

From Sufi Dargah to Public Space – Living History and Cultural Place at the Shrine of Shah Abdul Latif Bhitai in the Town of Bhitshah, Sindh (Pakistan)

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ABSTRACT

The Shrine of Shah Abdul Latif Bhitai (1689 -1752), a popular Sufi saint is a site of religious importance as well as a cultural heritage for the people of Sindh. Most importantly, it is representative of the collective memory of a social group, passed on through familial ties. Dating back to 1754, the shrine marking the center of the town, fulfills multiple functions today and has multiple groups/ institutions taking ownership of it. Despite the evolution, the case is a unique example of a surviving living heritage. The following paper outlines the functional evolution of the shrine, highlighting the factors responsible for its persistence and harmonious blend with later additional uses adding richness to its experience.

Keywords: Cultural Heritage, Collective Memory, Living History, Architecture, Context

1 Introduction

The Shrine of Shah Abdul Latif Bhitai (1689 -1752) is situated in a small town called Bhitshah in the province of Sindh (figure 1). It has an estimated population of 35682¹. It is heritage for the people of Sindh, comprising the physical structure, dating to 1756 and before, as well as intangible legacies of the saint today. The poetry by Shah Latif is sung with an instrument improvised by him called the *tambura*, the compositions meticulously worked out by him and his fakirs for the different times of the day and the significant occasions of the year, some examples including, rainy weather, mourning the Battle of Karbala, celebratory music for happy occasions. This intangible heritage is representational, symbolic and commemorative (figure 2).

Born in the late 16th century, Bhitai is described to be a great scholar, ‘incomparably the greatest man whom Sindh (region) has yet produced in the realm of imaginative art’ (Sorley 1940: 169). He was an Islamic mystic and a poet. His father, Shah Habib and his grandfather, Shah Karim were practicing Sufis as well. Islamic mysticism was hence a living tradition in the house where Shah Latif spent his childhood.

Sorley was a British historian, who spent a lot of time in Sindh during colonial rule. His book provides an insightful and objective commentary on the context, life and poetry of Shah Latif. About Shah’s poetry, he writes; it ‘has retained its universal appeal, with the spontaneity of his message engrained in the hearts of all classes of Sindh’s population, Muslims and Hindus, lettered and unlettered.’ In 1941 at the time of the book writing, the region of Sindh was part of the larger British (colonial) Indian subcontinent and the population



Figure 2 Sufi kalaam of Shah Abdul Latif Bhitai played on the *tambura*.

Source: Photo by Author

of Sindh composed of about 51 percent Hindus and 49 percent Muslims². His poetry was an important cultural contribution and development of the regional language. The people of Sindh popularly quote Shah's poetry in their daily conversation and to explain worldly phenomena even today. Akhund (1991) writes about Shah Latif,

“Shah Abdul Latif is a poet who uses for the first time with supreme skill the language of the country folk and employing it to interpret ideas of beauty and of religious philosophy, which, while drawing much inspiration from Persian models, succeeded in maintaining a high level of native originality and local eloquence. He was a man steeped in an understanding of the mystical teaching of Islam and familiar with the form of thought found to perfection in the great Persian masters.” (p. 23)



Figure 1 Locating Bhitshah town in Sindh province, Matiari District
Source: <http://www.pdma.gos.pk>, modified by Author

The town of Bhitshah formed around the shrine. It started as a small settlement in 1742, located close to a water source, Karar Lake linked to the Indus River tributaries. Shah Abdul Latif settled at this Bhit (lit. translation: mound of sand) with his followers. 1742-1754 mark the years of formation of the foundations of Bhitshah. A few simple dwellings with a communal well were constructed. Shah Latif's father was buried at the site of the shrine. The old dwelling of Shah Latif still exists today, preserved and maintained by his loyal fakirs' families. He lived a simple, secluded and uneventful life, immersed in Sufi learning, practice and teaching (Sorley 1940). He passed away in 1752 and was buried close to his father's tomb.

After the construction of the shrine in 1754, the settlement consolidated around the shrine, its daily activities revolving around the prescribed rituals, a process of keeping the collective memories of the group alive.

