

# The Mediatization of Sufism: A Content Analysis of Urdu Newspapers

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## Abstract

This research intends to examine and analyze the coverage of Sufism in Urdu newspapers of South Punjab, Pakistan. For this purpose, our study applied qualitative measures to investigate feature writings of national newspapers published from the city of saints, Multan. To provide a comprehensive picture of Sufi publications, this study analyzed special editions printed at the occasions of 'Urs' in three leading newspapers, Jang, Nawa-i-Waqt and Khabrain, to contribute to the contemporary studies of religion and news press. We randomly selected two years of new millennium to examine the content and presentation of Sufism in print media. In this period, 27 editions were published to cover prominent local and foreign Sufis. The study found that most of the publications focused on hagiographical writings, however, on some extent, we found features of Sufi poetry and its explanations as well. These writings presented Sufis' religious, social and political achievements, and spiritual triumphs to disseminate Sufist ideology among the folks. Paying tribute to Sufis, these writings drew a holy picture of saints and

presented them as successful men of mundane and eternal life. In this background, this research study, with its results, is an important addition for better understanding of the association of religion and media.

**Keywords:** Sufism, Islamic Mysticism, South Punjab, Media and Religion, Newspapers

### **Introduction**

Sufism, the spiritual facet of Islam, is a wider spectrum, which describes willingness to find relations between man and God through absolute submissiveness to the Lord and love to human being; it is a tremendous human behavior, which is based on moral conduct and pure thoughts as well<sup>1</sup>. This movement of Islamic mysticism emerged from Iraq in very early days of Islam as a practice of self-awareness that further transformed in a concrete foundation for spiritual knowledge and intellectual debate to its seekers and followers. Later, it converted into a dynamic institutional movement in the 12th century<sup>2</sup>. In this period, philosophical debates and spiritual issues had been discussed by intellectual Sufis and scholars, and Sufism emerged as an influential institution of the Muslim society. Sufi ideology reached the masses through the literature of Ibn-e-Arabi and Sufi poetry of Rumi, and Sufism became the inspiring part of religious, social, and political life around the Muslim World<sup>3</sup>. This institution served people, irrespective of their religion, and made great history of moral conduct<sup>4</sup> and religious tolerance<sup>5</sup>.

The relationship of media and Sufism could be traced out here in South Punjab since second half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century with the emergence of nineteenth century Urdu newspaper *Sadiq-ul-Akhbar*. This newspaper was published under the supervision of Bahawalpur rulers who were disciples of illustrious Sufi poet Khwaja Ghulam Farid and propagation of Sufism was at the top of its agenda<sup>6</sup>. This practice of propagation is also evident in recent times; Urdu newspapers cover the issues of Sufism by publishing news and photos of Sufi festivities, and news features having Sufi hagiographies, teachings, sayings and devotional poetry. For revered Sufis, they not only assign space on the front and back pages, but they also publish a full-page special edition on the eve of their death anniversaries called '*Urs*' to promote Sufi beliefs, culture and practices. The purposed study is set out to analyze the themes and concepts

of Sufi writings, mostly written by the religious scholars, published on the special editions of Urdu newspapers of South Punjab, Pakistan. It will explain how these newspapers portray religious, mystical and social behaviour of pioneer and legend spiritual mentors to inspire the folks.

### **Literature review**

The Southern part of the province Punjab of Pakistan has a long history of Sufism. Multan, Pakpattan, Uch, Chishtian, Kot Mithan, Jhang and Sakhi Sarwar are renowned cities for illustrious Sufis. We could trace out the footprints of foreigner Sufis here in the late tenth century<sup>7</sup> although, Bahauddin Zakariya (d. 1262) and Fariduddin Masud (d. 1265) commenced the immortal history of Sufism in the thirteenth century. These early Sufi masters of Suhrawardiyya and Chishtiyya orders established *Khanqahs* (Sufi lodges) which provided a firm ground to Sufism in the region and sub-continent as well. Their excellent knowledge, noble character and spiritual authority strengthened these institutions, which served until more than 200 years under the supervision of their inherited and spiritual descendants, Shah Rukn-e-Alam (1251-1334), Jalaluddin Surkh Posh Bukhari (d. 1291) Makhdum Jahanian Jahangasht (1308-1384) Badaruddin Suleiman and Alauddin Mauj Darya (d. 1334), and made South Punjab center of Islamic excellence<sup>8,9</sup>.

