



## THE ROLE OF SUFI TOMBS TOWARDS THE DEVELOPMENT OF ISLAMIC ART IN PAKISTAN

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### Abstract:

The paper deals with an unusual topic for today's fast moving and growing age of IT (Internet technology/industry). While moving fast we have generally forgotten our contact with our culture, history and art, which is the main source of civilization and happiness of the society. The paper is an attempt to introduce and ultimately revive the dying art that once dazzled the world in the form of decorative art at the palaces, mosques and gardens throughout Indian sub-continent during the hay days of the Muslim rule. The evidences of that period still exist in the cities of Delhi, Agra, Hyderabad, Sindh, Multan, Lahore and Peshawar just to name a few. This research paper however will limit itself to the monuments with in the limits of Pakistan.

### Introduction:

The Islamic monuments throughout Pakistan principally located in Sindh, Multan, Lahore and Peshawar are studded with colorful tile work, fresco painting and Arabic calligraphy where the written letter plays a major role and forms the principal element of decoration. After the calligraphy comes the fresco painting to add color to the building and create soothing effect to the eyes of the visitor. This decoration is limited to the interior of the monuments; the exterior of the same buildings is also decorated with colorful glazed tiles, which adds enormous beauty to these edifices. All of these buildings and their decoration were sponsored by the patronage of Muslim rulers or the elites of that time (1206-1857 AD)<sup>1</sup>. However, after the so-called war of independence of 1857 AD the Mughal rule came to its end from the subcontinent as a result of which these great monuments of the Muslim period were neglected for lack of patronage. Many of such monuments have disappeared or are in a very bad shape in Pakistan today. Likewise the art and artists (school of art) associated with these artistic work declined and decreased to the extent that if one or two of such artists are found they are only due to their spiritual association with certain religious monuments in Pakistan. We shall discuss the places and reasons in the following lines.

### Historical Facts and Reality:

The ancient gateway to the subcontinent 'Multan' and the areas nearby such as *Uchh Sharaif* and Sindh are rich with tombs of Muslims Sufi Saints who migrated to this area from Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, and the Central Asian region for the spread of Islam during the 10<sup>th</sup> century AD and onwards. It is important to note that wherever there is a tomb it was first a *khanqah* i.e. a place where a certain Sufi lived (however simple it might have been was in fact the abode of the Sufi) whence the Sufis parted the religious education to the local people. These *khanqahs* were invariably combined with a mosque each. After the death of the Sufi, however, his *khanqah* was changed into his tomb, which acted as his memorial, and his disciples annually in the form of *Urs* commemorate his death anniversary. These complexes of tombs and mosques all over the subcontinent serve to this day as centers for the development of tangible indigenous art such as tomb architecture, calligraphy, Fresco Paintings and Tile-work etc., with which the tombs of the saints and mosques were decorated. As for the intangible regional art, Sufi poetry, *dhammal* (dervish dance) music such as *qawwali* due to which (late) Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan earned international fame, are few known examples among others.

The tomb architecture created by the Sufis or for the Sufis during the 13<sup>th</sup> century onwards, starting from the tombs of Sufi saints of *Suharwardi Silsila* - Shaikh Bahuddin Zakariyya (d.1260s) and his grandson Ruknuddin Rukn-i-Aalam (d.1335) both in Multan are still intact as are many other subsequently built toms in the area of Multan, Sindh and *Uchh Sharif*. Thus the complex (tombs and mosques together) of Sufi architecture of Multan provides the prototype for the tomb architecture in the subcontinent. This indigenous architecture is decorated on the outside with the most attractive and colorful ceramic tile-work and from the inside with calligraphy and Fresco Paintings. This inherent art originated and developed in the Sufi architecture and influenced the local tradition such as the Hindu and Sikh culture. No doubt that the shrines of Sufi saints in the subcontinent played a significant role in the development of native arts both tangible and intangible and left an impact on the local culture but what is their contribution and the impact has not been studied as yet. It is for this reason that a systematic and scientific research is conducted to bring into focus the history and gradual development of a few components of tangible art associated with the Sufi tombs complexes i.e. ceramic tile-work, calligraphy and fresco painting from the earliest examples to present day Pakistan. With the help of the

<sup>1</sup> This period denotes the rule of Delhi Sultanate 1206-1526 and the Mughal Period 1526-1857

artefacts available in situ at the aforementioned sites in Pakistan highlight the significance of this extraterrestrial art and designs of tile work, calligraphy and fresco painting as principal elements of architectural decoration in the region and its impact on the local tradition and vice versa.

