

South Asia
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Cultivation and Conversion in Multan

The recent scholarship on the process of Islamization in India has stimulated a debate on the connections between cultivation, sedentarization and conversion in South Asia.¹ Southwestern Punjab, and the Multan region in particular, has become the object of interesting discussions on the issue, given the crucial relationship it shows between ecology, social structure and religious identity.² After showing the relevant role of the Sufi *dargahs* (tombs) in the process of conversion, the following aims to emphasize that Islamization in Multan does not seem to be connected with cultivation and sedentarization, which developed only in the late 19th century under the British colonization schemes. The process seemed to take place in an environment which remained largely nomadic or semi-nomadic until the colonial period.

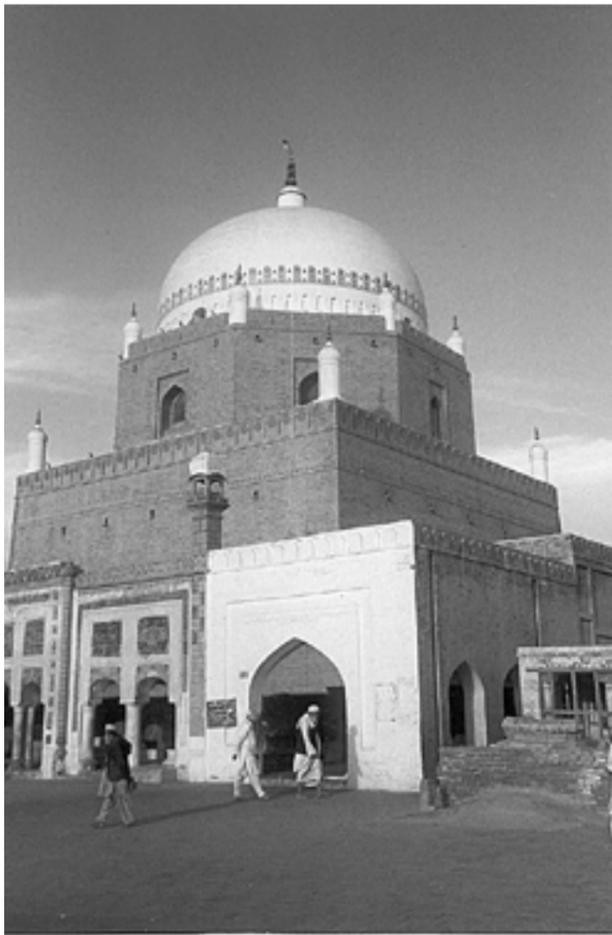


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Dargah of Shaikh Bahawal Haq

An urban settlement of considerable antiquity in the lower Indus valley, Multan was originally close to the confluence of the Chenab and Ravi rivers, a fact which could explain the early belief in the sanctity of the place by the Hindu population. The city has been for centuries a centre of Hindu pilgrimage, thanks to the presence of two famous *mandirs*, the Temple of the Sun and the Prhaladpuri temple. Multan was also the centre of a large commercial and agricultural system. During the reign of the Mughal emperor Aurangzeb (1658–1707), it was the capital of one of the main *subahs* (provinces), originally comprising three *sarkars* (districts) and 88 *paraganahs* (administrative sub-divisions). The Mughal province covered the entire southern Punjab, part of eastern Baluchistan and northern Sind. Annexed by the Sikh state in 1818, Multan was the capital of a largely autonomous province, particularly under the *diwans* Sawan Mal and Mul Raj. Both belonged to the *khatri* Hindu caste that has played an important political and economic role in southern Punjab. However, the growing rivalry between Multan and Lahore in the 19th century and the British interference in the Punjabi political scene provoked the revolt of the Multan garrison in 1848 and the assassination of the British officers Vans Agnew and Anderson, finally causing the second Sikh war and the annexation of the Punjab to the Raj.

Islam and the territory

The British district constituted approximately a triangle delimited by the districts of Muzaffargarh, Jhang, Montgomery, and the State of Bahawalpur. The total area of the district in 1881 was about 5,880 square miles. The basic element of the environment was the scarcity of rain, which made irrigation central to the agricultural life of the district. The territory of Multan was traditionally classified on the basis of the availability of water, in terms of riverain areas (*hithar*); the farther lands, which were partially cultivable through artificial irrigation (*utar*); and the central, arid lands, considered uncultivable (*bar*).

Most of the villages and *qasbahs* were situated near the river courses, while the *bar* lands were mainly inhabited by nomadic tribes that lived on pasturage and a limited trade. However, settled and nomadic peoples did not live in separate worlds. The *bar* lands were not only used by the nomadic tribes of the district but also by the people of the settled areas for the pasturage of their cattle. In Multan pasturage and breeding integrated the income of the settled areas. Moreover, given the scarcity of food, traditionally the cattle had to 'wander over wide tracts in search of food',³ a fact which made a conflict possible between settled and nomadic people.

The relevance of the Sufi *dargahs* in southern Punjab lies exactly in the need for mediation between potentially conflicting interests. As Richard Eaton has noted, the 'potential conflict' between pastoralists and riverine people was mitigated by the fact that the pastoralists needed access to the settled world for water, trade, and for 'providing the rituals and belief structures that made up their religious system'.⁴ As in many Muslim societies, in the Punjab the structures of devotional Islam served to integrate the settled and the nomadic-pastoral worlds. This conclusion seems confirmed by the connections between the *dargahs* and the rural population, represented by the traditions of conversion to Islam through the preaching of Muslim saints, often identified with Shaikh Farid-al Din Shakarganj of Pakpattan (d. 1265) or with the Multani saints: Shaikh Bahawal Haq Zakariya (d. 1262), Shaikh Musa Pak Shahid Gilani (d. 1592) and Shah Yussuf Gardezi (d. 1136).

