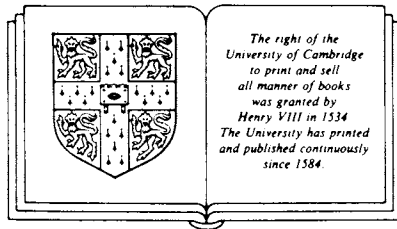


SUFI SAINTS AND STATE POWER

The *pirs* of Sind, 1843–1947

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Introduction

A major area of historical concern in recent years has been the investigation of how European powers established and maintained their colonial empires. As research has probed further, western rule itself has come to be portrayed in a new light. Interest has shifted from identifying metropolitan 'responsibility' for empire-building to specific local factors which 'encouraged' and 'sustained' colonial rule. While a combination of economic, military and technical factors is seen to have made empire possible, other factors are thought to have made it a working proposition. Theories of peripheral imperialism have appeared to challenge so-called 'Eurocentric' explanations: rather than regarding colonial expansion as primarily the outcome of processes within the various European states involved, they instead place the origins of and main impetus for formal imperialism in crises which occurred in the overseas territories themselves.

Robinson and Gallagher led the way in the late 1950s when they observed that theorists of imperialism had been looking for answers in the wrong places by scanning Europe for causes when it was in Africa that the crucial changes had taken place. Fieldhouse subsequently transformed this observation into a theory with his argument that full-blown colonial rule resulted from the need to fill the vacuum of power which followed the collapse of more-or-less informal methods of cooperation between native élites and Europeans. Robinson reinforced this trend by outlining a model of imperial control which, just as emphatic in its rejection of traditional Eurocentrism, stressed the importance of the relationships which colonial rules established with indigenous powerholders both before and after empire was made formal. By actively seeking out and winning over influential intermediaries, it was argued, colonial administrations constructed systems of

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political control which rested in large part on the collaboration of powerful local interests.¹

This 'peripheral' school of thought appears in some senses to be a defensive one. It can be interpreted as an attempt to absolve European states of ultimate responsibility for the building of empire. Equally it plays down the fact that much of the territory which came to comprise empire was conquered and controlled through the application of force.² All the same, meeting the challenge which it poses involves acknowledging the importance of the part played by local 'collaborators' in 'determining the objectives and timing of imperial annexation' as well as their subsequent rôle in the systems of control introduced by the colonial powers in order to rule their empires.³ Collaborating groups together with systems of local cooperation based on the 'bargains' made with their European rulers can be traced across the entire span of the British empire, from the supposed 'cradle' of indirect rule in northern Nigeria, to Kenya and its neighbours on the opposite side of the African continent and further east in the massive example of modern colonialism at work in India.⁴ Such relationships were not limited to British spheres of interest and the 'politics of collaboration' can be found operating in settings as far flung as French Morocco and the Philippines under United States control.⁵

The very word 'collaboration' is heavy with ambiguous and derogatory connotations which conjure up images of 'submission, defeat or resignation'.⁶ Yet, while power lay ultimately in European hands, it was often in terms of 'an active policy of cooperation' and 'compromise' that local groups viewed participation in systems of colonial control. For, just as the theory of collaboration can be

¹ R. E. Robinson and J. A. Gallagher, *Africa and the Victorians* (London, 1959, 2nd edn., 1981); D. K. Fieldhouse, *Economics and Empire, 1830-1914* (London, 1973); R. E. Robinson, 'Non-European Foundations of Imperialism', in R. Owen and B. Sutcliffe (eds.), *Studies in the Theory of Imperialism* (London, 1972), pp. 117-40.

² A. E. Atmore, 'The Extra-European Foundations of British Imperialism: Sketch for a Theory of Imperialism', in Owen and Sutcliffe, *Studies*, pp. 106-25.

³ Wolfgang J. Mommsen, trans. P. S. Falla, *Theories of Imperialism* (London, 1981), p. 411.