Later, in the second half of the 15<sup>th</sup> century, Qadiri saint Syed Muhammad Ghaus Bandagi Gilani (d. 1517) replaced Sufi predecessors in all spheres, religious, social and political, and continued organized Sufism in South Punjab after the decline of Chishtis and Suhrawardis central convents. He established his convent in Uch, however, his descendent Musa Pak Shaheed (d. 1601) served in Multan<sup>10</sup>. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, once again, South Punjab became hub of Chishtiyya order when Khwaja Nur Muhammad Maharvi (d. 1791) established Sufi convent in his hometown Mahar, 200 km from Multan after receiving cloak from Chishti Sufi Shah Fakhruddin of Delhi<sup>11</sup>. Later, his spiritual descendants founded Sufi institution all over the country in which Khwaja Muhammad Aqil of Kot Mithan, Hafiz Muhammad Jamal of Multan and Khwaja Shah Suleiman of Taunsa were well known in South Punjab. Very famous Sufi poet of Saraiki language Khwaja Ghulam Farid (d. 1901) also belonged to this Chishtiyya order<sup>12</sup>. These Sufis revived

Chishtiyya order in the region of South Punjab during 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries after more than four hundred years, due to the decline of Baba Farid's *Khanqah*, and in recent times, Sufi institution of Ahmad Saeed Kazmi (d. 1986) of Chishtiyya order is serving the masses for Islamic education and Sufi teachings.

Moreover, we can also find Naqshbandi Sufis in this region; Mahmood Mujadadi was considered first Naqshbandi Sufi of Multan and it is said that he was the spiritual successor of Khwaja Ahmad Sirhindi<sup>13</sup>. Maulana Hamid Ali Khan (d. 1980) and Syed Wali Muhammad Shah alias *Chadar wali Sarkar* (d. 1986) were renowned Naqshbandi Sufis of Multan<sup>14</sup> whose descendants are present in this region. There are also other several Naqshbandi *Khanqahs* in South Punjab in which *Khanqahs* of Ghulam Hasan Sawag and Abdullah alias *Pir Baro Sharif* are well known.

In a nutshell, Sufist work achieved remarkable religious, social and political progress in Southern part of the Punjab. They established *Khanqahs* for education, nutrition and shelter where humanity, love, inter and intra-religious harmony, spirituality and moral conduct were basic objectives of their teachings and practices which created a new code of ethics in the masses and society. They not only led their life as Islamic preachers and philanthropists, but they were also the source of sacred education and divine blessing<sup>15,16</sup>. Sufis shaped concrete social values with their attitude and practices in the society, which could not be subjugated by any force or movement. Even, “*The non-Muslims were attracted towards Islam because of the great morals of these saints. The Sufi saints gave the lesson of love, sincerity, peace and reconciliation to all humanity without any discrimination between race and colour*”<sup>17</sup>

Resultantly, Sufi religious authority, as mediator between God and human beings, established Sufis' close relations to the public as well as with the state administrations and tribal chiefs, which had made *Khanqahs* a bridge between rulers and public<sup>18,19</sup>. Sufism, due to its great impact on traditional and cultural values of the South Punjab, Pakistan, has become a necessary fabric of local life which is also evident in the newspapers' publications in terms of coverage of Sufi festivities and propagation of Sufism.