2 The Shrine as living history

The sites of shrines have a history of the intermingling of diverse cultures of Central and South Asia and Arabia creating richness, manifested in architecture, rituals and performances. Quoting Samina Quraeshi (2009): The sites of historic shrines

“trace the historical cross-pollination between Arabic, Persian, Turkish, Central Asian, and Indian traditions. So many travelers and pilgrims have come and preached and sung there that these sacred gathering places have become centers of diverse points of view. Even today, this diversity thrives, and some two-thirds of the population of South Asia has some allegiance to a shrine.” (p. 90)

The Shrine of Shah Abdul Latif Bhitai is a living history in many ways:

- It acts as a primary element (Rossi 1982) in the town of Bhitshah as well as the rural areas surrounding the town.
 - It is representative of the collective memory (Halbwachs 1992) of a social group.
 - Its architecture is a component of the collective memory, a heritage for the social group and a representation of the regional cultural identity.
 - The poetry of Shah Latif is another important component of the collective memory. Many shrines are associated with performances like singing, *qawwali* (mystic music) in particular in India and Pakistan, *dhamaal* (bodily performance). The Whirling Dervish of Konya is another example of such performance. These performances are all done in the praise of the Creator hence are religious in nature. There are also many shrines in which there are no performances.
 - Other rituals performed at the shrine, involving different people (and their families) are symbolic and commemorative.
 - The Urs, the annual occasion of the death anniversary (celebrated as annual town festival)
- Properly structured in space and time, the collective memory lives on, and continues to be celebrated through the calendar year.

2.1 The Architecture of the City: The Shrine as a Primary Element

The shrine of Shah Abdul Latif Bhitai as a primary element, is the geographical and

the pulsating center of the town of Bhitshah. According to Rossi (1982), primary elements in a city are elements of a dominant nature playing an essential role in the evolution of the city. Their relationship with their physical location and context is strong. The merging of primary elements with an area / their context makes for the physical structure of the city. Their ‘value’ is dependent on their significance in the city. A generator of the form of the city, the shrine reserves the value of being the primary element of the town of Bhitshah.



Figure 3 Old town of Bhitshah with the shrine at its center (marked by hatch)

Source: Author, Phd Fieldwork 2014/15

Constituting the physical center of the town, the shrine is surrounded and well connected by the oldest and most prominent residential neighbourhoods. The private residential neighbourhoods with narrow semi-public streets open up on to the relatively large open public space of the shrine, the contrast in space size and volume highlighting its centrality of role and purpose (Refer to Figure 3). Distinguishable through ‘form and exceptional nature in the urban fabric’, the shrine as a primary element ‘characterizes’ the town of Bhitshah and plays an effective role in the order and structuring of the city dynamic (Rossi 1982).

As a monument and a primary element, it serves multiple functions for the city and its people. Moreover, the shrine is symbolically representational of the identity of the people of Bhitshah and Sindh and is characteristic to the town. It also has a cultural value as it represents the collective memory of a particular social group. As a physical and social center, the events / activities of the shrine drive its small scale trade economy. ‘Shop keeping is good business in Bhitshah throughout the year,’ affirmed Asif Rajput, local resident and principal of a private school in Bhitshah. Within the rural context, the town of Bhitshah plays an important role as a market town for its hinterland, driven in unison with the activities of the shrine. (Figure 4)

