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The Life

The Risālo is a large collection of Sindhi lyrical poetry by the eighteenth-century Sufi poet Shah Abdul Latif (1689–1752) of Bhit, near Hyderabad in modern-day Pakistan. It is one of the greatest works of Sufi poetry in a South Asian language, and is universally acknowledged to be the greatest classic of Sindhi literature in both Sindh itself and other parts of Pakistan, and among the Sindhi émigré population in India and the wider diaspora.

The Sindhi word Risālo is the title always given to Shah Latif’s collected poetry. It derives from the Arabic risāla “treatise” (typically one written on an Islamic topic, often in prose), which is itself cognate with the word rasūl “apostle” used as a title of the prophet Muhammad. The common loose translation of Risālo as “the Message” thus conveys an appropriate sense of the poetry’s uniquely inspired character. It employs the full resources of the Sindhi language to present a uniquely vivid and varied expression of the central Sufi understanding of the created world as a direct manifestation of the divine, and of love as the all-powerful force that connects God with his creatures.

Shah Latif belonged to one of the many lineages of hereditary Sufi saints long established in the countryside of Sindh, where they have always enjoyed great prestige and power as pirs or holy men with a special spiritual authority. The honorific title Shah indicates his status as a Sayyid claiming...
direct descent from the prophet Muhammad. The largely hagiographic accounts of his life are of the usual limited use in constructing a fully detailed biography. It appears that unlike many of the pirs of Sindh or leading Sufis in other parts of South Asia, he was not formally affiliated in a chain of spiritual descent to any of the great Sufi orders. He is therefore generally classed as an Uvaisi Sufi, the term given to those whose spiritual initiation comes directly from divine inspiration without any saintly human intermediary.

It would however be misleading to see his poetry as the entirely original product of an unlettered genius. Shah Latif was a member of the rural elite who were trained in the Islamic sciences as transmitted through Arabic and Persian, the standard languages of education, and who themselves often wrote in these languages rather than in their native Sindhi. Other early Sindhi poet saints from a similar background include his great-great-grandfather Shah Abdul Karim (d. 1623) of Bulri in southern Sindh, who had been a noted spiritual teacher in his own right and who composed pioneering Sufi poems in Sindhi. These were recorded soon after his death in a lengthy Persian memoir composed by a disciple, and are known to have been treasured by Shah Latif. He is also known to have been in contact with another pir nearer to his own time, his older contemporary Shah Inat Rizvi (d. 1711) of Nasarpur, who was the author of a longer collection of Sindhi poetry, strikingly similar in scope to the far more famous Risâlo. Even before his time, therefore, there was already an established culture in Sindh of vernacular Sufi poetry, although this tends to be overshadowed by Shah Latif's unique reputation in the literary histories.4

The wide-ranging references in the Risâlo to many different locations in and around Sindh support the claim that Shah Latif traveled extensively as a young man. Like those of so many religious teachers in premodern South Asia, Shah Latif's verses were first extemporized orally in speech or song, then unsystematically recorded in writing by disciples. The Risâlo therefore emerged gradually from various collections of the verses Shah Latif had produced on many different occasions during the several decades of his lifetime.

Shah Latif's growing reputation came to attract an increasing number of disciples, and he later settled in the desert near Hyderabad in lower Sindh at Bhit, a place now known in his honor as Bhitshah (“Shah's Dune”). This is the site of the magnificent tomb constructed in his honor by the local ruler Ghulam Shah Kalhoro, where the date of his death is recorded as 14 Safar A.H. 1166 (1752 C.E.). Although he left no male issue to assume responsibility for the Bhitshah shrine, his disciples ensured that it became the center of his cult, including the elaborate tradition of musical performance of his poetry that he himself had devised, and the large collection of poetry by Shah Latif and others that was carefully assembled in the historic manuscript known as the Ganj, dated A.H. 1207 (1792 C.E.).

The Context

Sufi poetry is hardly to be properly appreciated without wider reference to the larger religious and literary traditions by which it is so intimately informed. In spite of the universalizing spiritual tone that is such an attractive feature
of much Sufi poetry, not least in the magnificent case of the Risālo, this first means understanding that Sufism in India is no exception to the general rule that Sufism is and always has been an integral part of Islam. Although the Sufis' emphasis on the primacy of a spiritual understanding distinguished them from the legalistic constrctions of the orthodox scholars, they equally found their core inspiration in the message of the Qur'an and the example of the prophet Muhammad as recorded in the Traditions known as Hadith.