### **Methodology**

The study used qualitative method of content analysis as discovery tool to explore the Sufi publications of Urdu newspapers of South Punjab. We analyzed special editions of three leading newspapers, Jang, Nawa-i-Waqt and Khabrain, to examine the content and presentation of Sufism in print media, and for this purpose, two years, 2005 and 2019, were selected by random sampling. Most of the data was printed against prominent Sufis, Bahauddin Zakariya, Shah Rukn-e-Alam, Fariduddin Masud and Khawaja Ghulam Farid, of South Punjab, however, we also found some special editions for the Sufis of other regions. Newspapers of 2005 were investigated from public library of *Bagh Langay Khan* and Nawa-i-Waqt office situated in Multan while for the data of 2019, online sources were used. In 2005, Jang and Khabrain published special editions for all four illustrious Sufis, although, Nawa-i-Waqt published special edition for three Sufis besides Fariduddin Masud; but it published two features about Fariduddin Masud on that day. Similarly, in 2019, Jang and Khabrain printed special editions for Bahauddin Zakariya, Shah Rukn-e-Alam and Khawaja Ghulam Farid while Nawa-i-Waqt published for Bahauddin Zakariya and Shah Rukn-e-Alam only. So, we found 19 special editions in the selected three newspapers of South Punjab during our research period to investigate the content of Sufism. Moreover, we also found 8 special editions for Sheikh Abdul Qadir Jilnai, Khawaja Moinuddin Chishti, Ali Hujwari, Ahmad Sirhindi, Ahmad Raza Khan and Ahmad Saeed Kazmi to comprehend the issue of Sufism in print media of South Punjab.

### **Findings**

It is evident that hagiographical work induces longing for the past, mobilize popular memory and preserve the history and traditions<sup>20</sup>. In the newspapers, features generally comprise on life stories, teachings, sayings, and charismas, and poetry of Sufi saints. The descriptive pattern of these features is: family background, birth, education, religious and social achievements, political relationship with rulers and charismas and charismatic death.

These newspapers' publications generally focused on the local saints, however, two revered Sufis, Abdul Qadir Jilani and Khwaja Moinuddin Chishti, remained notable in their writings as well.

### **Family background**

Most of the biographical features were started with the narration of family background of that Sufi, and it was found in most of the writings that they belong to the Syed, the descendants of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) or Sufi family which is revered by the populace due to their spiritual authority and sainthood.

### **Sufis' birth and childhood**

The births of holy persons, sometimes, meet mystical experiences of miraculous events and such kinds of stories are common in the hagiographies of Sufi saints. These miraculous births reveal the divine power and God's supremacy to surpass the rule of material world, and create religious faith in the community<sup>21</sup>. In Muslim community, the miracles of the Prophet Muhammad's (PBUH) birth are narrated often<sup>22</sup> particularly at the occasion of his birth commemorated in the Islamic month of *Rabi al-Awwal*. These miracle stories are very inspiring and make belief among the believers and followers<sup>23</sup>. Similarly, in case of Sufi saints, hagiographical work stated mystical happenings at the time of birth, and newspaper features also narrated these stories for their readers to demonstrate Sufi's spiritual authority and holiness.

These publications are full of saints' qualities as friend of God with the idea of 'perfect Muslim' which prompt love and respect for Sufis in the community. Writers described Sufi birth and childhood in terms of perfection; they led their lives in right and straight forward direction by utilizing their time and energy for the real purpose of life, God's love and obedience. They kept themselves away from communal activities of worldly pleasure and focused only towards Allah and His orders. The other important factor mentioned in features to become a Sufi is role of his parents, family and spiritual master who diverted seeker's attention towards love of God and managed his time delicately.

### **Sufis' education**

The basic element of Sufism is to purify one's soul from inner thoughts which are antagonistic to God's will<sup>24</sup>. For this purpose, knowledge remained important and played integral role in the personality building and spirituality of the Sufis who did extraordinary efforts for their religious education and mystical knowledge. It is evident that revered Sufis of the history were

distinguished scholar and intellectuals. They not only focused their own education but also established noteworthy institutions that shaped Muslim society with Sufi ideology. Despite several kinds of movements of Sufism around the globe, it is not viewed contrary to the traditional Islam because most of the Sufis in this region of South Punjab preferred *Shariah* (Islamic Law) in their lives and spiritual practices, and this message is dominant in newspapers' publications. Features frequently expressed the extraordinary efforts of Sufi masters for the basic Islamic education and knowledge who also travelled all over the Islamic world in search of highly qualified teachers and spiritual adepts.

