

DR ABDUL HAQUE CHANG EVOKES THE TRADITIONS THAT HAVE MADE SINDHI MUSIC UNIQUELY ECLECTIC.

CULTURE

SINDH'S MUSICAL ECLECTICISM



Illustration by Abeer Kasiri

THE music of Sindh has many colours, styles, genres, and forms. This diversity reflects layers of history and cultural influences. The music of Sindh is made up of seemingly similar but very diverse practices and traditions. Sindh has many geographical or cultural regions, and each of these regions has its own style of music. For example, the Thar region has unique melodies - a mixture of Rajasthani, Thari folk music, Marwari, and Dhatki tunes. Dhol, harmonium, khartal, morchang, and mudkaa are prominent musical instruments, whereas in the mountain regions of Sindh, string instruments and flutes are more common. In the Lar, or lower Sindh, vocal styles like mulud or choral singing are a distinguishing characteristic. In Sindh, the duhdul (drum) and shehnai are popular instruments at weddings, anniversaries, and other joyful events.

FOLK MUSIC

Folk music is the dominant form in Sindh, especially in rural and semi-urban areas. It has many different flavours and includes Geech, songs performed by women at weddings. Geech contains poetic themes of home, family, village, and happy moments but also sorrow and longing. Folk singing is often heard at shrines and public gatherings. These performances take a simple form and are accompanied by harmonium, dholak, and yaktaro.

SACRED, DEVOTIONAL, OR SUFI MUSIC

There are many styles and forms of sacred music in Sindh. Some of these are derived from syncretic traditions, and others are attached to various religions. Sindh has two main sacred traditions, Islam and Hinduism. They have similar tones and poetic expression in some musical styles, but they have evolved independently. Hindu devotional and sacred songs are sung in the temples, and Sikh Gurdwaras whereas Muslim sacred songs are sung at the shrines of saints and public gatherings.

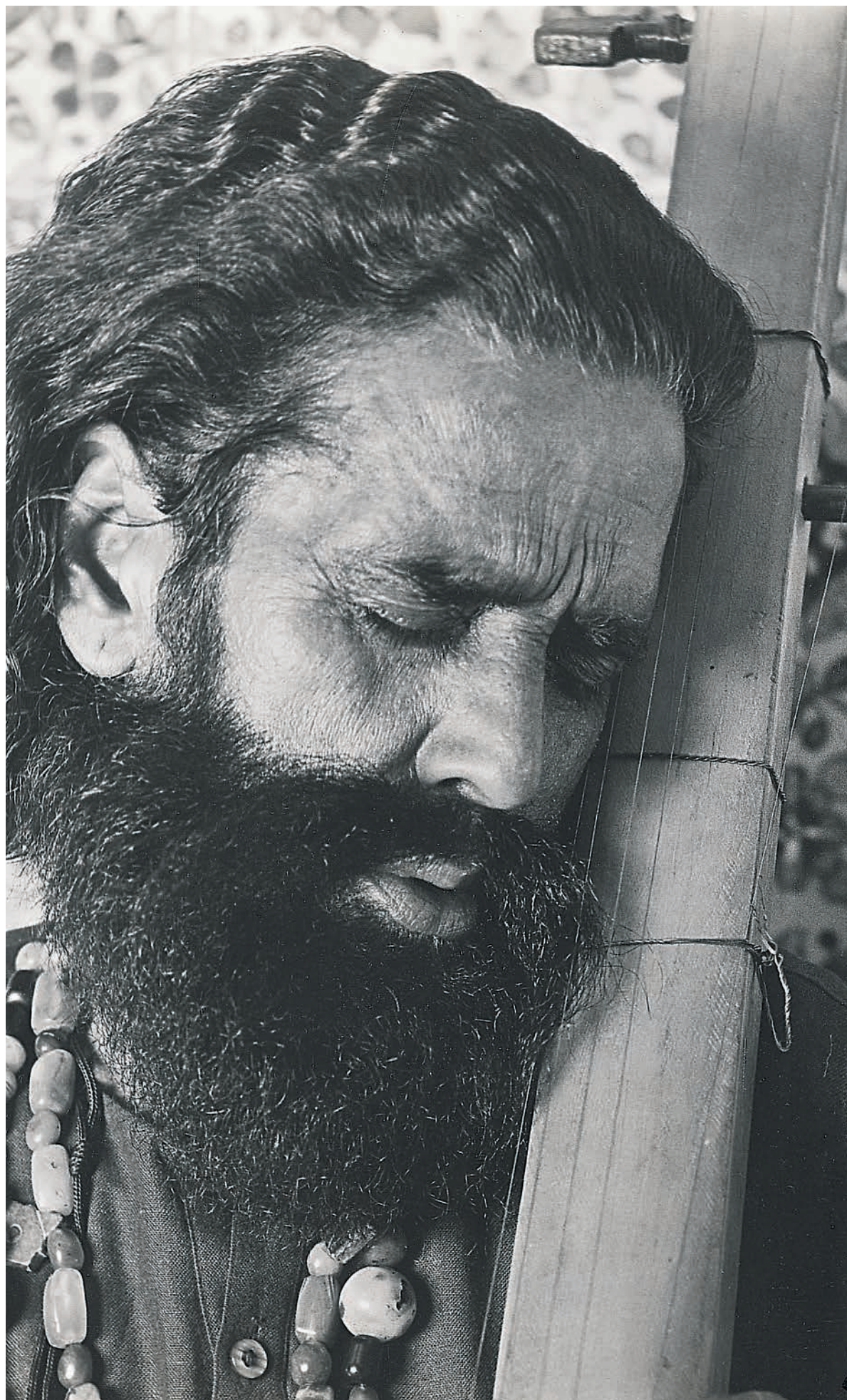
SHAH JO RAAG: A SUFI MUSICAL TRADITION OF SINDH