Since Islam is one of the defining cases of a religion of the book, the various traditions derived from the Qur'an within Islam have each generated their own extensive bodies of literature. By the ninth and tenth centuries, Sufis were already well established in Baghdad and other cities of the Middle East. These early Sufis, like the famous martyr Mansur al-Hallaj (d. 922), naturally used Arabic as the medium for their poetry and their prose treatises. Somewhat later, when various Muslim kingdoms established an independent existence in Iran and Afghanistan, Persian came to be cultivated in its own right as a literary language written in the Arabic script and containing large numbers of Arabic loanwords. This soon supplanted Arabic, especially as the preferred medium for a vast poetic literature. The prime genre for this poetry was the ghazal, a short love lyric with a strongly marked single rhyme whose characteristic blending of divine and human love was endlessly explored by many ingenious poets over the succeeding centuries. Persian was also used to spectacular spiritual as well as literary effect by many Sufi poets, of whom the greatest was Jalal ud Din Rumi (d. 1273), the author of a huge collection of ghazals as well as the Masnavi. The latter is a long didactic poem generally regarded as the supreme masterwork of Persian Sufi literature and sometimes called "the Qur'an in the Persian language." It is known to have been a primary source of inspiration for Shah Latif.

The Muslim conquests of northern India extended this Persianate cultural world to Sindh, where Persian remained the dominant literary language of the Muslim elite down to the Mughal period and beyond. As in other regions of South Asia, a strong Sufi presence was rapidly established across Sindh with the arrival of charismatic figures often associated with one or another of the main Sufi orders, like the Shihabuddins and Qadiris. Besides in the transmission of spiritual teaching within the circle of disciples formed around a pir, the Sufi message was also transmitted to a wider audience through poetry sung by musicians attached to the Sufi shrines constructed around the tombs of former saints, which were typically administered by their living descendants.

Despite the disapproval of music in the clerical Islam upheld by the mullahs and qazis, the singing of mystical lyrics gained popularity with the increasing use of local languages for poetry, which accompanied the decline of Mughal authority during the eighteenth century. While use of the vernacular by Sufi poets like Shah Latif and his Panjabi contemporary Bulleh Shah (d. 1758) has certainly helped to ensure their continuing popularity across religious boundaries and modern national frontiers today, it should also be remembered that their activity took place within a literary culture formally dominated by Persian, the language used in all the early prose accounts of Shah Latif's life.
Only with the British conquest of Sindh in 1843 did the literary culture of the Sufi tradition come to be overlaid by the new patterns of modernity. Persian was quite rapidly replaced as the language of education, administration, and elite literature by English and by Sindhi, whose development was actively encouraged by the colonial authorities in Bombay. As a classic that had always appealed to all sections of the Sindhi population, the Risālo was pressed into service to provide set texts for the examinations prescribed by the new education syllabus. As elsewhere in India, it was the Sindhi Hindus who were first drawn to participate most actively in the colonial system, and much of the new secondary literature in English or Sindhi prose on Shah Latif’s life and poetry was the work of Hindu scholars.

This situation continued until after independence in 1947, when the mass emigration of the Hindu population from Pakistan to India took place. Since then, studies by Indian scholars of Sindhi literature in general and of Shah Latif in particular have continued to occupy a prominent place. These naturally tend to view Shah Latif as one of the many great premodern poet saints who helped to construct the national identity of modern India, and to detect the particular inspiration of the Vedanta in his exposition of universal spiritual truths. The very large literature on Shah Latif that has been produced in Pakistan has been mostly written in Sindhi or in Urdu, and so has had rather less impact on international understanding. Many interpretations are naturally tied to local preoccupations, as when Shah Latif is too narrowly seen as an authentic spokesman of the Sindhi folk tradition or as an advocate of Sindhi nationalism.

A necessary corrective to the Indian scholarship is provided by the common emphasis upon the Islamic character of Shah Latif’s poetry. In English, this has been cogently argued by Schimmel, whose work remains an essential introduction to Shah Latif and his Risālo.