Bahauddin Zakariya and Baba Farid Masud, after the completion of their basic education in Multan, visited Baghdad, Bukhara, Medina, etc. for their higher education and mystical knowledge. Even, Makhdum Jahanian received title of "*Jahan Gash*" mean one who traveled around the globe, due to his passion of travelling<sup>25</sup>. Their aim was not only to obey the rule of God absolutely but also made themselves perfect in the worship of God with traditional Islamic norms and as well as through awareness of Him with spiritual concentration and exercises.

Several Sufis wrote books and treatises, and these scholarships and manuscript made them prominent in the history of Sufism, otherwise numerous spiritual masters of great Sufis are not renowned as compared to a Sufi author. Most of their work covered Islamic jurisprudence and mystical ethics. Moreover, some descendants also collected sermons of intellectual spiritual masters that describes lessons of ethical values and teachings of Islam in the context of Sufi ideology. Urdu Newspapers' publications described the books of renowned Sufis of the South Punjab like Bahauddin Zakariya, Baba Farid, Sultan Bahu and Khwaja Ghulam Farid. In these writings, feature writers stated the name of the books and treatises rather than to portray their teachings and ideology. Only some parts of the venerated book, *Kashf-ul-Mahjob*, of Ali Hujwari on Sufism were printed. Writers appreciating his work wrote that each and every word of his book, '*Kashf-ul-Mahjob*', is a treasure of wisdom and spiritual knowledge.

**Sufis' intellect**

These hagiographies expressed that Sufis' education, exposure and mystical knowledge made them genius, and writers also highlighted the role of heredity to develop manners and maturity among these Sufi masters that played integral role to complete the task and to continue the mission. Their wisdom and spiritual qualities has provided a concrete foundation to seekers for sacred education, spiritual awareness and intellectual debate. Writers posed them great scholars and mystics, who were expert of religion and divine knowledge, and focused on their sayings as well to disseminate the wisdom of these spiritual mentors.

Authors frequently quoted venerated Sufis like Abdul Qadir Jilani, Baba Farid, Bahauddin Zakariya, Shah Rukn-e-Alam etc. They tried to inspire their readers with Sufi wisdom, divine knowledge and holiness, and presented them as spiritual enthusiastic persons. These sayings urge Muslims to follow order of God wholeheartedly and forbid to cross limits of God. Sufis emphasized on the purification of one's soul with the worship of God, patience, abstinence, moral conduct and nourishing poor. Indicating the path of an ideal man they advised the repentance, remembrance of God, and teachings, practices and ethics of Muhammad (PBUH). They concluded this world a temporary place and asked to keep the distance from worldly matters. These sayings portrayed Sufi saints the well-wisher of the human beings who forced people to believe in God and to love the God than any valuable thing of this world. These personalities with their divine knowledge and intellect inspired a huge community that established the grandeur of religion Islam among the folks as well.

#### **Religious, Social and political triumphs**

Sufism affected several aspects of religious, social and political life in the sub-continent, and Sufis always urged to follow inner aspect of Islamic law, which is the true message of Islam<sup>26</sup>. Millions of the people embraced Islam due to their impressive preaching and everlasting moral conduct. Their *Khanqahs*, Islamic institutions, were parallel to the recognized governmental or Muslim societal educational system, but the additional spiritual opportunities under the umbrella of the great Sufis had made them significant. Newspaper publications emphasized on work of Baba Farid and Bahauddin Zakariya. Both did remarkable progress in South Punjab together in the thirteenth



century. Several renowned clans of Punjab embraced Islam and adopted Islamic values to the preaching of these saints and then to their descendants<sup>27</sup>. They disseminated true spirit of Islam through their educational and spiritual values for hundreds of years, and converted many to Islam. Their descendants established distinguished *Khanqahs* in different cities of this region.

It is evident that religious and mystical awareness in Southern part of the Punjab, Pakistan, is indebted to the Bahauddin Zakariya (1171-1262), Baba Farid Masud (1175-1265), Makhdum Jahanian (1308-1384), Syed Muhammad Ghaus Bandagi Gilani (d. 1517) and Khwaja Noor Muhammad Maharvi (1730-1791) who established peerless institutions and trained several illustrious Sufi mentors. These *Khanqahs* provided education, nutrition and shelter where humanity, love, inter and intra-religious harmony, spirituality and moral conduct were basic objectives of their teachings and practices which created a new code of ethics in the masses and society. Now, we could find Sufi institutions, spiritual masters, disciples and devotees all over the region.