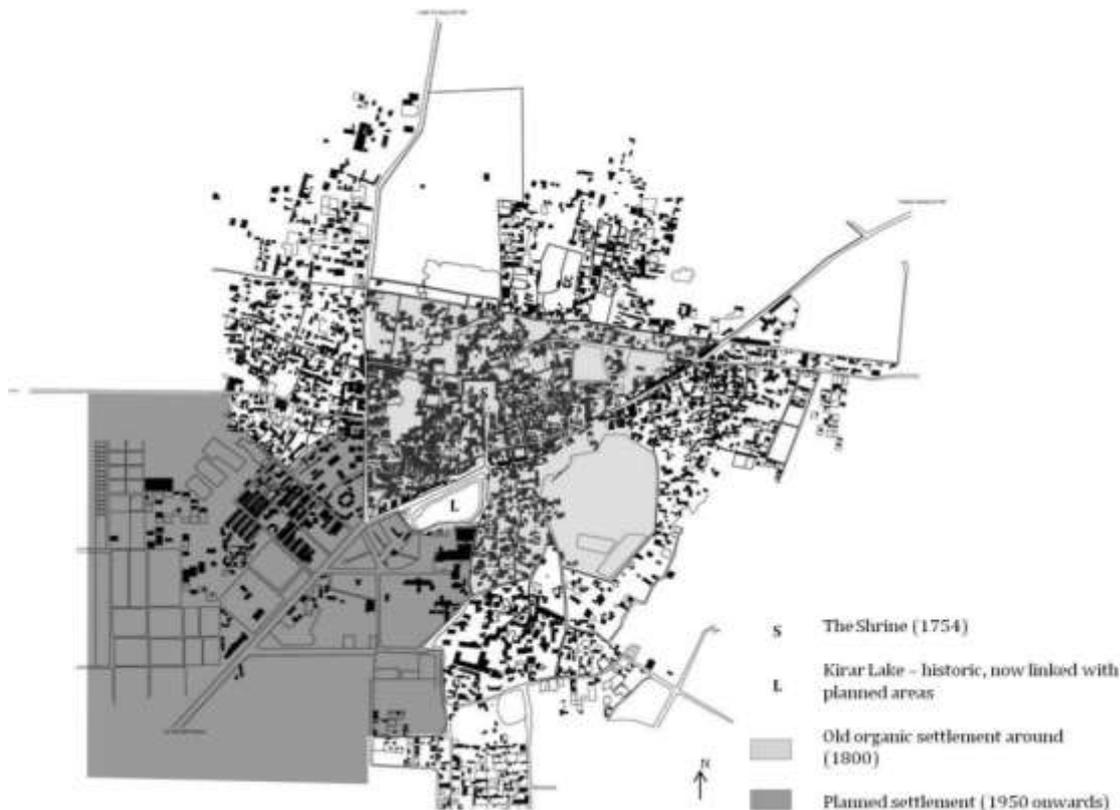


Figure 4 Spatial development of Bhitshah

Source: Map developed by Author, part of Phd Research

2.2 The Shrine Architecture: Form

The construction of the tomb of Shah Abdul Latif Bhitai was carried out under the orders of Ghulam Shah Kalhoro, then ruler of the Kalhoro dynasty. Built by Master Mason, Eedan Razo from Sukkur, under supervision of Syed Jamal Shah, the first Gadi Nashin of the saint's family, the tomb was built as a cube chamber with a hemispherical dome on top, a basic form for most, if not all tombs. (Figure 5)

“The cube symbolizes the earthly, material body, and the dome represents the spiritual, heavenly sphere above.” (Mumtaz in Qureshi 2009:46)

The Sufi shrine exemplifies the use and symbolic meaning of ideal forms in architecture. It is metaphoric;

“the body of the lover rises upward toward the Beloved, and the Spirit descends halfway to meet it. This meeting of the lover and the Beloved is the *wisal*, the union, the ultimate goal of the Sufi” (Mumtaz).



Figure 5 The Shrine of Shah Abdul Latif Bhitai, Bhitshah, Sindh

Source: Author, December 2014

The history of architecture of the Muslim context spread across Central and South Asia is known for the development of geometric patterns and proportioning systems at varying scales of construction and design. ‘Architecture, says Mumtaz (Qureshi 2009:46), is profoundly connected to the metaphysics of the ‘sacred’ sciences of numbers and geometry.’ Design of tombs and mosques were embedded in geometry and mathematics in plans, sections and elevations as well as in the details of surface decoration. Examples of tombs built on similar principles include the epitomic Taj Mahal (1630) and Tomb of Ali ibn Musa Reza (Imam Reza) in Mashhad-Iran.

The tomb of Shah Abdul Latif Bhitai follows similar principles as the architecture at that time. The Kalhoros were well aware of the strong architectural presence created by the Mughal Empire (15-18th century) at that time in prominent parts of the subcontinent. The forts in Delhi (1648) and Lahore, the tomb of Humayun were architecture of parallel times with the shrine. Ghulam Shah Kalhorro was a ruler taken to building monuments and was one of the few regional rulers with a long list of monumental construction to his credit, in particular mausoleums. Some examples include that of Shah Baharo in Larkana (1774), Mian Noor Mohammad in Nawabshah (1758), Mian Adam Shah Kalhorro in Sukkur and Mian Shah Ali in Larkana. (Figure 6)