The Poetry: Form
Like so many collections of premodern Indian religious poetry, the Risālo is a set of lyrics primarily designed for musical performance. Most of these lyrics are in the traditional Sindhi form, which is commonly known by the Arabic word bait (“verse,” plural abyāt). In earlier examples of Sindhi Sufi poetry, the bait is generally identical with the dohā, the premier short verse form of so much north Indian poetry. This is a rhymed couplet in which each line is divided into unequal halves by a strong caesura, with a longer first half-line consisting of thirteen metrical instants ending with the unrhymed syllabic pattern −−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−−}
local mosques—these are both resources to be treasured.\textsuperscript{15}

Instead of this familiar two-line format, however, the \textit{bait} as developed by Shah Latif more usually contains three or more lines, in which the order of one or more of the half-lines may be reversed, with the rhyme coming in the middle as in the Hindi \textit{sorathā}.\textsuperscript{16} The meter is fairly free, with a strict syllabic count not always being maintained, but the poetic structure of the half-lines is tightened by Shah Abdul Latif’s systematic use of strongly marked alliteration in each half-line.

All these features are illustrated in the following \textit{bait}, whose three lines have the very common syllabic pattern 13 + 11, 13 + 11, 11 + 13. The rhyme is marked by the use of small capitals:

\begin{verbatim}
ajū puṇu uttara pāra de, kārā kakkara kESA
vijjāy vassāṇa āiyūn, kare la’la libESA
pirīn āe parīdaE, mūn khe mīnhan merīā
\end{verbatim}

\textbf{22.6} Today clouds hang in the north like long black hair. To signal the rain, flashes of lightning have come like brides dressed in scarlet clothes. My beloved is far away, but the rain has brought me close to him.

While the halves of each line are tightly structured, the overall format of the \textit{bait} as created by Shah Latif is quite free in the number of lines. It incorporates Arabic quotations that seldom conform exactly to the meter. The poet’s signature is typically tied into the verse with alliteration, as in the following longer example:

\begin{verbatim}
nakā ‘kun fa-yakūnu’ ħuī, nakā mūrata mĀHA
nakā sudha savāba ājī, nako ēharauzay gunĀHA
hekaī heka ājī, vahānīyat vĀHA
liktāy latifu cae, uī īguhāndara āGĀHA
akhiyūn aṣeva\textsuperscript{v}ē, uīhā sānāī supirīn
\end{verbatim}

\textbf{15.3} There was no \textit{Be and it was}, the moon had not yet been formed. There was no awareness of virtue, there was no connection with sin. There was oneness alone, there was nothing but divine unity. There, says Latif, she understood a complex mystery. Beloved, with my eyes and my heart I have recognized you.

Besides these densely expressed \textit{avyāt}, Shah Latif also used the more relaxed format of the \textit{vāī}, a close relative of the \textit{kāfī}, the prime genre of Sufi poetry in Panjabi.\textsuperscript{17} The \textit{vāī} consists of a varying number of monorhymed single verses, preceded by a refrain repeated after each verse. The form is illustrated in the following example, where small capitals distinguish the rhyme and the refrain appears in brackets:\textsuperscript{18}

\begin{verbatim}
biṅdo tana tabīBU, darūn mūninha dardā jo
buki dīṅdumi bājha ji, aće shāla ‘qajBU
pirīn āe pāņa kāyo, sando ēharu ēharīBA
dukhando sabhōi dārī kāyo, manjohū tana tabīBU
adiyūn ‘abdū’l-latifu cae, hātiku ādí hābīBU
\end{verbatim}

\textbf{1.33v} The beloved will be my body’s doctor, and the cure for my pain.
He will give me a dose of his mercy. Oh, may the beloved come.
[The beloved will be my body’s doctor, and the cure for my pain.]
The beloved has come himself to take care of this poor patient.
[The beloved will be my body’s doctor, and the cure for my pain.]
The doctor has removed all pain from my body.
[The beloved will be my body’s doctor, and the cure for my pain.]
Oh sisters, says Abdul Latif, the beloved is a skilled physician.
[The beloved will be my body’s doctor, and the cure for my pain.]