Shah Jo Raag is a tradition of devotional music performed historically at the shrine of Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai, located in the town of Bhit Shah, in the district of Matiari. Bhit Shah is 58 kilometres from Hyderabad and 13 km from the historic town of Hala. The tradition has been transmitted through families of sacred musicians, called Ragi faqirs, since 1743.

Ragi faqir is a specific term for a musician of Shah Jo Raag. In Islamic Sufism, a faqir is a dervish, a Muslim Sufi ascetic. In modern Sindh, faqir is the generic term for any pilgrim visiting shrines or sacred places or inclined toward mysticism. A Ragi faqir is a Sufi musician who has devoted his life to performing in the sacred tradition of Shah Jo Raag while maintaining a regular, nonascetic social life. Different castes of Ragi faqirs live in different villages. Historically, each caste group has its own Ragi faqirs who perform with a distinct style. Most faqirs of Shah Jo Raag wear black to indicate their insider status.

TAMBURO, THE MUSICAL INSTRUMENT

The tamburo used for Raag has five strings, which makes it distinct from all other tamburos, which have three or four strings. The tamburo is also called damburo, dambur, tambooro, and dambooro. It is the only accepted musical instrument for Shah Jo Raag, since Shah's time. Ragi faqirs call it kath jo manhoon, or 'wooden man.' They believe it is a living thing. According to the faqirs, a tamburo is a mystical and



A portrait of the famed folksinger Allan Fakir.

mysterious musical object. They say that the murshid played it to connect with God in a state of wajaad, or trance. They try to connect with their murshid through Raag, and through him ultimately with God. There are two types of tamburo: the yak bhandyo and the phakdar. Function and performance are identical, and it's a matter of individual preference which type a Ragi faqir chooses to play. The yak bhandyo is made of a single wooden piece with a single chamber and no joints. The outer shape or resonator is plain. It is heavier than the phakdar. The phakdar is made of two or more wooden pieces. Its soundboard, resonator, and neck can be separate pieces. The lower outer shape is in the form of slices of melon. The tamburo has seven parts: the bhandi (resonator), thaari (soundboard), sung (neck), ghityoon (pegs), taandoon (strings), ghorri (bridge), and pustang (tailpiece).

Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai (1689-1752) was a Sufi poet and the founder of Shah Jo Raag. He formed the first toli (group) and made Tamar Faqir its agwan (leader). Shah Jo Raag is a vocal performance accompanied by a single five-stringed instrument called a tamburo. It is sung in choral style by a group of four or more. Transmitted orally, the Risalo, a compendium of Shah Abdul Latif's work, is the only acceptable text. The mystical ideas in Shah Latif's poetry are revealed through Shah Jo Raag, which consists of three essential components: Shah Jo Kalam - the text, the tamburo, and the Ragi faqirs.

The Ragi faqirs emphasise the difference between Shah Jo Kalam and Shah Jo Raag. Singing Shah's poetry in any style or form, such as classical, folk, or pop, is considered a rendering of Shah Jo Kalam. However, Shah Jo Raag is a separate genre, and only those who follow the traditional methods and have completed the prerequisite study can sing it.

Born in 1954, Abida Parveen took Sindh music in a very different direction. She has introduced Sindh music not just to Pakistan but to the world, making Sufi music accessible to a larger audience than those who understand Urdu, Sindh, Hindi, and other languages of Pakistan and India. Because of her influence, Sufi music is now a popular genre in the West.

Allan Faqir (1932-2000) simplified Shah Jo Risalo and Sufi poetry for the general public in Pakistan. His style was syncretic, combining folk and classical and taking some elements from Shah Jo Raag. He simplified the wai singing accompanied by tamburo. He belonged to the Manganhars, an occupational caste of traditional musicians in Sindh. His many songs were very popular in Pakistan, especially "Itmay Baray Jeevan Sagar Main," and he was also famous for singing a song with Muhammad Ali Shehki, "Allah Allah Kar Bhayya, Humma Humma."

POPULAR MUSIC

Pop is the most common form of music played in Sindh. It has been broadcast on radio and spread through cassette culture and live performances.

Syed Suleman Shah was a unique performer who made use of storytelling and dance in his songs. His singing style involved singular body movements, hand gestures, and expressions.

CLASSICAL MUSIC

Though Sindh has many North Indian musicians who adapted classical music to Sindh poetry, Ustad Manzoor Ali Khan (1922-1980) was a legend. Many classical musicians performing today are either members of his family or his students or were trained

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BHIT SHAH

FOR DR ABDUL HAQUE CHANG, THE MUSIC THAT PERMEATE WITHIN SHAH ABDUL LATIF'S SHRINE ARE THE RAYS OF HOPE THAT FOREVER SUSTAIN HIS DEVOTEES.

MYSTIC MELODIES



A woman in a trance as Kamil Faqeer Thani renders a raag at the tomb of the sufi saint Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai at Bhit Shah.

THE saint, the great poet and master of music, Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai, is buried in Bhit Shah. The tomb is covered with beautiful square-shaped wooden craft. The shrine, situated in Bhit Shah, Matiari district of Sindh, is about 59 kilometres from Hyderabad city and around 13km from Hala, which lies in the northwest. In the southeast, approximately 19 kilometres away, is Tando Adam. Driving to Bhit Shah via the Link Road, one passes by the Karar Lake, which has now shrunk in size due to the expanding population of adjoining areas.

On its other three sides, Bhit Shah is surrounded by agricultural land. The shrine itself is located in the town's centre and the middle of residential quarters of those associated with the dargah. The Havelis of Syeds are situated in the north and east of the shrine. In the south is the commercial market. In the west lies the Zikari Fakir Para.

Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Christian, people from all faiths pay homage to the saint with humility. The building of the shrine is a well-decorated piece of art and architecture. Sindhi and Multani Kashi work dominates the tomb's walls in shades of blue, black, white, brown and yellow, in a mesmerising display of patterns and colours. The floor of the shrine is also fully tiled in black and white. The shrine's overall Kashi interior, made by local artisans on tiles brought from Hala and Nasserpur, also incorporates Quranic verses, Persian poetry, geometrical and floral designs.

