

Book Review

Frembgen, Jürgen. W., *We are Lovers of Qalandar: Piety, Pilgrimage and Ritual in Pakistani Sufi Islam*. 192pp. Oxford University Press 2021.

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Lal Shahbaz Qalandar is not only Pakistan's most popular Sufi saint but also an iconic figure whose presence looms large over the country's religious, cultural, and public life. Given the diversity of his millions of devotees, it is not surprising that there is considerable variety in the ways they express their love and devotion for him. He is commemorated through ecstatic spirituality but also through Shia mourning rituals; devotees donate food at his shrine but many also share hashish in his name; they compose poetry and sing songs about him, name their businesses after him and even dedicate their life to serving him. Qalandar devotion has become such a significant part of Pakistani culture that entire genres of artistic expression, spanning the mediums of film, music, dance, poetry and visual art, have emerged around it. In *We are Lovers of the Qalandar*, Jürgen Wasim Frembgen makes sense of this popular phenomenon by centring his analysis on 'ordinary' devotees and their relation to the Qalandar. Adopting what he terms a "Sufism observed" approach, he focuses on three specific forms taken by their Qalandar devotion: 1) visual religious material; 2) pilgrimage networks 3) Sufi ritual of *dhamal*. He offers ethnographic descriptions and analysis of these forms by drawing on data collected over nineteen fieldtrips to Sindh and Punjab spread over twelve years from 2003 to 2015.

Frembgen's major contribution to furthering our understanding of Qalandar devotion lies in highlighting the expansiveness of its geography in contemporary Pakistan. Even though Shahbaz Qalandar's shrine is located in Sehwan in Sindh, Frembgen estimates that 70% of the devotees attending his *urs* (annual celebration of a saint's passing) actually belong to Punjab. Therefore, it makes sense for him to place Punjab, particularly Lahore and other cities of central Punjab, at the centre of his examination of Qalandar devotion. This is achieved in two ways. First, Frembgen's focus on what he calls "visual piety" introduces us to the significance of

"aesthetic objects" such as "common figurative and calligraphic artefacts as well as aesthetic expressions from the world of the pilgrims" as receptacles for carrying and accessing Qalandar's power and blessings. This investigation of material religion thus identifies an important physical conduit for transmitting Qalandar's presence beyond the space of his shrine. As Frembgen argues, these objects not only serve as a memory of the saint and a marker of identity but are "charged with saintly charisma and power" which is actively sought by devotees and shapes their behaviour.

Secondly, Frembgen highlights the significance of mass pilgrimage to Qalandar's shrine in Sehwan by Punjabis for the rapid expansion of Qalandar devotion in Pakistan. He attributes the emergence of this mass pilgrimage to the embrace of the Qalandar as their patron saint by Lahore's film and music industry (p.3). Certain leading lights of this industry not only put the Qalandar on celluloid and composed popular film songs dedicated to him, but they also played key roles in organising and promoting pilgrimage to his shrine complex. They organised musical events to celebrate him and formed and led *sangats* (pilgrimage associations) that quickly emerged as the paradigmatic social organisation for devotees undertaking the pilgrimage.

Frembgen's monograph consists of three main sections, spread across six chapters and organised around the themes of visual religion, pilgrimage and ritual. They are preceded by a foreword by Michel Boivin and a short introduction by Frembgen. Boivin provides some context to the book in his brief remarks about Sehwan and Shahbaz Qalandar's shrine as a field of study and Frembgen's contributions to it. In his introduction, Frembgen draws our attention to the contested biography of Shahbaz Qalandar and provides an outline of the book. However, in framing his study, he ignores much of the existing scholarship on the Qalandar in Pakistan as well as a

number of recently published ethnographic studies of Muslim shrines in India that have opened up new avenues for exploring Sufism in South Asia.¹