In the traditional manner of performance called Shāha jo rāgu (“Shah’s music”), as practiced by the hereditary musicians attached to the Bhitshah shrine, a sequence of thematically linked abyāt is recited in a distinctively ecstatic style by alternating male soloists before closure is marked by the calmer ensemble presentation of a vāi.19

The Poetry: Matter
The Risālo as a whole represents an ambitious recasting of the language of mystical love, long developed with such intricate sophistication in Persian Sufi poetry. While using some familiar Persian tropes, it draws upon a wide-ranging set of interlocking references to the scenery, society, and legends of Sindh to create a whole new imaginative world. Since it can be quite difficult to grasp parts of this world without having some idea of the whole, it is useful to begin with an overall summary of the contents of each of the musical modes called sur into which the verses of the Risālo are grouped, in this book presented as numbered chapters.20

The first three surs are collections of verses setting forth Sufi teachings, both directly and through images drawn from Persian and local poetry. Kalyan (1) begins with a direct evocation of the oneness of the divine and praise of the special status of those who practice the mystical path to realize this:

1.2 Whoever says with faith He is one and has no equal has accepted Muhammad, the cause of creation, with their heart and tongue. Exalted through following the divine command, they are never led astray to a false destination.

The later verses of the sur use the familiar imagery of the ghazal to celebrate the cruel suffering inflicted by the beloved on all who truly seek him. Further images are developed in the lengthy Yaman Kalyan (2), where the divine beloved appears first as a doctor, then as a blacksmith, while his lovers are described in the familiar Persian image of drinkers in a tavern. The core teaching of Sufism is explained with an explicit reference to the authority of Rumi:

2.73 The multiplicity of creation is in search of God, and its origin is his beauty—this is what Rumi said. If you
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remove the veil from your heart, you will behold him within.

Asa (3) speaks of the discipline required to behold the beauty of the divine, whose primary requirement is to practice the rigorous inner discipline that curbs the distracting impulses of the lower self.

A series of local images furnishes the material of the less closely linked Surs that follow. Kambhat (4) begins with a celebration of how the divine beloved’s beauty eclipses that of the moon, before switching to an expression of desire to be taken to see him. If it is to get him there, the poet’s camel, as elsewhere a symbol of the lower self, needs strict discipline to abandon the attractions of grazing where it will. The setting shifts from the desert to the ocean in the next two Surs. These use the long-distance sea voyages annually undertaken by the Hindu traders of Sindh to locations like Aden, Gujarat, or Lanka as symbols of a mystical quest for the treasure of union with the beloved. In Sirirag (5), the voyager is urged to observe continual vigilance to overcome the dangers of the journey, while in Samundi (6) the focus is upon the pain of separation suffered by the wives left behind while their husbands are absent on business:

6.7 He has sailed away and left me completely abandoned. Ages have passed, but no one has returned. Oh wretched girl, the pain caused by the one who has departed will kill you.

For many, the emotional heart of the Risālo is to be found in the following Surs, which deal in different ways with heroines of local romantic legends. These stories are loosely set in the pre-Mughal period when Sindh was ruled by the Muslim Rajput dynasties of Sumiros and Samos, but they are not related in detail. The emphasis is on the figure of the heroine, either as the object of poetic description or as a female persona for the poet to speak through in accordance with the usual convention of Indian lyric poetry. The long Suhini (7) is based upon a Sindi story centered on the river Indus. Suhini, who has been married off to another man, uses an earthen pot as a float to help her across the river for secret assignations by night with her beloved, the buffalo herder Sahar. Her sister-in-law discovers her secret and substitutes an unfired pot, which causes Suhini to drown:

7.89 She goes with an unbaked pot and she does not ask for one that has been fired. She crosses the turbulent water, says Latif, and goes to her herdsman. How can she overcome the love by which she is herself overcome?

As in many other passages in the Risālo, the intensity of feeling provoked by the heroine’s sufferings is heightened by a frequent shifting of the narrative voice from the poet to the female persona’s direct speech and back again:

7.90-92 Suhini was happy when she saw the designs drawn by the potter. The water washed away the pattern and the glaze could not withstand the impact. In
her thoughtless youthful pride, Suhini thought it was fully fired. In the Indus she came to know that it was unbaked.

“So what if it is unfired? The favor of my beloved is firm. Sahar is my beloved, it is wrong for me to look at Dam. Whether squalls or strong winds blow, I will go on to the far bank.”

The unfired pot was quite unable to withstand the river and it crumbled into pieces. She lost her strength in the stream, her arms became exhausted. Pouring in from all sides, the waves buried her. Her heart was filled with the reality of the angel of death.