⁴ For non-Indian examples, see Michael Crowder, *The Story of Nigeria* (London, 2nd edn., 1966), pp. 235-6; R. E. Robinson, 'European Imperialism and Indigenous Reactions in British West Africa, 1880-1914', in H. L. Wesseling (ed.), *Expansion and Reaction (Essays on European Expansion and Reaction in Asia and Africa)* (Leiden, 1978), pp. 141-63; John Lonsdale and Bruce Berman, 'Coping with the Contradictions: The Development of the Colonial State in Kenya, 1885-1914', *Journal of African History*, 20 (1979), pp. 487-505; Edward Steinhart, *Conflict and Collaboration: The Kingdom of Western Uganda, 1890-1907* (Princeton, 1978); Robert C. Gregory, 'Cooperation and Collaboration in Colonial East Africa: The Asians' Political Role, 1890-1964', *Asian Affairs*, 80, no. 319 (April 1981), pp. 259-73; for examples drawn from the Indian subcontinent, see later.

⁵ Robin Bidwell, *Morocco under Colonial Rule: French Administration of Tribal Areas, 1912-56* (London, 1973); Robin W. Winks, 'A System of Commands: The Infrastructure of Race Contact' in Gordon Martel (ed.), *Studies in British Imperial History: Essays in honour of A. P. Thornton* (London, 1986), pp. 8-48.

⁶ Steinhart, *Conflict*, p. vii.

Eurocentric if European political and economic processes are projected in a haphazard fashion on to extra-European societies, similar dangers exist if the social, economic and political positions of collaborators are not taken into account when analysing their responses: collaborators were often 'groups of people who muddled and lurched from one compromise to another in relation with the legions of imperialism' while 'the imperialists [too] had to dodge from one compromise to another when they were not using brute force'.⁷

Understanding why collaboration came to be seen as a relatively attractive option can shed valuable light on the responses of certain groups whose reasons for reacting in this way appeared, at least initially, to run counter to their position in local society. Indigenous religious leaders, for instance, represented one potentially valuable source of collaboration for colonial powers wherever empire was established; their long-held rôle as intermediaries between powerful outside forces, earthly or unearthly, and ordinary men and women offered colonial authorities a potent means of securing control over large sections of the population. But like other possible 'allies', religious leaders had to weigh up the balance of advantages and disadvantages to be gained from entering into such a relationship. To Muslim religious leaders in particular, the balance at first must have appeared weighted very much against collaboration. European colonialism represented infidel rule, threatening the Muslim way of life and their own position in society. Yet, paradoxically, a significant number of them came to support European governments which could claim no direct Islamic legitimacy and which introduced changes that seemed to make their existing functions increasingly irrelevant. In supporting the state, these Muslim religious leaders were but continuing a tradition of respect for rightly constituted authority which had been their hallmark from the earliest days of Islam, even though it often meant conflict between the earthly ends of monarchs and the Godly ends of faith. In supporting the vigorously 'modernising' colonial state, of course, the potential for such conflict was much greater.

Colonial rulers also experienced conflicting feelings when it came to their policies towards their new Muslim subjects. The French, for example, sought a 'controlled', 'malleable', 'pliable' Islam which 'they could twist and bend to serve their purposes' and, hence, Muslims were sometimes given special privileges. But, at the first 'hint of opposition', they dealt forcefully with the offenders, harassing, imprisoning and even deporting them. In French-controlled Morocco, indirect rule meant 'a coalition of interests' with the local aristocracy, tribal and religious leaders headed by the Sultan who commanded spiritual as well as temporal respect. The British pursued a similarly pragmatic policy designed to secure the maximum cooperation from Muslims in the task of administering large territories where European personnel and financial resources were inadequate.

⁷ Atmore, 'Extra-European Foundations', pp. 123, 125.

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But, like their French counterparts, they viewed Muslims, and more specifically Muslim religious leaders, as likely opponents to colonial rule. Hence, a sense of suspicion, periodically reinforced by outbursts of opposition, dogged relations between colonial administrators and sections of the Muslim hierarchy which had linked their interests to the new imperial status quo.⁸

