.6. Left, Rukn-e-'Alam, the parapet tiles from the parapet above. Notice the kalima or the Islamic profession of faith on them, followed at the bottom by the hardly visible Arabic number ۛ. Right, Rukn-e-'Alam, the negative image of a parapet tile, with the number ۛ clearly following the kalima. This number is representative of the Shi'a profession of faith, known as the Panjatan, denoting the Family of the Prophet	195

6.1.	Left, Latin cross niches inside the Surkhposh khanqah. Notice the oil residue that has dripped down from the lighting of ceremonial lamps. Right, the Surkhposh mosque interior, with the north-facing chillah rooms and their entrances (panelled doors)	216
6.2.	The Jahangasht khanqah, the mihrab facade with Jahangasht's snake marked between the tiles	219
6.3.	Top, the Bibi Jaiwandi pentagram complex with the Surkhposh khanqah on its right (notice the line emanating from the khanqah's corner that defines the centres of the Nuriyya and Baha al-Halim monuments). Bottom, the pentagram site plan. The monuments in the complex today are, A) lost monument, B) Baha al-Halim, C) Bibi Jaiwandi, D) Nuriyya, and E) lost monument. The original site plan, as was aligned with the khanqah, is denoted by letters with dashes, i.e. A', B' and so on. The deformed plan today, because of the sinking of the site and the monuments, is marked by straight letters without dashes, i.e. A, B, etc	224
6.4.	Top, the Bibi Jaiwandi pentagram drawn in perspective, with its centre point seen vertically. The complete configuration would have been visible from the north-west corner of the Surkhposh khanqah's chillah room facade. Bottom, a comparison between Bibi Jaiwandi and Rukn-e-'Alam, with the pentagram representation of A) Muhammad, B) 'Ali, C) Fatima, D) Hasan, E) Husayn on the left, and the Rukn-e-'Alam Panjatan tiles depicting the same five personalities in a similar fashion (on the right)	226
6.5.	A comparison of the religious symbols at the Bibi Jaiwandi complex. Top row from left, a) the Druze pentagram of al-Hakim, a.1) the symbol for the Sun (below it) and, b) the Bibi Jaiwandi pentagram representing the Panjatan, Nawruz and the wilayat of 'Ali. Bottom row from left, a) a Bibi Jaiwandi tile with the symbol for Mars, b) a Baha al-Halim cross niche, c) a Surkhposh khanqah cross niche, d) above: Bibi Jaiwandi hexagrams, d.1) below: a Baha al-Halim hexagram, e) above: the twenty four spoke Bibi Jaiwandi dharmachakra and, e.1) below: Bibi Jaiwandi swastikas	229
6.6.	Lal Mohra, left, Tomb B, the main southern entrance with its hexagrams; right, Tomb D, the mihrab with its Latin crosses in glazed tile	236

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978-1-107-06290-0 - Constructing Islam on the Indus: The Material History of the Suhrawardi
Sufi Order, 1200–1500 AD
Hasan Ali Khan
Frontmatter
[More information](#)

List of Figures	xiii
6.7. Top, the monument of 'Ali Akbar's mother, the southern entrance with the shrine of 'Ali Akbar in the background. Notice the graves with the white plaques (right foreground), located next to the entrance. They tilt towards the actual Mecca direction, which is 10 degrees to the south-west of the shrine here. Bottom, the Pir 'Adil dome and its trishul, facing west (i.e. Mecca)	242
C.1. The crests of the Rifa'i (left), and the Badawi Sufi Orders with the Seal of Solomon	254
Appendix 1	272
Appendix 2	273

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978-1-107-06290-0 - Constructing Islam on the Indus: The Material History of the Suhrawardi
Sufi Order, 1200–1500 AD

Hasan Ali Khan

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

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Hasan Ali Khan

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

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

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Hasan Ali Khan

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

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

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Sufi Order, 1200–1500 AD

Hasan Ali Khan

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

Foreword

xvii

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.

Francis Robinson,

Professor of the History of South Asia,
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[More information](#)

Cambridge University Press

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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

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

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Hasan Ali Khan

Frontmatter

[More information](#)

xx

Preface

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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Frontmatter

[More information](#)

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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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