The allegorical significance of Suhini’s perilous journey across the river in search of her beloved is dwelled upon at length, with numerous extended descriptions of the perils the intrepid searcher must face.

Suhini, who met her death in the river, forms a natural pair with Sasui, the delicately reared girl from the southern Sindhi city of Bhamhor, whose beloved, the Baloch prince Punhun, was abducted from her side by his kinsmen while she slept. She suffers prolonged torment from the heat and the desert as she tracks him across Las Bela to the west of Sindh, before she finally meets her end in the wilderness:

8.56 She climbs the mountain with feet softer than silk.
The soles of the poor girl’s feet are wounded and gashed. Such is the sad state in which she makes her way toward Punhun, saying, “Oh, may he come back, the one to whom this slave girl is bound.”

As the greatest of all the heroines, Sasui has no fewer than five surs devoted to her: Sasui Abiri (8), Ma’zuri (9), Desi (10), Kohiyari (11), and Husaini (12). Throughout them all, she represents the devoted lover who is determinedly set on the mystical quest for the divine beloved, of whom Punhun is the supreme symbol.

While both Suhini and Sasui are perfect incarnations of the selfless fidelity that must be displayed by the true seeker, the next two surs reflect the contrary fate awaiting those who do not remain true to their love in spite of their high birth. In Lila Chanesar (13), Lila is fatally tempted by the offer of a valuable necklace to allow her rival Kaunru to spend the night with her royal husband, Chanesar. When he finds out how he has been shamefully deceived, he is enraged with Lila, who bitterly laments the loss of his love and of her royal status for the paltry reward of worldly riches:

13.5 “The glitter of the gems turned my head. I thought I would win the necklace as a bet, and that it would be mine forever. Kaunru’s trickery beat me.”

In Mumal Rano (14) the enchantress Mumal, who has used sorcery to destroy all the suitors who were lured to her magic palace of Kak, is finally won by the Rajput prince Mendhiro, called Rano. But when a trick of hers goes wrong, he abandons her in jealous rage, and she is left to lament her fate and pine for him in despair.
The next two surs are different again. The long Marui (15) is based on the story of Marui, a beautiful girl belonging to the Maru tribe of desert nomads who was abducted by the ruler Umar. Held in luxurious confinement in his fortress at Umarkot in eastern Sindh, she bemoans the loss of her old freedom and the absence of her beloved fellow tribesman:

15.44 “If I die thinking about the homeland I long for, do not imprison my body in captivity. Do not keep this exile apart from her beloved. Pour the cool earth of the desert over her dead body. Once my life is over, take my corpse to Malir.”

In Kamod (16), by contrast, there is a happy ending when the fisher girl Nuri from the Kinjar lake in lower Sindh is overcome by gratitude for the favor shown her by Prince Tamachi, when he makes her his principal queen. Another local folk tale forms the basis of the very short Ghatu (17), which celebrates the heroism of a family of fishermen who battle a sea monster living in a whirlpool near Karachi.

The following three surs are devoted to one of most remarkable themes in the Risālo, the wandering yogis who traversed Sindh during their pilgrimage to the shrine of the goddess at Hinglaj in Balochistan. As a young man, Shah Latif is believed to have spent time with these yogis, whose extraordinarily single-minded focus on their spiritual quest is praised at length in the very long Ramakali (18):

18.52 The fire of love blazes within them, while on the outside they are covered with ashes like stokers.

Choosing a retreat, they have abandoned lies, vices, and falseness. They have nothing to do with sin, but practice many virtues. The more they burn, the purer and the happier they become.

The celebration of the ascetic way of life of the Hindu yogis, a most unusual topic for a Sufi poet, is continued in Kha hori (19). After an appeal to the crow, the traditional go-between of Indian love poetry who conveys messages to the beloved, the second part of Purab (20) laments the sudden departure of the yogis for their home country in the east. Another traditional bird symbol is invoked in Karayal (21), which speaks of the wild goose (sometimes translated as “swan”) that stands for the spiritually evolved man, as opposed to the snakes of this world described in the second part of the sur.

The season of the rains, always infused with intense feeling in the Indian poetic imagination, is wonderfully evoked in Sarang (22), where the transformation of the landscape in Sindh and far beyond is interpreted as a manifestation of the universal extent of divine grace:

22.14 It has rained in the plains and deserts, it has rained in Jaisalmer. The sky is overcast and the rains have come to the desert. Women left on their own have lost their worries, says Latif. The paths have been made fragrant, and the herdsmen’s wives are happy.

