

# Embodying Sufism: The Spiritual Culture of Third Gender (Khwaja Sira) Communities in Pakistan

*Khwaja Sira is the term for the 'third gender' community in Pakistan. As in many other nations around the world, they have been systematically marginalised in Pakistan too. Although their rights and identity were recently recognised in law, the implementation of the legal provisions remains patchy. Amen Jaffer, however, shows how the khwaja siras have for long been opting into the praxis of the spiritually-venerated sufi culture to carve out a space for themselves amid the mores and structures of Pakistani society.*

[Khwaja siras](#) (also known as *hijras* in South Asia) are a community whose rights and gender identity have become a much-debated public issue in Pakistan. Due to the landmark 2011 judgment of the Supreme Court of Pakistan and the 2018 Transgender Rights Bill, they have now been legally recognised as a third gender with fundamental rights of citizenship.

However, as the political and legal struggles for implementing these rights unfolded, the question of *khwaja sira* rights turned into a public debate on the very constitution of their gender. When these discussions played out in courtrooms and media spaces, the authenticity of the *khwaja sira* gender came under increased scrutiny.

A dominant position in these debates characterised *khwaja siras* as a biological category and following this characterisation, the state institutions mandated with certifying their citizenship demanded medical examinations as proof of their third gender. One response to this discourse was to highlight its inherent discrimination, but some *khwaja siras* took an entirely different line of reasoning – they shifted the terrain of this debate to their soul.

Emphasising the mismatch between their visible bodies (*hazir*) and the invisible soul (*ruh*), they presented the *khwaja sira* as a feminine soul that was stuck in a masculine body.

In presenting this definition of their gender and seeking legitimacy for it, *khwaja siras* seek to define the distinctiveness of their soul. **It is not just any feminine soul but one endowed with certain spiritual qualities.**

My research on *khwaja siras* in Lahore demonstrates that this spiritual self is created and lived through deep engagements with [Sufi](#) theological concepts and participation in the culture of Sufi shrines in Pakistan. Sufi shrines are also viewed by *khwaja siras* as critical to gaining a legitimacy for their position and role within the social order, which is otherwise denied to them. Though set apart from society and embedded in alternative kin organisations with their own rituals, practices, rules, language, relations and castes, etc, *khwaja siras* are still deeply connected to the social and cultural life of Sufi shrines. Importantly, they do not just participate in shrine activities but use spiritual categories derived from shrine culture to order their own existence. My argument, in this post, for how they do so unfolds at three different levels or registers. First, I examine the ways in which the Sufi concept of [faqiri](#) informs the construction of the *khwaja sira* self. Second, I direct my attention to the significance of the Sufi relation of [pir-murid](#) for the organisation of *khwaja siras* as a distinct social body. Finally, I explore Sufi shrines as a key social space for participating in public life for *khwaja siras* in Pakistan.

## The Concept of *Faqiri* and the *Khwaja Sira* Self

The term *faqir* refers to spiritual ascetics who actively reject the world under the inspiration of divine love. Generally viewed as holy men who have disembedded themselves from society to dedicate their lives to God, they are often associated with Sufi saints and shrines that they have vowed to serve. A number of *khwaja siras* also present themselves as *faqirs*, who have severed ties with the world and chosen the path of God.

*Faqiri* signifies sacrifice as it involves leaving behind the comforts, safety and predictability of family and society to embark into the perils of the unknown. Since the histories of loss and sacrifice are inscribed into the very constitution of *khwaja siras*, one can see the appeal of *faqiri* for them. Identifying as a *faqir* enables them to make sense of their social position in spiritual terms by tapping into a broadly understood syntax for dignifying the distance travelled by their souls and bodies from the binary gender order.

The concept also allows me to understand their social ostracisation as not just an exclusion but a source of their spiritual powers to heal and bless. *Khwaja siras* have to go against institutional structures and social practices that impose and sustain a binary-gender universe. In such a context,

*faqiri* serves as a powerful statement legitimising their alternative lifestyles and communities because it connects to a long history of reverence for ascetic renunciation that has been a part of the Islamic tradition since its formative years.

### Spiritualising the *Khwaja Sira* Community Structure

*Khwaja siras* not only challenge the dominant binary-gender order of society, but also question individual-centred notions of gender. This is because *khwaja sira* is not just an identity but also a community. Becoming a *khwaja sira* involves the severance of ties with one's natal family and blood relations to join and live in a separate social body that is based on voluntary but binding and clearly defined non-blood relations. However, the *khwaja sira* community and especially the *guru-chela* (teacher-disciple) relation, which is its bedrock, is viewed as morally suspicious by their critics. Such critics point to the unnaturalness of this social structure and condemn what they believe are signs of homosexuality permitted within these structures. *Khwaja siras* respond to such allegations by linking the *guru-chela* relation to the more respected Sufi affiliation between *pir* (spiritual guide) and *murid* (follower). Also a non-blood relation, the affinity between a *pir* and *murid* is venerated as a sacred link that enables the transmission of spiritual knowledge and powers.

By spiritualising their own *guru-chela* relation in this way, *khwaja siras* make a claim to a moral basis for their community.

### Sufi Shrines As Seminal Spaces for the Performance of *Khwaja Sira* Gender and Identity

Sufi shrines are also at the epicentre of *khwaja siras'* public life. Partly this is because it is one of the few hegemonic institutions that is open to them and allows them to participate in various practices and rituals. The *urs* celebrations in shrines on the occasion of a saint's death anniversary are especially important for *khwaja siras* and they perform ritual roles in many of them. Another striking feature of their participation in shrine culture is the ways in which certain cultural practices, important to *khwaja siras* but generally considered deviant, are not only acceptable but even celebrated there. An illustrative example of this enmeshment is dancing, which is one of the most popular forms of expression, as well as economic livelihood, for *khwaja siras*. While they are frequently hired for entertainment at weddings and parties, their dancing on such occasions is viewed in eroticised and immoral terms. However, *dhamal*, a popular dance form in Sufi *urs*, is seen in an entirely different light. It is not even considered a dance, but viewed as the performance of devotion, of celebrating the saints and praying; that is a moral-religious action. Likening them to sparrows, a number of saints are known to appreciate the performative styles of *khwaja siras*. This use of this metaphor suggests a positive valuation of the restless energy, exaggerated mannerisms and gestures that *khwaja siras* emphasise in the presentation of their gender. Thus, *khwaja siras* are encouraged to express those very aspects of their performativity that are stigmatised in other domains.

Clearly, there are important affinities between Sufi shrines in Pakistan and the milieu in which *khwaja siras* spend most of their lives. From the way they relate to shrines and speak about them, it is apparent that *khwaja siras* consider them a key part of their everyday lives. Whether it is the regularity of their visits or the familiarity and ease with which they evoke and inhabit its culture, their relationship with shrines is one of deep intimacy. This is because shrines accommodate the very cultural norms of this group that are considered deviant in other social institutions.

Sufi culture, therefore, is not just a source of moral legitimacy but also a site for participating and seeking pleasure in a rich public life without compromising the values and ways of life that are held so dear for *khwaja siras*.

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*The views expressed here are those of the author and not of the 'South Asia @ LSE' blog, the LSE South Asia Centre, or the London School of Economics and Political Science.*