These newspapers writings illustrated that the services of this institution irrespective of religion made it symbol of Islamic moral values and religious tolerance. Great Sufi convents of Bahauddin Zakariya and Baba Farid cultivated extreme love and infinite trust in God among thousands of disciples, students and the folks more than two hundred years. Their spiritual adepts strengthened their Sufi orders, Suhrawardiyya and Chishtiyya, in all over the country. Moreover, these revered Sufis also enjoyed wide prestige and authority because of their veneration among Muslim rulers, and utilized their obedience and sources for the prosperity of society.

Newspapers' publication further explained that veneration of the Sufis among both sides, Kings and public, made *Khanqahs* a communication channel between rulers and their masses. Saints were not only regarded as the source of spiritual blessing and sacred knowledge, but they were social workers and philanthropists who contributed for a prosperous society. These saints distributed millions of money and the gigantic sum of commodities to poor and settlers. They also played an integral role in the reconciliation process between hostile rulers. Moreover, impacts of Bahauddin Zakariya's socio-economic achievements could be found in Multan even in recent days in the

form of small housing projects attached with famous pottery industry of Multan.

It was a time of great vision and norms in the case of Sufism, and spiritual masters were model of imitation and source of inspiration. They left perpetual impacts in the region through their religious, political and social services. They were not only great spiritual masters who guided the folks towards the path of God, but they also used their fame for political and social concerns of masses.

### **Charismas and charismatic death**

Divine blessings achieved by austerity and asceticism provide Sufi saints unbridled powers and make them a charismatic authority. Sufis always focused on inner purification and Allah bestowed mystical knowledge and powers to His friends directly or through His another holy man. Newspaper features, frequently, discussed spiritual experiences and miraculous stories of Sufis to show the close relationship of God and holy men. They concluded that extreme love and infinite trust in God has enhanced spiritual maturity among these seekers, who worshiped God only for the sake of God not for the hope of any rewards, here and hereafter.

Their mystical approach had made them well-aware of inner feelings and thoughts of the human beings. They sometimes helped people beyond the boundaries of nature in all worldly matters. Sufis always tried their best to ease the ordinary man through their spiritual powers. Moreover, they revealed their divine powers to establish Islam and religious circles in adverse political conditions as well. Authors expressed that charismas of Sufi saints secured their devotees and followers to the rulers; Muslim and non-Muslims. These newspaper publications concluded that Sufi spiritual and charismatic authority made them popular in the folks and their divine powers and devotion of the masses established spiritual autonomy over the mundane world. These writings mostly finished with the death sketches of the saints which has different meanings among the masses because of different ideologies of life and death, whether they believe in religion or not<sup>28</sup>. However, death stories of these Muslim ascetics were presented as a successful and happily return to their God with great heavenly reward, pleasure and eternal rest having no fear and woe of death. These miraculous

stories of spiritual heroes further provide foundation for religious belief and practices<sup>29</sup>.

### **Sufi poetry**

Sufi poetry is another significant part of Sufi literature which always influenced human beings and created a great impact on their lives, attitude, and beliefs. This genre has also made Sufi poets immortal due to the deep penetration of their poetry among the masses. Similarly, Sufi poets of South Punjab, Sultan Bahu (1630-1691) and Khwaja Ghulam Farid (1845-1901) are revered not only among the people of sub-continent irrespective of religion but they still attracts social scientists and scholars to probe their poetry in terms of ideological and intellectual debate.

Our primary resources, Urdu newspapers of South Punjab, assigned sizeable place for Sufi poetry and its explanation in their special editions, however, authors mostly focused on the poetry of Khwaja Ghulam Farid; the most famous and influential Sufi poet of Saraiki language. They highlighted divine love, mystical ideas, spiritual education and natural beauty as main features of his poetry. They mentioned that Khwaja Ghulam Farid was inspired to the philosophy of Ibn-e-Arabi, particular to the doctrine of *Wahdat-ul-Wujud* (Unity of Being). His poetry expressed the love of God and Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) as well as uncertainty and fragility of the world. He used folk stories to explain sincerity and faithfulness in love. He utilized feminine accent and *Sassi* was his favorite character. The first and utmost quality of his poetry is optimism. His message of hope and struggle to overcome temporary worries is appreciated. He exemplified life as a journey; and said that man tackles all difficulties in a journey due to longing of destination, and difficulties are inferior as compared to his goal.