Other traditional poetic themes appear in the next three short surs. The sufferings of a woman whose husband has
gone away are described in Rip (23), while Barvo Sindhi (24) is an expression of love, again through the usual female persona. Kapaiti (25) explores the familiar Sufi theme of a woman spinning as a symbol of life put to productive use.

The following suras are variously based upon male characters from the heroic Rajput period of Sindhi history. Their generous chivalry evokes the supreme qualities of the central figure of Muslim devotion, the prophet Muhammad. The famously munificent Sarp Khan of Las Bela is evoked as a symbol of perfect beneficence in Piribbi (26). In Sorath (27), the generosity of Rai Dayach of Junagah in Gujarat is so great that he has no hesitation in allowing his head to be cut off, when the minstrel Bijal asks for it as a reward for his performance:

27.21 “Minstrel, the one for whose head you bargained has no need of life. If you required something I did not have, it would have been a reproach to all donors in every age.”

The notably varied Dahar (28) begins with an evocation of the former prosperity of an area now made desolate by the shifting course of the Indus, the grace of the Prophet, then the sorrowful cry of the lone crane abandoned by its migrating flock, before concluding with references to the brave bandit Lakho. Further praise of the prophet Muhammad as the ideal ruler begins Bilaval (29), which goes on to celebrate the legendary generosity and chivalry of the Sindhi ruler Jadum Jakhiro, ending with an unusually satirical conclusion in which the poet’s disciple Vagand is mocked for his laziness and greed.

The final Kedaro (30) is rather different in character from the rest of the Risalo. It too is a celebration of heroic courage, but the setting is far from Sind in the desert of Iraq, where Imam Husain was killed at the battle of Karbala in 680:

30.9 The perfect young heroes came to Karbala. The earth shook and trembled, and there was uproar in the heavens. This was not just a battle, but a manifestation of God’s love.

The clear alignment of this sur with the world of Shia mythology has raised questions about its authenticity, which is however generally maintained with some qualification. 22

The Poetry: Manner

In considering the questions that surround this unusual sur Kedaro, there is an interesting anecdote. When Shah Latif was asked if he was Sunni or Shia, he first replied that he was in between the two, and when told there was nothing in between, he gave the perfect Sufi response by stating, “I am that nothing.” 23 It is, after all, this negation of the separate existence of the self that makes possible the Risalo’s extended celebration of the wonderfully varied ways the divine is made manifest.

This ambiguity may be the fundamental reason why—in contrast to the relative ease with which the formal structures of Shah Latif’s poetry, even the capacious matter of its content, may be defined—it is so much harder to pin down the distinctive manner of its expression. This is highly
distinctive in comparison with the more familiar outspoken style of other well-known Sufi poets of the region, like Shah Latif’s Panjabi contemporary Bullhe Shah. A large part of Bullhe Shah’s appeal to modern audiences is the defiance with which he brushes aside the artificiality of religious boundaries, and the contempt he expresses for the pretensions of orthodox religious specialists. In place of their narrow divisions, he proudly proclaims his allegiance to the bold rallying cry of hard-core Sufism through the ages, Mansur’s notorious assertion of identity with divine reality, anā ’l-haqq “I am God”:

You filled the cup of oneness and gave it him to drink.
You made Mansur drunk. You were the one who made him say, I am God. Then you seized him and set him on the gallows.  

A similarly ecstatic tone, which insists on speaking openly of the truths revealed by mystical insight, characterizes some of the later Sufi poets in Sindh. The most famous of these is Sachal Sarmast  

(a. 1827) of Daraza, a Qadiri pir living in Khairpur in northern Sindh, who composed prolifically not only in Sindhi but also in his local Siraiki, as well as in Persian and Urdu, and whose reputation in Sindhi literature is second only to that of Shah Latif himself. The relationship between the two poets is characterized in an anecdote of a visit paid by Shah Latif in later life to Sachal’s grandfather, with whom he was on friendly terms. On seeing the latter’s young grandson there, Shah Latif predicted to his friend: “This young child will lift the lid off the pot I have been heating.”