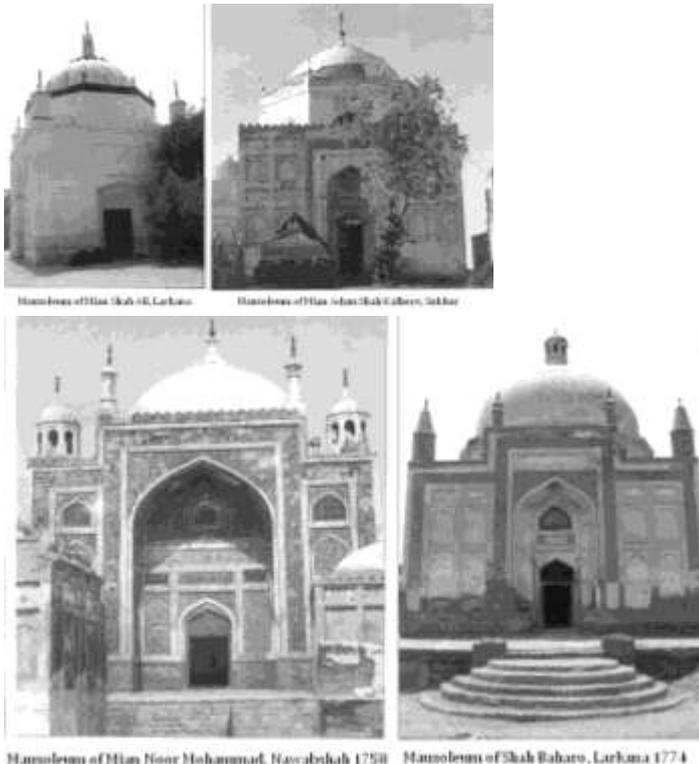


Figure 6 Mausoleums constructed in Sindh under Ghulam Shah Kalhoro
Source: Bokhari, *Kalhor Period Architecture*

3 Functional Evolution of Shrine

The attached map (Figure 7) summarizes the expansion that the shrine has undergone over the past three centuries. During the lifetime of Bhitai (1742-1752), the shrine was used largely as a Sufi learning center, a *khanqah*, with the saint as acting authority composing poetry and music as a part of their daily sessions of *zikr* (praise of Allah). His fakirs³ followed him, learned from him and contributed to this as well. At the shrine are the physical markers of his seating place, his old and later residence and a simple mosque (later reconstructed and ornamented) where prayers were conducted. The large outer open space was a later expansion in the 1980s, following the removal of mud brick housing from this space, to accommodate a larger number of people within the shrine’s boundaries.

Up until 1960, the shrine was managed by the extended family of Bhitai. The National / provincial department of *Awqaf*⁴ was then set up for better facilitation and management of shrines and other religious spaces. Addition of public facilities such as dispensary, toilets etc. was done. The change in the management system of the shrine from a familial to a bureaucratic system led to a change in the culture of the management itself. This is not to say that one was better than the other. It is to highlight the change itself. It marks the arrival of a ‘modern’ system described as ‘national’ identifying the shrine to be a national heritage.

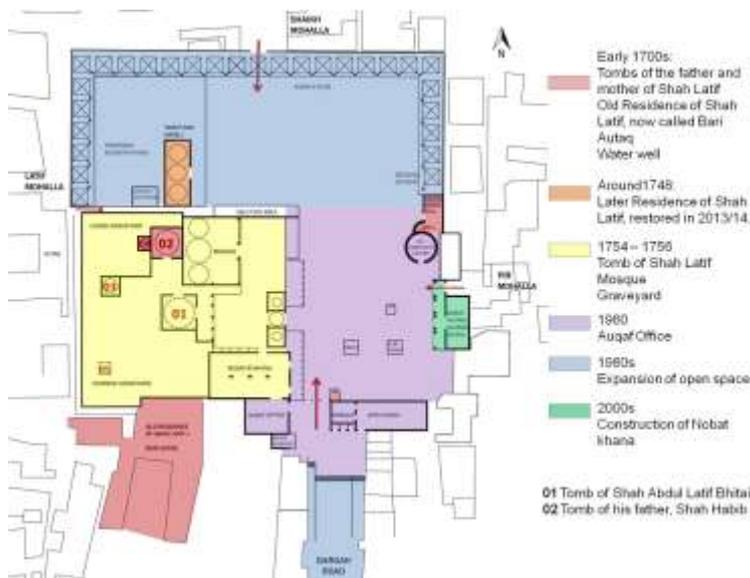


Figure 7 Physical evolution of the Shrine of Shah Abdul Latif Bhitai, Bhitshah, Sindh

Source: Author, Phd Fieldwork 2014/15

Major expansion works were undertaken in the 1980s under the instructions of then government of Benazir Bhutto (daughter of Z. A. Bhutto). Dargah Road, marking the main entrance axis into the shrine, was given proper shape and name. A big flight of steps was constructed before this entrance and temporary shops were replaced with shops of permanent construction. Marble flooring was laid throughout the shrine.

Over time, the Shrine has played multiple functions within the town and the region.

- A Sufi learning center, a *khanqah* (1742-1754)
- A *dargah*, a shrine complex (1754 -)
- Public space of the town (1960 -):
- Political space
- Recreation and relief – local tourism and a public space of the town

The following matrix (Table 1) summarizes the different evolution phases of the shrine, giving the political regime, and parallel town development that influenced the functional change of the shrine.