The description 'Muslim religious leader' requires further clarification. In western contemporary minds, Islam has come to be identified with the ayatollahs of Iran, *burqa*-clad women, and row upon row of Muslim men praying in unison in the mosque: that is, with a strong emphasis on the *Sharia*, or holy law, as interpreted by the *ulama* or Muslim 'clerics'. But Islam encompasses another tradition which, although less prominent today than in the past, still exerts a strong hold over many Muslims. This is the tradition of the sufi saint as mediator between God and Man, his shrine as the focus of religious activity and a strong emphasis on the development of spiritual understanding. Rigid distinctions have been drawn between *ulama* and sufis. They have been portrayed as antithetical, irreconcilable representatives of the same truth and consequently very different from the point of view of their relationships with governments of the day. As guardians of the *Sharia*, *ulama* were officially appointed as *muftis* and *qazis* to interpret and administer God's Law. They often came to rely on the state for their livelihood in the form of stipends and grants; they tended to become involved in worldly interests, which could lead them both to be distracted from essentially spiritual matters and to identify with the concerns of rulers rather than those of ordinary Muslims. Sufis, on the other hand, sought to gain knowledge of God in their hearts. By following the path, which meant observing various techniques of spiritual development, they aimed to obliterate self in unison with God. Because they placed greater emphasis on spiritual growth rather than on the letter of God's law, they were often able to reach out to people of other faiths, indeed to draw them towards Islam. For these reasons, and because they depended on the offerings of the pious rather than the gifts of kings, they often tended to stand aloof from state power and its representatives.⁹

These distinctions between *ulama* and sufis, however, have not always remained as clear cut either in doctrinal terms or in terms of their relations with secular authority as their popular images suggest. From as early as the ninth century AD, attempts were made to integrate orthodox Islam and sufism. They reached their apogee in the work of al-Ghazzali (d. AD 1111) who succeeded in reconciling the two forms of religious understanding by showing that the intellectual rationalism of the *ulama* and the intuitive knowledge of the sufis need not be in conflict. From then onwards, the rôles of guardian of the law and

⁸ Peter B. Clarke, *West Africa and Islam: A Study of Religious Developments from the 8th to the 20th Century* (London, 1982), pp. 189-93; Bidwell, *Morocco*, pp. 9, 16-20.

⁹ Fazlur Rahman, *Islam* (Chicago, 2nd edn., 1979), pp. 128-32, 150-2; Aziz Ahmad, 'The Sufi and the Sultan in Pre-Mughal Muslim India', *Der Islam*, 38 (1963), 142-53.

cherisher of souls could be united, albeit usually in varying proportions within the same individual.¹⁰

The Indian subcontinent provides a good context for studying the relationships between different kinds of Muslim religious leader and state power, indigenous as well as European, for 'one of the most persistent problems' of the Indian Islamic tradition has been 'the definition of the proper relationship between religious and political authority'.¹¹ Thus, while the majority of Indian *ulama* enjoyed a tradition of collaborating with local, often Muslim, rulers, supporting and propping up the fortunes of the ruling powers, a significant minority never sought help or recognition from the state. Similarly, while certain sufis maintained a strict separation from the affairs of state, others became famous for the good relations which they established with governments of the day. Members of the Suhrawardi *silsila*, for instance, mingled enthusiastically with Muslim rules and accumulated great wealth and landed interests in the process. The traditions of the sufi and the *alim* were drawn even closer together by the emergence of the Naqshbandi *silsila* in the seventeenth century and during the Chishti revival of the eighteenth century. Increases in the number of multiple initiations also meant that differences between the various sufi orders became far less distinct, including differences in attitudes towards their involvement with holders of state power. More generally, the institutionalisation of the *dargah* led to the emergence of powerful sufi families whose landed interests often led them to support the established order. As Richard Eaton's *Sufis of Bijapur 1300–1700: Social roles of Sufism in Medieval India* (Princeton, 1978) shows, sufis could develop a variety of rôles, quite different from the limited rôle too often ascribed to them as religious ascetics with few if any worldly cares.

Muslim rulers in India resolved problems of stability by drawing on the support of local notables. The British, their Indian empire expanding and faced with the dilemma of how to control their newly acquired territories with limited manpower resources, likewise turned to local powerholders, including members of Indian Islam's religious élite. Under these circumstances, those who were prepared to cooperate found their position in society bolstered by the authorities. Consequently, mutually advantageous relationships developed between powerful indigenous groups and the British, as illustrated, for instance, in T. R. Metcalf's *Land, Landlords and the British Raj: Northern India in the Nineteenth Century* (Berkeley, 1979) which examines the nature of such a relationship in the context of the *talukadars* of Awadh. Other studies, such as J. H. Broomfield, *Elite Conflict in a Plural Society: Twentieth Century Bengal* (Berkeley, 1968), E. Leach and S. N. Mukherjee, *Elites in South Asia* (Cambridge, 1968), Anil

¹⁰ Rahman, *Islam*, p. 140.