7.97  A single loud cry is heard in the water and on dry land, and in the forests and plains. All things deserve the gallows. They all make thousands of Mansurs; which ones will you hang?

Similarly, in a variant form of a verse already quoted, Shah Latif proclaims the same truth as those more outspoken Sufis while disclaiming the need always to speak of it so openly:

2.71  The multiplicity of creation is in search of God, and its origin is his beauty—this is what Rumi believed. Those who have seen this place do not speak of it.

Instead of reiterating the simpler kind of Sufi vision, Shah Latif in his Sindhi poetry creates for his local audience an entirely new way of imagining reality. All the sources agree that he kept three books with him as his primary sources of continual inspiration: the Qur’an, from whose verses he so frequently quotes in Arabic; Rumi’s great Persian Masnavi; and the Sindhi verses of his ancestor Shah Karim. He derived from them a genuinely new creation in his Risālā, in which a large collection of individual verses embracing a vast variety of local and Islamic references collectively constitute one of
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those all-embracing classics that most literatures are only
given once. As he himself says of his poetry:

7.77 What you consider to be poems are divine verses.
They direct the mind toward the beloved.

Here the contrast between baita, the ordinary Sindhi word
for poems, and āyatān, the Arabic word for verses of the
Qur'an, might be seen as an indirect claim for the status
of the Risālo as a “Qur'an in the Sindhi language” compa-
rable to the classic definition of the Masnavī as a “Qur'an
in the Persian language” (Pers. Qur'an dar zabān-e pahlavi). Equally, it might well be said the Risālo is one of those very
rare instances in the literary history of South Asia of a genu-
inely integral Indo-Islamic creation. 27

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16 Lines in this reversed order of the soraṭā are most commonly found in the concluding verse of ṣaraṭ and in the opening refrain of a rāj, as illustrated in the following examples, but are by no means confined to these positions.


18 In order to save space, only the first instances of all refrains are cited in the main body of the translation.

19 For a representative recording, see Pakistan: Faqirs du Sindh (C.54154) issued on the Ocora label by Radio France.

20 More detailed guides will be found in the introductory endnote to each chapter.

21 These are often collectively referred to as “the seven heroines” (S. sat sūrmiṇgī), viz. Suhini, Sasui, Līla, Mūmal, Marui, Nurī, and Sorath; see further Sayed 1988 and Hussain 2001. Sorath (27) hardly deals with the princess after whom the sūr is named, and is accordingly placed separately in our numerical sequence.

22 It is omitted without comment in Kazi 1961. In Baloch 2012: 417–425 it is placed separately, immediately following the main body of surs now generally agreed to be fully authentic, and preceding a variety of extra surs that were present in earlier editions. These notably include a certainly inauthentic Hir and a Dhol Marui that extend the geographical coverage of the Risālo to Panjāb and to Rajasthan.


24 Shackle 2015: 45.


27 In this sense, the Risālo might be seen as an achievement in lyric poetry fully comparable to the narrative poetry of the earlier Avadhi premākhyān, now better known since Behl 2012.

NOTE ON THE TEXT AND TRANSLATION

Although Shah Latif’s great prestige ensured that his poetry was more carefully transmitted than, say, the Panjabi lyrics of his contemporary Bullhe Shah, the earliest manuscripts date only from around fifty years after his death, allowing for a natural inflation of the corpus. Furthermore, since the Risālo is a large collection of mostly quite small lyrics, both the precise number of items to be considered fully authentic and the order in which they are best arranged are matters yet to be finally decided.

There is still no fully standardized critical text of the Risālo. Several of the oldest manuscripts are available in modern printed versions, including a handsome facsimile of the Ganjī with transcription into modern Sindhi orthography (Mirza 1994). Produced at Bhitshah itself, this is a very large collection containing some 4,500 verses, by no means all of which can be regarded as authentic. A pioneering attempt to produce an edition of the Risālo from manuscript sources was made by the German philologist Ernst Trumpp (1866), who also compiled a still very useful grammar of the older Sindhi language (Trumpp 1872). Acceptance of Trumpp’s edition, although it was beautifully printed in Europe and sponsored by the Government of India, was severely inhibited from the outset by his insistence on using his own eccentric, albeit rationally devised, system for writing Sindhi.

Alongside smaller collections of selected verses, many larger editions of the Risālo were printed in Bombay and