These traditions emphasize the centrality of the myth of the saints for the religious identity of the rural population. This sense of identity was publicly emphasized at occasions such as the *sajjada nashins*' (the custodians of the tombs') visits to the *murids* (disciples) at their villages and during the *urs*, the celebrations in memory of a Muslim saint (literally his 'wedding' with God). The *urs* were occasions that served to represent the legitimating bases of the *sajjada nashin* and his family. Particularly famous was the *urs* at the tomb of Shaikh Bahawal Haq in the month of *safar*. In the words of the Commissioner of Multan in 1856, this shrine was 'a celebrated place of pilgrimage for the Scindians'.⁵ The connections between the tribes and the holy families were even crystallized in the toponymy of the villages. Be-

tween 1885 and 1900, the then settlement officer Edward Maclagan observed that the Sufi saints were frequently recorded in local memory not only as founders but even as purchasers of villages, a fact that seemed to represent spiritual authority rather than actual sale.⁶

Sedentarization

This evidence supports the thesis proposed by Richard Eaton and David Gilmartin, that the *dargahs* in southern Punjab integrated, culturally and politically, the marginal social groups into the orbit of Islam.⁷ However, while Eaton proposes a connection between conversion, cultivation and sedentarization of the Jat tribes of southern Punjab, this relationship is problematic in the case of Multan, where Islam proceeded in a context that remained largely nomadic or semi-nomadic until recent years.

Due to the scarcity of rains, apart from the riverain lands, cultivation in the Multan region necessitated artificial irrigation. The use of the 'Persian wheel', a peculiar system which was in use in the Punjab as early as the 16th century, and considered by Prof. Irfan Habib as an important factor of change in the economy of the Punjab, does not seem to have influenced in a significant way the socioeconomic structure of this territory. Even during the Mughal period, which is commonly regarded as the beginning of large-scale cultivation, in the Punjab as in India generally, cultivation did not make any real progress in the *bar* territory. In the early 18th century, after 200 years of Mughal rule, cultivation in Multan was still limited to the fertile *hithar* lands. A partial extension of the cultivation towards the *bar* highlands began many years later under the Nawabs of Multan and Bahawalpur in the mid-18th century. This fact was caused in large part by the greater political autonomy enjoyed by the Nawabs of Multan and Bahawalpur with the passage of the sovereignty from the Mughal to the Afghan kingdom.⁸

Nevertheless, despite the flourishing of irrigation works in the region in the mid-18th century, these projects did not radically change the ecological structure that, at the beginning of colonial rule, was still quite sharply divided into fertile strips of irrigated areas along the rivers, mostly inhabited by settled Jat tribes, and arid, basically uncultivable lands at the centre of the *doabs*. These lands were still in the late 19th century 'a grazing ground for sheep and a browsing ground for goats and camels' as a British observer recorded, and were populated by nomadic tribes – like the Langrial and the Hiraj – that still lived of pastoralism and of a limited trade with the settled world.

Conclusion

Our evidence would suggest that in the Multan area the link between Islamization and agriculture cannot be sustained. Local traditions and colonial sources describe an environment in which nomadic tribes were gradually drawn into the fold of Islam by the interaction with the Sufi tombs, but did not abandon the traditional lifestyle till very recently. In 1881 the Muslim population of the

district was recorded in the official census as being slightly less than 79%; still, apart from the riverain, the sedentary lifestyle was not accepted by the population. While confirming the relevance of the *dargahs* and their custodians as mediators between socioeconomic worlds and as vehicles for Islamization, our research suggests that this process be placed in a context where sedentarization and cultivation tended to proceed with greater difficulty than previously suspected.

Of course the situation was to change radically with the beginning of the Canal Colonies' projects that interested the Multan district with the Sidhni Colony (from 1886 to 1888), the Lower Bari Doab Colony (from 1914 to 1924), and with the Nili Bar Colony (started in 1926 and concluded in the 1940s). By promoting cultivation into the *bar* highlands and, more importantly, by creating colonies of cultivators from different areas of the Punjab, the social and ecological configuration of the district, and the traditional relationship between the pastoral tribes and the environment were ultimately transformed.

Notes

- Richard Eaton, 'The Political and Religious Authority of the Shrine of Baba Farid in Pakpattan, Punjab', in Barbara Metcalf (ed.), *Moral Conduct and Authority: The Place of Adab in South Asian Islam* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1984); *Ibid.*, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier, 1203–1760* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); and David Gilmartin, 'Shrines, Succession, and Sources of Moral Authority', in Metcalf (1984).
- See, for example, Karin de Vries, 'Pirs and Pastoralists along the Agrarian Frontier of Multan, 1886–1947', *IIAS Newsletter* 24 (2001): 9.
- James Douie, *Punjab Settlement Manual* (1899; reprint Lahore: Government Printing Punjab, 1930), 76.
- Eaton (1984), 342.
- W. P. Andrew, *Indus and its Province. Their Political and Commercial Importance Considered in Connexion with Improved Means of Communication* (1858; reprint, Karachi: Indus Publications, 1986), 148.
- Edward Maclagan, 'Notes on Village Names and History', (manuscript, District Record Room, Multan, 1900).
- Eaton (1984); Gilmartin (1984).
- For major details, see *Multan District Gazetteer, 1923–4* (Lahore: Government Printing Punjab), 187–202; Ashiq Muhammad Khan Durrani, *Multan under the Afghans, 1752–1818* (Multan: Bazm-e Saqafat, 1981), 165–168.

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