In front of the tomb is the central inner courtyard of the shrine with the Lakhidar gate. There are two

rooms on the left and right of the entrance, known as the Toshakhana. On the left side of the Lakhi gate area waiting the room, kitchen (langar khana), and the office of the Sindh Auqaf department. In the front of Lakhi gate is an exterior courtyard, where the Much (holy fire) is lit for the Sai Sohmani ritual, Muslo (designated place for praying) where Fakirs conduct their ritualistic zikr. At the right corner of the courtyard is an old well which used to provide fresh drinking water in the olden days. The drum-beating place, which is locally called Dhamal Ji Jai or Nonbat Gah, is at the boundary of the courtyard. At sunset, the dhamalis beat the drums, and devotees and fakirs dance with spiritual zeal.

The shrine of Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai is an abode for thirsty souls looking for a spiritual path. Millions have visited the dargah, yet the spring of blessings has never dried up.

The shrine of Shah Abdul Latif has been the source of inspiration through the poems sung by Bhit Shah's Fakirs. The saint's signature work of poetry and music, Shah Jo Raag, provides a magnificent medium of expression. The melodic voices of Fakirs touch the souls of pilgrims.

SAI SOHMANI

Zikari Fakirs perform the Sai Sohmani ritual. It is performed on the night of the first Sunday of every Islamic month. During the Ziker, the Fakirs burn wooden sticks collected from the nearby jungle and then walk seven times around the Much (holy fire) while reciting Allahu and the kalam of Shah Abdul Latif.

NOBAT GAH

In the Nobat Gah, Dhamali (drum beater) Fakirs beat two drums every day after Maghrib prayers. During the dhamal, Raqs-i-Darveshan is performed by Fakirs and visitors. In this particular Sufi dance, a performer moves in a circle with the rhythm of the drum. The darvesh performing the dhamal start slow, and then both the dancers and drummers gradually increase the pace of the rhythm of movement and accompanying drumbeat. The Raqs-i-Darveshan is similar to the whirling dance performed on the shrine of Maulana Rumi in Konya, Turkey. It is widely believed that by losing oneself in the dhamal, the performer is transcended to the state of Wajd in which they experience some divine moment or spiritual connection.

WADI-I-AUTAQ

The Wadi-i-Autaq (Khanqah) is also known as Shah Ji Autaq and Tamar Fakir Ji Autaq. Its functions are, to some extent, like that of a traditional Khanqah which is in essence a spiritual retreat or a place, in essence, for spiritual and character reformation. The shrine's Wadi-i-Autaq was the first structure built by Shah Abdul Latif and his Fakirs. From the time of Shah till now, this Wadi-i-Autaq has rendered significant contributions in the continuity of Shah's Sufi doctrine, which is kept alive by Shah Jo Raag through the ideological lineage of Raagi Fakirs.

Historically, this institution has remained a hub of devotees and Sufi intellectuals, providing three main functions: 1) Cementing brotherhood and

strong attachment with Shah among the Fakirs. This connection provided a role model for the masses with a spiritual devotion to Sufism and Shah Jo Raag.

2) This institution keeps Shah's message and work alive and makes it relevant for the modern time. The Autaq is the centre for teaching and learning Shah Jo Raag and other teachings of the saint. Here, new Fakirs get mystical training. It is said that Tamar Fakir was the first who started singing the Raag, and this was why he became a favourite of Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai.

3) It provided residence for Fakirs from earlier times, as it was the only place where people could reside. Everyone was accepted there while searching for the ultimate truth without considering of religion, caste or creed. Through this, many people became members of the Sufi school of Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai. His poetry provided intellectual Sufi discourse by which Fakirs searched for the reality of life and beyond. The Wadi-i-Autaq is also called the School of Shah Jo Raag, as many Raagi Fakirs live here, and every Toli who has to perform Raag at Adi comes here before the commencement of the Raag. Three to four hours before going to Raag, members of Toli come here simply because, according to the tradition, they have to keep their instruments in the Autaq.

The saint, the poet, the musician, the torchbearer might physically lie in Bhit Shah, but his true essence is found in the Fakirs' melodies. In the songs of bards. In the narratives of storytellers. In hope for the poor and hapless. Shah Abdul Latif's shrine is a ray of hope for those who see no light in life. ■

SINDH'S MUSICAL ECLECTISM

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by them. He was from Gwalior Gharana, which emerged during the time of the third Mughal emperor, Jalal-ud-din Muhammad Akbar, and flourished till the decline of the Mughal Empire (1526-1857).

