
Competing for Distinction: Lineage and Individual

Recognition in Eighteenth-Century Sindh*



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Abstract

There is a long tradition of describing Sindh as peculiarly prone to Sayyid veneration. On the face of it, the biographical section of Tuhfat al-Kiram or Gift for the Noble, an eighteenth-century history and geography written in Persian in Sindh, appears to confirm this idea. In listing the notables of Thatta, Sindh's premier city, the author, Mir 'Ali Shir Qani', orders them by groups, giving priority in his hierarchical arrangement to Sayyids. However, this article examines Tuhfat al-Kiram not as a transparent description of Sindh, but rather as a normative exposition of a Sayyid-led social order. It draws attention to Qani's project of reconciling individual excellence with lineage in a post-Mughal context without a discerning sovereign to uphold a meritorious order. By exploring Qani's silences, particularly on Hindus and women, this article investigates the anxieties that run through this text about the threat to the old Persianate elite of Thatta. This threat spurred Qani' to reimagine a social order in Sindh where claims of descent served to close off mobility in an otherwise meritocratic Persianate society. Sayyid priority in eighteenth-century Sindh was not an established fact, but a newly-fashioned claim, which remained contested and contradictory, even within Tuhfat al-Kiram.

Keywords: Sayyids; Persianate culture; Sindh; tazkirah; Thatta; Kalhora; Qani; early modern South Asia

Introduction

British travellers, who ventured into Sindh in the nineteenth century, unfailingly noted the veneration that people reserved for Sayyids, the descendants of Prophet Muhammad. James Burnes, who visited the Talpur court in 1827–28, described “an unbounded and superstitious respect”.¹ He wrote, “No person under any provocation would dare to abuse or strike [a Sayyid], unless at the risk of being torn to pieces by the populace; and in consequence of the privileges and immunities they enjoy, they flock from all the neighbouring countries

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¹On the English East India Company's diplomatic relations with the Talpurs, see R. Huttenback, *British Relations with Sind, 1799–1843: An Anatomy of Imperialism* (Karachi, 2007).