Islam entered in the sub-continent from the South with the Arabs and from the North with the Turks during the 7<sup>th</sup> and 10<sup>th</sup> centuries respectively. With their arrival a new religion i.e. 'Islam' was introduced here. Thus a new culture developed in the subcontinent which left a strong impact on the local culture, which can be seen today in the form of religion, language, food, architecture and so on. The new form of architecture (a blend of local and alien architecture) unknown hitherto in the subcontinent was introduced in the form of tombs, mosques, gardens, *havelis* (mansions) and forts embellished with marble mosaics, fresco paintings, calligraphy, cut glass and ceramic tiles with attractive colours and intricate designs. Pakistan is studded with such architecture together with the new towns established by the Arabs during the early 8<sup>th</sup> century such as Bhanbore and al-Mansurah<sup>2</sup>. Both of these towns now form perfect antiquity. Limited excavations of their ruins have yielded almost all sorts of early Islamic ceramics. Besides these ruined towns there are hundreds of Sufi tombs and mosques still in situ where these ceramic tiles along with calligraphy and Fresco Paintings can be seen.

At the two above mentioned sites the excavations conducted so far by the Pakistani archaeologists are limited to the various features of the architecture including the Jamie mosque, Dar-al-Imarah, industrial and commercial areas and the ground plans. No significant light has been thrown on the artefacts found from their excavations. Some attempt has been made by the earlier excavators during the 19<sup>th</sup> century<sup>3</sup> but their attempt in explaining the artefacts was limited to the physical description of the articles. No history of the origin or the development of Islamic pottery or other artefacts has been forwarded by either of them. This was mainly due to the reason that the excavation at al-Mansurah was the earliest attempt on the subject carried out on any Islamic site till then i.e. 1852 AD.

It is important to note that the publications on Islamic ceramics themselves prove that this subject was not in fashion till the first quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century when the first systematic excavations were carried out at Samarra (835-883 AD – now in Iraq) by the German archaeologists, Drs. Sarre and Herzfeld<sup>4</sup>. The Excavations at Samarra thus mark the beginning of the historiography of Islamic ceramic from the 1<sup>st</sup> quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Hence, it is not surprising that the earlier excavators (British-1850s) could not throw much light on the history of Islamic ceramics founds from al-Mansurah. Hitherto, the pottery of al-Mansurah - the early Islamic pottery - of Pakistan has not been given a serious attention resulting in the general assumption that the pottery tradition did not exist in the sub-continent. However, al-Mansurah alone has yielded a number of pieces of glazed pottery made as early as 8th century AD providing ample evidence of a rich cultural and social life of al-Mansurah.

The author has had the opportunity of examining the artifacts found from the aforementioned sites comprising of, among others, the ceramics of the early Umayyad period 661-750 AD, Abbasid period 750-1258 AD, Samanid period 819-1005 AD and Fatimid 909-1171 AD which have been studied and catalogued by this author and has been published. Further research on the existence of ceramic tradition and its continuity is significant particularly in relation to the Sufi Shrine complexes in the area such as Sindh, Multan, and *Uchh Sharif*. Having the first hand knowledge and the fairly closer information on the gradual development of the art of calligraphy, Fresco painting and the ceramic Tile-work in the region, the author has found out that the art under discussion has completely died out due to the lack of patronage which it enjoyed during the Muslim rule between (1206-1857 AD). All the buildings of the bygone days represent a complete picture of neglect except those, which are related to religion such as the mosques and the shrines of the Sufi saints. The historic mosques are under the control of the government department of called *Auqaf* and are preserved to lesser extent as compared with the tombs of Sufis across Pakistan. This difference is obvious due to the performance of the government department *Auqaf* as compared with the tombs, which are funded by public and devotees. Thus