Time period	Political Regime	Economic System	Planning
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1742 – 1754	Saint's Authority	Rural economy	Village settlement
1754- 1947	Kingdom Colonial rule	Rural economy / Rural center	Organic settlement
1947-2004	Post colonial democracy	Local craft production and trade	Modernist planning of Cultural City
2005 – 2014	Post colonial democracy	Hybrid; semi-urban center for rural areas, market for local crafts.	Networking Infrastructure improvements,

Table 1 Evolution phases of the town

Source: Generated by Author using the works of Arif Hasan and Sukanya Krishnamurthy as a reference

Divided into four main phases, the first phase

marks the formation of the *khanqah* during the lifetime of the saint. The second phase is the golden age of the shrine spread over two centuries, it is the time when the shrine and the settlement consolidate in physical and social terms. According to Halbwegs (1941), for a collective group memory, the greatest part of its memory span is the time during which nothing radically changes, when life is content with repetition in an essentially unaltered way. During the two centuries, the subcontinent's political history underwent major changes, however Bhitshah carried on its rhythmic pace of rituals affected little by it. The little change in population of settlement between 1902 (2382) and 1960 (2862) is an indicator of its constancy during this long phase.

The third phase of the shrine's development, during the postcolonial democratic regime is essential as the shrine 'image' is used as an inspiration for the development of the town as a 'culture city' on modernist principles, albeit supporting traditional values. The function of the government as a facilitator and welfare supporter of the indigenous people is of remarkable importance. The formation of the Bhitshah Cultural Center, planning of the town as a Culture City⁵, laying the foundation of a formal music school and the extension of the *Urs*, the saint's death anniversary as a formal three day festival with highlighted participation of the government are indicators of the government's ownership and a clear prescription of its role.

The fourth phase of the shrine's functional evolution is marked by a failure of the government to fulfill its role as a provider, marking an increase in the role of NGOs and social work organizations within town and district. The shrine in this phase takes on a new role as a public space, influenced by modern communication technologies supporting people's awareness campaigns and demonstrations.

The following sections elaborate on the different roles played by the shrine in its physical, socio-political and cultural context.

3.1 The khanqah

The *khanqah* can be described as a Sufi learning institution dating as far back as the late 10th century. Travel lodging houses situated along popular routes of travelling (using animal driven modes), the *khanqahs* offered service and support to the travelling fakirs/ sufis⁶. Travelling, a common activity of the Sufi group was considered a way of seeking knowledge and wisdom. Typically, the *khanqah* was hosted by the people who serviced or managed the place, the *mutawalli* (trustee), *gadi nashin*⁷ and / or family of the saint. The place hosted two types of visitors or guests including one who paid their respects to the saint, prayed for the saint and for themselves and left; the second were those who stayed there. The hosts earned their livelihood through *nazranas* (gifts) given by the visitors at the shrine. The *mutawalli* or *wakf*⁸ management employees paid special attention to the visitors and facilitated them in different ways to satisfy them 'as clients' or 'special guests' (Shahzad 2007).

The Shrine of Shah Abdul Latif Bhitai also functioned as a *khanqah* during his lifetime. As a social institution, the Sufi saint gave training to his spiritual disciples, 'leading them through a succession of stages to experience the Divine Reality (*haqiqat*)' (Shahzad 2014: 7).

It acted as the center of social and cultural life. Community activities such as offering free food (langar) and drinking water (sabeel) to all without any social / class distinctions were regular (Shahzad 2007; 2014). The khanqah (and its hosts) was known for its generous, welcoming and humble disposition.

3.2 Shrine Complex - As a dargah

After the death of the saint, and the tomb construction, the *khanqah* developed into what it is now referred to, as a *dargah*. A Persian word, the literal meaning of *dargah* is 'a palace' or 'royal court'. While the *khanqah* operated under the live authority of the saint, as a Sufi learning center, the *dargah* is basically a place of

eneration of the saint. It has evolved into a complex with the addition of various public services. A dargah complex generally includes multiple courtyards, a *naubat khana* (music house), *langer khana*, *Shifa khana* (dispensary), library, *musafer khana* (resting hall), public toilets and drinking water facilities. The *dargah* is hence more elaborate than a *khanqah* and no longer aims to provide spiritual training (Shahzad 2014). Catering to larger numbers of population and a change in the management system from a private welfare to a public welfare institution are major reasons for this change.

The performance of rituals continues at the shrine complex, as the traditional way of group commemoration. A ritual can be described,

‘as a formalized, rule bound, structured and repetitive activity of a symbolic character restricted to specific times and places, which focuses the attention of participants and observers on objects of thought and feeling which they hold to be of special significance’ (Lukes 1977:54; Kong and Yeoh 1997). ...’These moments of movement and stillness are full of meaning within the context of the organizing group.’ (Busteed in: Moore et al. 2007)⁹

Rituals at the Shrine of Shah Abdul Latif Bhitai create a commemorative structural framework, constant repetition of which generates a sense of order and continuity. The daily performance ritual of the recitation of the poetry of Shah Latif, compiled as *Shah jo Risalo* is a major component of the collective memory of Bhitai and his fakirs. Well rooted within its social and cultural context, the poetry symbolically represents the people of Sindh. The following are some its salient features that allow it to continue being a symbol of identity and representation of multiple social groups.

