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 fagiri 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 sira 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 sira, one can see the appeal of faqir 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 sira have to go against institutional structures and social practices that impose and sustain a binary-gender universe. In such a context,

faqir 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 sira 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 unnaturality of this social structure and condemn what they believe are signs of homosexuality permitted within these structures. Khwaja sira 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 sira 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 sira’s public life. Partly this is because it is one 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 sira 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 sira 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 sira. While they are frequently hired for entertainment at weddings and parties, their dancing on such occasions is viewed in eroticised and immoral terms. However, dhamaal, 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. Liking them to sparrows, a number of saints are known to appreciate the performatives of khwaja sira. This use of this metaphor suggests a positive valuation of the restless energy, exaggerated mannerisms and gestures that khwaja sira emphasise in the presentation of their gender. Thus, khwaja sira 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 sira spend most of their lives. From the way they relate to shrines and speak about them, it is apparent that khwaja sira 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.

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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 sira.

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