¹¹ David Gilmartin, 'Shrines, Succession and Sources of Moral Authority', in Barbara Daly Metcalf (ed.), *Moral Conduct and Authority: The Place of Adab in South Asian Islam* (Berkeley, 1984), p. 221.

Seal, *The Emergence of Indian Nationalism: Competition and Collaboration in the Later Nineteenth Century* (Cambridge, 1971), Gordon Johnson, *Provincial Politics and Indian Nationalism* (Cambridge, 1973) and C. A. Bayly, *The Local Roots of Indian Politics: Allahabad, 1880–1920* (Oxford, 1975) explore some of the political repercussions of this colonial policy of control.

Some investigations in the Indian setting have looked specifically at the responses of local Muslim powerholders to British rule, most notably P. Hardy's *The Muslims of British India* (Cambridge, 1972), Francis Robinson's *Separatism Among Indian Muslims: The Politics of the United Province's Muslims 1860–1923* (Cambridge, 1974) and David Lelyveld's *Aligarh's First Generation: Muslim Solidarity in British India* (New Jersey, 1978). But none of these has taken the reactions of Muslim religious élites as the principal subject of its investigations. The resulting imbalance has been corrected to some extent by more recent examinations of the ways in which such leaders responded to the introduction of the modern state so threatening to the foundations of their status and power. Barbara Metcalf has analysed the way in which sections of the *ulama* at Deoband coped with the imposition of British rule. Likewise, Farhan Nizami, concentrating on Delhi and the Upper Doab, has examined the attitudes of its Muslim religious leaders and institutions towards the British presence in the first half of the nineteenth century, while Francis Robinson has looked at the reactions of *ulama* and sufis in a comparative article dealing with North India and Indonesia.¹² Little work has been done on understanding the relationship between religious élites and the British in those regions of the subcontinent where sufis rather than *ulama* had established themselves as the main source of religious leadership for local Muslims. Only in David Gilmartin's *Empire and Islam: Punjab and the Making of Pakistan* (Berkeley, 1988) has the relationship between the British and leading sufi shrines been systematically analysed, while Ian Talbot in *Punjab and the Raj, 1849–1947* (New Delhi, 1988) has concentrated on the political activities of these Panjabi religious élites largely during the later stages of colonial rule in the context of the decline of the Unionist Party and the rise of the Muslim League. But the Panjab was of central importance to the administration of British India because of its economic and military resources and its strategic position. So, although these researches form a valuable addition to our knowledge on the subject, a considerable gap still remains concerning our knowledge of the relationship between the colonial state and Muslim religious élites in regions further away from the centre of British power.

Sind, lying on the western fringes of the Indian subcontinent and nowadays a

¹² Barbara Daly Metcalf, *Islamic Revival in British India: Deoband, 1860–1900* (Princeton, 1982); Farhan Ahmad Nizami, 'Madrasahs, Scholars and Saints: Muslim Responses to the British Presence in Delhi and the Upper Doab 1803–1857' (PhD thesis, University of Oxford, 1983); Francis Robinson, 'Ulama, Sufis and Colonial Rule in North India and Indonesia', in C. A. Bayly and D. H. A. Kolff (eds.), *Two Colonial Empires* (Dordrecht, 1986), pp. 9–34.

province in Pakistan, represents just one such region. Strategically important from an all-Indian perspective, it was administered nevertheless as an outpost of Bombay Presidency for most of the duration of the British *raj*. Under these circumstances, the maintenance of British control over the region would have been very difficult without the active cooperation of local Sindhi élites, the province's tribal *sardars* and great landholders or *waderos* who owned some of the largest estates in British India. Overwhelmingly Muslim in religious belief, Sind also possessed a very well-established sufi élite in the form of landed *sajjada nashin* or *pir* families. Not perhaps as wealthy in terms of land as their non-spiritual counterparts, these families nevertheless exerted such great religious influence over Sindhis, high and low, that the British could not afford to ignore their combined spiritual and temporal power. Thus, *pirs*, like *sardars* and *waderos*, became intermediaries for British rule and did very well for themselves in the process.