- Shah’s poetry is in the ancient Sindhi language. Understood by the people of its time, it continues to be well remembered and is considered to be part of the cultural development in language and literature for the region. It is well-owned and remembered by the average Sindhi (Fieldwork 2014-15).
- The poetry of Shah Latif is based on ancient true legends of the region. Seven folk tales make the major content of Shah-jo-Risalo. Shah Latif traveled through different parts of the region to witness the geography of places associated with each tale well articulated in his poetry. It is rich with graphic details of the folk tales that he uses to express human relationship with Divinity. Quoting Samina Quraeshi (2009) who articulates this well:
 - “Through the use of local folk tales, Shah Abdul Latif’s poetry elaborates the soul’s movements: hope, longing, fear, annihilation, and finally union: these are the stages of the ‘interior journey’ toward the Divine. The use of folk legends was a well-established tradition in religious teaching in the region, and Sufi teachers tapped it since their audience was familiar with these tragic tales and could identify with the universal sentiments and the local customs and geography that they referred to.” (p. 109)
 - Shah Latif structured the poetry into modes of the Indian classical music, relating to times of the day, seasons, and moods for major religious occasions. The compositions were done with the help of other fakirs singing classical music from the subcontinent. The well structured form of classical music has strengthened the rhythm of this ritual / form of collective memory.

The performance is representative of Sufism in general; of a specific Sufi order; of Sindhi culture and heritage; and finally of the saint Shah Abdul Latif Bhitai and his fakirs. (Figure 8)



Figure 8 Daily performance ritual at the Shrine of Shah Abdul Latif Bhitai,
December 2014

Source: Author

The music sessions take place in three shifts, continuing through most of the day with breaks for meals and prayer times only. A total of 17 people play in one day, in different shifts altogether. The seven days of the week are distributed among the estimated number of 80 fakirs of Bhitshah who are musicians.

While the *khanqah* no longer exists with its disciplinary saint authority the tradition of the learning of music performances at the shrine continues. This process preserves an important figment of the Sufi learning institution due to its rigorousness and the need to understand it well in order to perform it. One has to acquaint oneself with the language and meaning of the ancient Sindhi to attain the correct tones, moods and manner of singing. The poetry in its words consists the essence, the detail and the wholesome picture of the teaching.

The training of the Sindhi classical music along with learning the poetry within a traditional learning format retains some important characteristics of the spiritual training. This training offers the following:

- An in-depth understanding of the meaning and content of Shah's poetry;
- A respect for the fakirs and their simplistic but generous life style;
- Inculcates love of Divinity
- Nurtures the tradition of commemoration, passing on the knowledge

The collective memory (in the form of poetry, music and the rituals) and its passing on to people interested (locals and foreigners) or those responsible through generations is a way of keeping the Sufi center / *khanqah* as a living symbol of Sufi heritage.

'Spiritual training' undertaken by the mystics is strict, disciplinary and requires following a saint's instructions for long time periods, even a lifetime. The learning of poetry and its performance on the *tambura*, however, is only an introduction to such training, which is more religious than cultural.

The numerous fakirs are followers of the saint and do not necessarily invent, evolve, adapt his teaching to the changing world. The students individually interpret the teachings and adapt to this, make individual modifications to their lives as they feel suited (eg. Muhammad Ismail Fakir, 22 yrs)¹⁰.

The shrine's evolution as a *dargah* is marked by the addition of the government department of *Awkaf* to the actors involved in the management of the shrine and related heritage. As a *khanqah*, the shrine was managed by the saint, his family and his fakirs. Different fakirs were attributed different responsibilities and different aspects of the collective memory for preservation and continuation. *Tamrani* fakirs (responsible for music performance), *Mungenhar* fakirs (responsible for *dhamaal* drumming), *Autari* fakirs (responsible for management of resting spaces for visitors locally called *Autaq*, outside the shrine) are some examples.

The differences between the traditional and the *Awkaf* system of management are distinct. The traditional is familial, approved and consented within community, trust factors developed through dedicated deliverance of responsibility, the modern mechanism is bureaucratic, with its center provincial, incorporating change in administrative appointments every few years with personnel appointed sometimes having little knowledge about the culture of shrines. Based on the civil court orders and jurisprudence, it is of marked difference from the traditional system. Physical infrastructure and building upgradation, financial management are undertaken by the *Awkaf*. The two systems, despite the differences, coexist harmoniously, each delivering their roles and mutually supporting the other.¹¹ It is a rare example of a living heritage that continues to inspire and attract people.