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<sup>2</sup> Al-Mansurah, also known as Brahminabad, was the first Arab metropolis established in the Indian sub-continent between 728-37 AD by the Umayyad governor 'Amr Thaqafi s/o Muhammad bin Qasim al-Thaqafi. It remained the principal Arab metropolis and a major centre of trade and culture until its destruction by an earthquake in the 12th century. (Khan, A. N., al-Mansurah: A Forgotten Arab Metropolis in Pakistan, Karachi, 1987)

<sup>3</sup> A. F. Bellasis and Richardson carried out the primary excavations at the site in 1852, 54&58 and the excavated material was then deposited in the British Museum (BM). Excavations were continued first by Henry Cousens in 1895 and from 1966 onwards by the Department of Pakistan Archaeology. The latter excavations have revealed many interesting aspects such as daily utensils, bronze doorknockers and the plan of the city, which is now available for study. So far seven research articles and a monograph on the results of excavations at al-Mansurah have been published by the officers of the Archaeology Department in addition to a preliminary report published by Bellasis & a voluminous work by Henry Cousens. (Bellasis, A. F. An Account of the Ancient & Ruined City of Brahminabad, in Sindh Bombay, 1856; Henry Cousens, 'The Antiquities of Sindh', Calcutta, 1929); Rajput, S.A., History of Islamic Art based on al-Mansurah Evidence, Lahore, 2009.

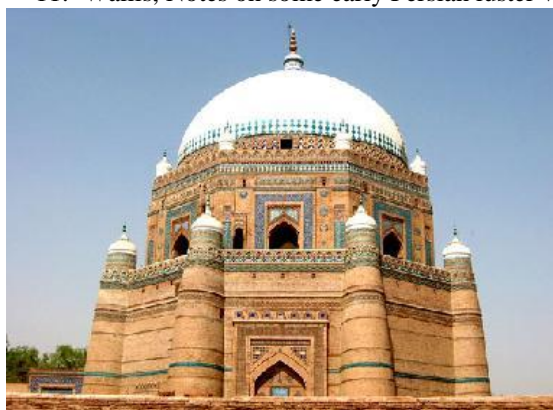
<sup>4</sup> Wallis, Notes on some early Persian luster vases, London, 1900, No. 3, p.3; as cited by Butler, A.J., Islamic Pottery: A Study mainly Historical, London 1926, p. 37. Also see Rajput, S.A., History of Islamic Art based on al-Mansurah Evidence, Lahore, 2009, pp. 98 & 109.

these are the only places where the best examples of Islamic art are kept preserved but the tombs are still continuing and are the only places that are contributing for the development of calligraphy, fresco painting and the ceramic tile-work. Examples are given at Plates 1-5 below.

Present day trend at the ceramic schools of Multan and Sindh need add to the historiography of the ceramic industry of the region. Likewise the modern trends towards ceramic tiles and techniques including calligraphy and fresco Painting associated with the Sufi shrines are into focus to understand and appreciate gradual development of Islamic art and for its comparative study elsewhere. It is hoped that the present research undertaken with great care and sincerity will in turn produce a useful publication on the role, which the Sufi tomb complexes played towards the preservation and development of Islamic art of Pakistan. It will also sensitise the concerned authorities for the better upkeep of the historic buildings. More scholars will contribute to this study for the preservation and promotion of this dying art. The intended publication(s) will also provide comparative material on Islamic art for future research elsewhere. It is further hoped that the historical buildings of Pakistan will have better appreciation and ultimately a new lease of life.

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[Plate-1a.] Shrine Shah Rukne Alam 1335 A.D, Multan depicting brick and tile work on the exterior of the tomb



[Plate-1b.] Close up of the tomb of Rukne Alam.



[Plate-2a.] Badshahi Masjid Lahore, Aurangzeb 1658-1707 AD



[Plate-2b.] Close up of fresco painting inside the Badshahi masjid, Lahore



[Plate-3a.] Much better preserved Tomb of Shah Abdul Latif Bhitai at Bhit Shah, Sindh.



[Plate-3a.] Much better preserved Tomb of Shah Abdul Latif Bhitai at Bhit Shah, Sindh.



[Plate-4a.] Wazir Khan Mosque, Lahore Depicting the Fresco Painting and calligraphy.



[Plate-4b.] Wazir Khan Mosque, Lahore Depicting the Fresco Painting deteriorating at the base.