Authors in the analytical features argued that the poetry of Farid for nature cannot be overlooked. Khwaja Farid immortalized *Rohi* and its weather, plants, insects, animal, birds, culture and mood of life. He used the metaphor of desert for expressing diverse themes particularly colours of the life and the monsoon weather. His poetry prompts love to the motherland and he raised voice against tyranny. The depiction of grieve in his poetry is the universal truth which came from sorrows and problems of the residents. He expressed the spirit of living with one another in peace. His poetry of nature made him

distinctive among the Sufi poets. His camping and traveling in the desert of Cholistan evoked feelings and thoughts of natural beauty. His Saraiki poetry is regarded as the prototype of Saraiki language due to its fundamental vocabulary, accent, signs, and terminologies. These Sufi poets contributed a lot for the mystical love and divine blessings and they are also considered as stimulating agent against social cruelties and norms.

#### **Conclusion**

Media is not only the source of information but also depicts the inclination of the society regarding their ideology, beliefs and customs<sup>30</sup>. Media texts and images drive people minds through the process of repetition and amplification of the stories which endorse cultural values<sup>31</sup>, and our study that confirmed the newspapers' repetition of Sufis' hagiographies could be considered a massive contributor of Sufi philosophy and culture. "These Newspapers' publications help reinforce, reproduce and transform the social, moral, religious, and political structure"<sup>32</sup>.

The content of our selected newspapers' publication are mostly consist of narrative work. Authors communicated the structure and meanings of Sufism by describing hagiographies of Sufi saints, and explanation of Sufi poetry for the dissemination of Sufi message and ideology. Philosophy of all Sufi orders of South Punjab, Qadiris, Chishtis, Suhrawardis and Naqshbandis, were presented positively without any argument or objection to others whose main objective was the projection of Sufi ideology; the purification of one's soul by overcoming its baser elements. These biographies stated how success was achieved, and what were the important and basic elements to compose a Sufi personality in religious, social and political fields?

In the newspapers writings leading element was mystical religiosity which focused mystical knowledge, divine revelation, faith, belief, devotion, concept of salvation and spiritual authority. Similarly, their convents which were parallel to the recognized governmental or Muslim societal educational system, provided spiritual opportunities additionally to the seekers under the umbrella of great Sufis. Writings delineate that they were dynamic scholars who were fully aware of the spiritual message of Islamic teachings and wisdom, and that the entire were achieved by the absolute trust in God and asceticism. Authors used inspirational wordings, phrases and titles in their

writings, particularly in headlines, to demonstrate Sufi spiritual powers and authority. It is obvious that media text built religious sense and culture through its languages, myths and signs<sup>33</sup>, and we found these elements in our primary sources, newspapers' features.

Writings stated that Sufis' mystical authority established their close relations not only to the public but with the state administrations and tribal chiefs as well, which made *Khanqahs* a bridge between rulers and public. Kings and rulers always remained in touch to the Sufis for the sake of divine blessing for their rule and worldly achievements, and in this relationship, great Sufis influenced rulers and confirmed spiritual authority over worldly rule and further utilized rulers' obedience and sources for the prosperity of society.

Thus, social well-being is another element which authors used to popularize Sufism among the folks. No doubt, mostly Sufi saints endured starvation, and led ascetic life style, but they distributed a lot of food and money to the masses. Sufis of Multan patronized calligraphy, mosaic art, pottery making, and carpet weaving as well as learning of construction skills. Even, Bahauddin Zakariya sent few youngsters to China to learn pottery making<sup>34</sup>.

In short, these writings drew a holy picture of Sufis by presenting their ideology and wisdom, and declared Sufi path a best approach for successful mundane and eternal life. The message and wording have an optimistic approach that focuses on achievements of Sufis and Sufism. The writings portrayed Sufi a perfect man to recognize Sufism the only way to achieve the reality of the life.

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