This addition to the management system marks a major change in the regional political and administrative context. The following section elaborates on the physical and socio-cultural changes at the shrine, a response to the evolving context.

3.3 The Shrine as a Public Space of the town

The shrine is a physical and socio-cultural center of the town. Besides being a sacred space, the shrine's open courts fulfill functions of a public collective space of the small town. Not all shrines have this characteristic. The shrine of Bhitai is unique hence and comparable to other shrines in small towns where its presence and form plays a significant role in the immediate and city context. The term 'public space' applies to different scales and uses. City level and neighbourhood level public spaces play numerous roles catering to different user types (Jacobs 1961; Madanipour 1991). The shrine of Bhitai qualifies as a public space at the town level.

The shrine is a meeting point, an orientation point, a point to acquire information; for residents of different neighbourhoods, for friends, for learners of music, for travelers etc.

It is open and accessible to all. It provides important civic services like public washrooms, drinking water, free food, shelter and bedding for night stays, attracting people to it including local tourists, residents and travelers. Its ease of accessibility and multiple meanings allow for a mix of activities to take place at the shrine. The fact that it is a strictly pedestrian zone is of importance. In respect of its sanctity, people take off their shoes, dress appropriately and feel at ease at the *mazar*. These customs highlight the open courts of the shrine as the face / front of the town. Multiple levels of ownership, care of its visitors and a 'code of behaviour' create a symbolic language for this as a public space. It is representational of the town and its people – the geometry of the large court and its relationship to the immediate neighbourhood context as mentioned earlier highlights this role. On entering the open court of the shrine and standing in its center, the vastness of the space and the architecture of the shrine gives 'a sense of arrival' in the town itself. The chaotic experience of the town's streets is a complete juxtaposition to this. People take ownership of the space, keeping it clean, giving respect to the environment and the people.

The Shrine is a **political space**. The coming of government officials and important people to the shrine is a statement for the small town and its people. Before elections in particular, reported Bhitshah residents (PhD Fieldwork 2014/15), the party nominees come to pay their respects at the shrine. In the small town, everybody instantly knows of their presence and debate over its favourability for future purposes.

The interpretation and use of the shrine as a political public space has come about within the postcolonial democratic regime, after the 1960s when the government took ownership of the place and created *national* alignments with it, extending it beyond the 'sacred space' that it originally was. The 1980s expansion of open courts around shrine has added to this experience.

The shrine is often used for media coverage of such activities, among others. I witnessed for instance a demonstration against the terrorist attack in Peshawar¹² about a week before my visit. Candles were lit and the young and old stood in solidarity holding placards and with prayers for the victims of the attack in the public space of the shrine. (Figure 9)



Figure 9 The Shrine as a Political Space

Source: Bhitshah Youth Organization (BYO), December 2014

In my interviews with youth organizations doing social work in the town, it was intriguing to learn that many of their campaigns start at the shrine. The youth get together at the shrine to start off on an activity. The cleaning week undertaken by the Bhitshah Youth Organization (BYO) began with the cleaning of the shrine's public space and the adjoining streets. Such self-help campaigns are a recent occurrence at Bhitshah since 2004, a reaction to the failure of the government administrative and planning mechanisms generally in most parts of the country. They are an indicator of the generation of civil movements.

The shrine of Shah Abdul Latif Bhitai is representative of the town of Bhitshah. This is not to say that all shrines feature such a role.

People also come to the shrine for **recreation and relief** from daily routine. Interviews with the locals revealed a general increase in the use of the shrine for recreation. The music performances make it an attractive local tourist spot. People from nearby villages and towns come to it on motorbikes, personal vehicles or by public transport to spend their weekend evenings, relax after a working week, to hang out with friends and family at the shrine. In my interviews with the residents of Bhitshah, outside the shrine, their days of visit to the shrine with family are usually fixed. As evenings out, they offer prayers mixed with recreation. Sindhis from other cities / towns around Bhitshah are commonly observed taking pictures of themselves in front of the shrine. On weekend evenings, the shrine is filled with outsiders listening and enjoying the performance with friends and family. Within families, I observed that elder people were more into veneration, while the younger people were attracted to the shrine mostly for recreation. Groups of men and girls I interviewed, verified this to be their purpose of attraction. 'It is a lovely way to spend an evening with friends', remarked a middle aged Sindhi man. They did not really understand the meaning and purpose behind it, but found it to be a source of entertainment (Figure 10).