In chapters one and two, Frembgen examines a variety of media forms – posters, stickers, placards, banners, videos, photographs, etc. – that bring the sacred presence of the Qalandar into the homes, workplaces and other everyday spaces of devotees. Believed to be imbued with the power to bless and protect, the consumption of these mass-produced visual objects has become central to the expansion and popularity of Qalandar devotion. While Frembgen is cognizant of this importance, he spends most of these chapters on describing the visual representations of Qalandar, his followers and his shrine and misses the opportunity to explore the larger implication of this phenomenon. His material suggests that the Qalandar is the foremost saint of popular media in Pakistan. I would even argue that in contemporary Pakistan, he is constituted through the media in a double sense. Not only are devotional media objects central to the circulation of his presence, media forms created by Lahore’s film industry and other cultural producers have played a central role in driving pilgrimage to his shrine. This intertwining of popular media and Qalandar devotion deserves further reflection and raises a number of questions that Frembgen largely ignores. How do devotees accept the consumption of media objects as representative of the Qalandar? What is it about him compared to other Sufi saints in Pakistan that lends itself to mediatisation? How does this widespread consumption of the Qalandar through the media distinguish devotion to him from that offered to other Sufi saints?

Frembgen’s focus shifts to *sangats* (pilgrim associations) from Punjab in chapter three. Along with shedding light on the pilgrimage cycle, he describes the social structure and organisation of these groups as well as relations between their members. Presenting *sangats* as a mechanism for socially embedding Sufi Islam in Pakistani society, Frembgen stresses the role of *biraderi* (kin), friendship, sect, and locality in shaping these groups and also points out that their leadership often lacks religious charisma and authority. He then goes on to offer accounts of the pilgrimage itself including the celebrations before departure, the journey to Sehwan and community life in pilgrim camps. Chapter four continues the theme of pilgrimage by presenting the biography of Mai Kausar, a female Qalandar devotee based in Lahore who has followed in the footsteps of her grandmother and mother by leading a mostly female Qalandar pilgrimage group. While this account offers interesting details about these women’s negotiation of their position and authority in a male-dominated sphere, Frembgen offers almost no analysis or context to Qausar’s self-narrated life story. A particularly significant omission are the implications of the shifts in Sufi leadership and authority that are signaled by the emergence of pilgrim associations. Chapter five is ostensibly meant to augment the discussion on pilgrimage, but actually makes a case for Qalandar devotion as a transgressive tradition that inverts gender norms, serves as a liminal counter-site for

“figures of ambiguity” and challenges the norms of scriptural Islam and Pakistan’s patriarchal-rational order. While Frembgen offers plenty of information in this section on pilgrimage, as a reader I felt myself getting lost in the details and failing to see the larger picture.

The last thematic chapter of the book concerns the embodied performance of the *dhamal* ritual to express love and devotion to the Qalandar. Frembgen organises it around three different actors and their distinct modes and styles of ritual performance. Overall, he presents *dhamal* as an ecstatic expression of love that is characterised by rapture, release, trance, intoxication and spectacle. The last section of the book is a brief Afterword in which Frembgen presents the political stakes of Qalandar devotion by drawing attention to its significance for cultural diversity, religious pluralism and identity that he sees as under threat from “conservative, scriptural, and reformist currents of Sunni Islam” (p. 154) in Pakistan. This is a theme which runs through the book and especially in the last three chapters but is articulated most explicitly here. The problem though is that Frembgen’s romanticised image of Sufism as an inclusive, harmonious “religion of love” as opposed to the austere, exclusivist and fundamentalist tendencies of scriptural Islam has been repeatedly debunked. Most recently, Ewing and Corbett’s (2021) edited volume on Sufi shrines in Pakistan and India not only offers plenty of empirical evidence against Frembgen’s thesis but also reveals the political investments in portraying Sufis as ‘good Muslims’. Frembgen would have been better served by bringing a critical eye to the politics that animate the devotional practices that he observes, such as the power struggles within and between pilgrim associations, the debates around the correct practice of *dhamal* or the processes through which aesthetic and other conventions are established in media representations of the Qalandar.

References

Ewing, Katherine P. and Corbett, Rosemary R. 2020. *Modern Sufis and the state: the politics of Islam in South Asia and beyond*. New York: Columbia University Press

Footnote

[1] Scholarly studies on Qalandar and his followers in Pakistan include the works of Omar Kasmani (2012, 2015, 2017, 2019, 2022), Delphine Ortis (2017, 2020), Amen Jaffer (2018), Remy Delage (2018) and Katherine Ewing (1997). Innovative ethnographic treatments of Muslim shrines in India can be found in the monographs of Anand Taneja (2017), Carla Bellamy (2011) and Anna Bigelow (2010).