Ustad Manzoor Ali Khan introduced classical Indian music through local dhuns (tunes) and styles and translated it into Sindhi. He appropriated many dhuns from both traditions and gave them new, creative styles. Among many of his great songs and dhuns, Rano is a famous piece synonymous with the Sindhi language. Muhammad Juman, Muhammad Yousif, Waheed Ali, Ustad Wazir Ali Khan, Ustad Gulzar Ali Khan, and Abida Parveen are established students of Ustad Manzoor Ali Khan.

BHAGATI TRADITION

Bhagati is an old and famous Hindu devotional tradition in Sindh, but it is not limited to the Hindus of Sindh. Bhagat Kanwar Ram (1885-1939) was a renowned singer who performed all around Sindh. He was a poet, musician, and practicing mystic. He earned most of his income by singing devotional songs to poor and needy people without regard to their creed or religion. He was assassinated in December 1939 by fanatics. His traditional music continues today, especially among the Hindu community of the upper Sindh and Thar regions. Many folk and Sufi singers in Sindh have followed his musical styles and adapted his songs and poems. Abida Parveen and Suhrah Faqir have sung his songs in different styles that appropriate original dhuns. Bhagat Kanwar Ram was a beloved and respected devotional performer in pre-Partition India. It became a sensation, and he influenced many prominent singers in Sindh such as Jalal Chandio, Manzoor Sakherani, Zarina Baloch, Runa Lila, Dhol Faqeer, Ustad Muhammad Yousuf, Master Chander, and Suhrah Faqir, among others.

AFRO-SHEDI MUSICAL TRADITIONS

The largest South Asian-African community resides in Sindh, but not much has been written about their musical traditions. This area is not only home to the African Pakistani population but is historically the



Laghans (Muslim minstrels) in Sind. c. 1876.

cultural capital of the African Iranian community. Within this broader era, Afro-Shedi music is a tradition peculiar to Sindh. Shedi Mela is an annual celebration held at the Shrine of Saint Mangho Pir in a suburb of Karachi. Different Shedi groups from Hyderabad, Karachi, and the Lass and Bela regions of Balochistan lead the procession, playing African-derived forms of music referred to as Goma, or sacred trance dance, accompanied by large African drums. The event attracts a huge crowd of devotees and pilgrims from all over Sindh and Balochistan.

Similarly, Shedi music has acquired pop status. Lewa dance, zar trance music, drumming, dhamal dance, and Shedi women singing in domestic spaces in rural and urban Sindh have become essential local traditions. The Shedi also recite eulogies for martyrs of Karbala following the Shia tradition of Ashura procession in Muharram as a sacred practice. Shedi have taken on the traditional role of playing shehnai, a double-reed flute, during weddings and birth and circumcision ceremonies. Another speciality of the Shedi of Sindh is the nagara, or naghara, a half-circle drum played at the shrines and Shia mosques.

In Sindh, where the majority of the Shedi reside, many are known as bards, traditional musicians, trance masters, shamans, dancers, and spiritual healers. Shedi music has become localised and vernacularised as sacred, folk, and popular music in these regions. Within the cultural context of Sindh and Balochistan, Shedi music and performing arts are an essential component rather than being considered exotic or imported. This process of localisation, vernacularisation, and indigenisation shows us how Shedi music has been internalised as a form of cultural identity in Sindh and Balochistan. Meanwhile, the Shedi musicians host a canon of folklore with a shared leitmotif of Afro-Shedi history from slavery to citizenship. As musicians in their new home, the Shedi have opened channels of mobility that endure across Sindh and Balochistan.

During the last 20 years, throughout Sindh and Balochistan — in rural villages, at the shrines of Sufi saints, at weddings and circumcisions — almost anywhere I go, I find that the Shedi identity is not limited to African descent. It seems to be, like my own identity, a mixture of two cultures. My ethnographic research among the Shedi in Karachi suggests that the growing popularity of hip-hop and Western music is peculiar, yet at the same time, it tells of the power of music, which transcends all divides.

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