Figure 10 The Shrine as a recreation space

Source: Author, January 2015

The residents of Bhitshah (in my interviews) on the other hand, adamantly insisted that the shrine was primarily a religious place. My target group for these included the youth (teenagers) along with the adults. Its recreation function was looked at as a by-product. Yet proud pictures in front of the shrine showed that it was an important part of the cultural identity of the Sindhis. Urban settings offer several forms of public recreation, but for rural settings, such *mazars* and in particular that of Shah Abdul Latif Bhitai acts as a place of cultural recreation.

4 Conclusion

The shrine of Shah Abdul Latif Bhitai is primarily a sacred precinct. It is also more than just a religious space. It is the central public space, and the primary element of the town of Bhitshah.

Geographically central, traditionally sacred, the shrine plays multiple roles as its socio-political contexts evolve. As a pedestrian zone, managed and maintained by the government administration, it is a representative public space of the town. Government officials, political party representatives as well as the civil society use it as a political space. The fakirs, the *Awkaf* management and the *Gadi Nashin's* small interventions all play different roles of ownership and management of shrine.

The intertwining of religion and culture in the Muslim context particularly within Sufi heritage is such that it is difficult to separate. The shrine is a cultural place, the poetry and the classical performance reverberating through the town, representing the regional identity of Sindh. The additive roles of the shrine create a richer experience of the place, making it a living heritage for the fakirs and the family of Bhitai, the residents of the

town and a cultural identity for the region of Sindh and its people. It is therefore a national heritage, not to forget an international Sufi heritage.

Declaration of Interest Statement

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There is no conflict of interests to declare.

Date: 31 December 2025

References

¹ As of 2014, estimates projected by the Town Municipal Authority

² This demographic composition changed drastically in 1947 as Hindus migrated to India and Muslims in large numbers came to Pakistan at Independence with 1951 census showing 97 % Muslims.

³ Fakir: comes from the Arabic word 'fakr' denoting one who lives simply; In this context, it defines a devotee of saint who wishes to take responsibility of preserving and carrying forward a part of the saint's legacy / social memory.

⁴ Awkaf: plural of 'wakf', an Arabic word, meaning Endowment. It was started as an urban institution in the late 6th century through many parts of the Muslim context. In Pakistan, the Awkaf department was formulated as a government department in 1960 for the purpose of management of shrines and religious spaces. It is thereby an evolution of the institution from a private trust to a bureaucratic management. Its objectives include maintenance of the shrines; and provision of facilities for its visitors. It undertakes physical maintenance, addition, expansion and reconstruction of buildings within its precinct; also undertakes to hold events on major occasions, providing protocol for the government officials. It is an autonomous department running on the nazranas received at shrines.

⁵ Culture City: Plans for making Bhitshah into an International Culture City were undertaken in 1950s. Artisans undertaking age-old specialized crafts production in the region were invited to come and settle in the town. A modernist plan accommodated their housing and livelihood needs with workshop and display centers aiming to project Bhitshah as an exclusive cultural center. The crafts included tile work Kashi, lacquered wood work Jandi, dyed and blockprinted textile craft Ajrak, embroidered textile craft Susi and handwoven cotton fabric Khaadi. Plans were partially implemented due to political factors and only two artisan types were able to settle in the town, the Ajrak and Jandi craftsmen.

⁶ fakirs/ sufis: The two are distinguished by their grades of religiosity.

⁷ Gadi Nashin: The designated title bearer/ representative of the saint's family.

⁸ Wakf: Local term for a trust dating to 7th century; Mutawalli: In this context is the Trustee

⁹ Mervyn Busted "Fostered to trouble the Next Generation": Contesting the Ownership of the Martyrs Commemoration Ritual in Manchester 1888 – 1921", in: Moore, Niamh; Whelan, Yvonne (eds) (2007) *Heritage, Memory and the Politics of Identity – New Perspectives on the Cultural Landscape*, UK: Ashgate Publishing.

¹⁰ Profile of Fakir Muhammad Ismail (Interview Jan 2015): Fakir Muhammad Ismail has chosen to be a fakir and is not obliged to be one through his family. He is a graduate of Sindh University, has a fulltime job at an engineering firm. As a fakir, he performs on weekends at the shrine along with a weekly evening job as a radio jockey running an interactive program on Shah Abdul Latif. He is an example of present day fakir, an evolved version keeping in stride with his expectations of the modern world.

¹¹ There are issues and challenges faced by the two social structures, however, that is not within the scope of this paper.

¹² Peshawar is the capital of the northern province, Khyber PukhtunKhwa of Pakistan.

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