The history of Sind has attracted very little attention outside the region itself: it has generally been perceived by historians as 'marginal' in relation to the rest of the Indian subcontinent. Apart from the works of former administrators-turned-scholars such as Sorley and Lambrick,¹³ there have been only a handful of studies on the region made in English. Among the more important are R. A. Huttenback, *British Relations with Sind: 1799–1843* (Berkeley, 1962); Hamida Khuhro, *The Making of Modern Sind: British Policy and Social Change in the Nineteenth Century* (Karachi, 1978); David Cheesman, 'Rural Power in Sind' (PhD thesis, University of London, 1980); and Allen Jones, 'Muslim Politics and the Growth of the Muslim League in Sind 1935–1941' (PhD dissertation, Duke University, 1977). Annemarie Schimmel has tackled the subject of sufism in Sind but mostly from a literary and philosophical angle, focusing on the pre-British period.¹⁴ So, despite some work on the position of *waderos* and other holders of rural power under British rule, there has been as yet no proper exploration of the relationship between the British and the local religious élite of the region – the *pirs* of Sind.

This work, therefore, seeks to fill these gaps as well as to offer some thoughts on the wider question of various kinds of Muslim response to colonial rule. It sets out to examine the British system of political control in relation to the institution of the hereditary sufi saint within the framework of Sind under British rule from 1843 until 1947. Chapter 1 looks at why sufism as opposed to more 'orthodox' forms of Muslim practice came to dominate Sind. The connection between the rise to predominance of sufi saints and the tribal nature of Sindhi society is

¹³ H. T. Sorley, *Shah Abdul Latif of Bhit: His Poetry, Life and Times* (repr. Karachi, 1966); H. T. Lambrick, *Sir Charles Napier and Sind* (Oxford, 1952), *Sind: A General Introduction* (Hyderabad, Sind, 1964), *Sind Before the Muslim Conquest* (Hyderabad, 1973), and *The Terrorist* (London, 1972).

¹⁴ Annemarie Schimmel, *Pain and Grace: A Study of Two Mystical Writers of Eighteenth-Century Muslim India* (Leiden, 1976) and 'Shah Inayat of Jhok: A Sindhi mystic of the Early Eighteenth Century', in *Studies in Honour of Prof. C. J. Bleeker* (Leiden, 1969).

discussed; while the consolidation of their influence is linked to the gradual expansion of the agriculture which took place as irrigation became more efficient. The physical and political distance of Sind from centres which wielded state power, meant that *pir* families came to control social and economic resources to an extent not possible in more centralised regions. As a result, rulers looked to them for cooperation.

With the arrival of the British in 1843, Sind again came under the control of a distant state power. *Pirs* were faced with the problem of coping with the change of administration and its impact on their overall position in Sindhi society, while the British had to work out ways in which to deal with this influential religious élite in order not to alienate their valuable support. Chapter 2, therefore, discusses the foundations on which relations between the *pirs* and the British were based: it looks at the British system of political control based on patronage and the public distribution of honour, and analyses the *pirs*' often 'enthusiastic' participation within it.

The following two chapters take up the question of the precarious balancing act on which the British system of control depended. They examine two crises during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries which reveal with great precision the inner workings of the system of control: in both cases, they demonstrate how *pirs* were pushed to a large extent from underneath into taking a stand against the British. Chapter 3 investigates the first crisis which consisted of conflict between an individual *pir* and the authorities during the 1890s while chapter 4 takes up the second crisis which involved a larger number of *pirs* in an all-India protest against British policy. Their involvement in the Khilafat movement between 1919 and 1924 represented the first real collective challenge issued to British rule by Sind's religious leadership. Both chapters illustrate the way in which the system of control helped the British to retain ultimate authority over the countryside.

Chapter 5 considers the general flexibility of the institution of the *pir* as reflected in the way in which it was able to adapt quickly as new political arenas developed. It highlights the extent to which *pirs* remained motivated by parochial concerns, even though, as independence grew nearer, it was their influence which proved decisive in helping to swing the support of the province's Muslims behind the Muslim League's Pakistan demand. Chapter 6 addresses what happened when relations between an individual *pir* and the British broke down altogether in the 1940s and law and order was seriously threatened. On this occasion, the authorities could not rely on the *pir* to cooperate as he was largely responsible for instigating the trouble in the first place, and so, in the final instance, the British fell back on the use of force in order to restore the balance of interests so essential to their system of controlling Sind. Finally, the epilogue continues the story into the post-independence period by looking at policies of the new Pakistani state towards the institution of the *pir* and the extent to which they have affected the position of *pirs* in the Sindhi countryside.