

SurajKund: A Lost Icon in the hagiography of Shah Shams in Multan

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Multan, the city in the middle Indus region regarded by some to be the World's oldest inhabited, along with perhaps Damascus in Syria, was renowned in antiquity and the early medieval era for its ancient Sun temple. Unlike Damascus and the regions to the west, Multan does not preserve any of its ancient sites, and most of the city's surviving heritage monuments actually date to the mid-Islamic period, starting in circa 1200; among which a few until recently retained connections to its pre-Islamic past. There are many reasons for the loss of the pre-Islamic built heritage of Multan, in comparison to that of its Middle Eastern counterparts, but the main reason is invariably the continuous waves of invasions that the middle Indus region suffered, in both the pre and early Islamic eras, which resulted in widespread destruction of the built environment. The most important pre-Islamic religious site in Multan, its ancient Sun temple dedicated to the worship of the Sun, was located on the citadel mound, next to where the shrine of the Suhrawardi Sufi Bahaa-din Zakiriyya(d.1261) now stands. The temple's religious value and wealth was noted by most medieval visitors to the city, including amongst others the Chinese Buddhist pilgrim, Hiuen Tsang, and Muslim historian al-Muqqadasi (d. late 10th century). Tsang described the temple in his visit in 641 as 'a temple dedicated to the Sun, very magnificent, and profusely decorated. The image of the Sun-*deva* is cast in yellow gold and ornamented with rare gems. Its spiritual powers made plain to all, where men from all countries offer their prayers in the thousands at all times.'¹

In his history *al-Muqaddimah*, the 14th century Muslim historian Ibn Khaldun talks of Multan as the home of 'the great

idol.’²Not only was Multan known for the ancient temple and the riches connected to it, it was also the largest and the most prosperous city of the Indus region in the early medieval era, before Lahore and Delhi rose in rank—first under the Delhi Sultanate, and then the Mughal Empire. Incidentally, in the Islamic era, Multan’s prosperity and prominence, as reported by visiting Muslim historians, was connected to the Fatimid Empire in Egypt (909-1171), and also to its religious creed, of which it was a *jazira* or dominion. *Khums* presents (religious tithes amounting to 20% of all income) from Multan are mentioned as being sent to Fatimid Egypt by the Arab historian al-Maqdasi, who visited Multan in 986. Masudi, a slightly earlier historian, who visited in 915, also wrote (in 943) about Multan’s wealth. He commented on the city’s multi-storeyed houses made of sandalwood, with visible fertility, luxury and opulence, and its coinage being fashioned on Fatimid coinage.³

An earlier (9th century) Persian Muslim historiographer, al-Baladhuri, in his history *Futuh al-Buldan*, comments on the amount of gold recovered from below the idol in Multan’s Sun temple by the Umayyads as amounting to 13200 *maunds* (a medieval weight measure). The portion of the loot that was sent back to the caliph in Iraq as booty was 120000 Dirhams, while the whole conquest of Sind, including Multan, had cost the Umayyad treasury only half that amount, i.e. 60000 dirhams.⁴Multan’s Sun temple and its opulence and wealth is also mentioned in the *Chachnamah*, the most referenced history in existence of the conquest of Sind by the Umayyad armies, translated from the Arabic by a certain individual named <Ali al-Kufi. In 1216, al-Kufi, an Iraqi who lived in the city of Uch near Multan, under the reign of Nasir al-din Qabacha (ruled Uch from 1206-1228), travelled to Bhakkarin upper Sind (near Sukkar), to obtain the original Arabic manuscript of Sind’s conquest by the Umayyads. It was called *Minhaj al-din wa al-mulk*, which Kufi translated into Persian. The Arabic version however, has never been discovered. Nevertheless, the *Chachnamah* talks about Multan’s Sun idol as being ‘so like a living man that Muhammad bin Qasim (Sind’s Umayyad conqueror) mistook it for one, and he drew his sword in order to strike it.’⁵ In a multi-faith twist, the famous Muslim historian

Ibn al-Athir (lived 1160-1233), comments on the same idol inside the Sun temple as actually being that of the Abrahamic prophet Job (i.e. Ayyub).⁶ It appears that Multan's religious tendencies were syncretic in pre-Islamic times, mainly based on the worship of the Sun. The famed jurist and official historian of the Fatimid empire, Qadi Numan (d.974), wrote of the local religion of Multan and Sind as being 'Zoroastrian'. Scholars have interpreted his comments 'implying some (level of) Hindu-Zoroastrian syncretism,'⁷ mainly due to the Sun temple and its connection to the Iranian religion through the worship of that certain heavenly body.

In early medieval times, the religiosity of Multan's Sun temple pervaded not just the beliefs of local inhabitants, but also those of surrounding regions. Noted scholar of Sind Mumtaz Husain, citing from the work of the 10th century Muslim scholar Ibn Nadim (d.995) called *al-Fihrist*, comments on the different kinds of religious denominations that lived in the Indus region. Among them, the *Aditkiya* or Sun worshippers were prominent, and venerated an idol representing the Sun. This idol sat on a cart with four horses at its four corners, and held an illuminating atom in its hand. The *Aditkiya* believed that the Sun was the father of ether (the fifth element), and that all the angels were subordinate to him. They worshipped the idol by circumambulating it and beating drums.⁸ It is not clear if the idol in Multan's Sun temple and that venerated by the *Aditkiya* were one and the same, but the connection to the Sun temples ever present in Ibn Nadim's narrative. Barry Flood, in his book *Objects of Translation: Material Culture and Medieval 'Hindu-Muslim' Encounter*, talks about agglomerative attitudes towards idolatry, identity, and religious practice prevailing amongst the Muslims of Multan, even outside the ruling elites.⁹ These agglomerative attitudes towards religion of course had to do with the veneration of the Sun. Flood goes on to comment (that during the Fatimid era in Multan), the Caliph al-Muizz (ruled 953-975), sent a letter in 960 to the local *dai* or missionary, who had converted a large

number of people to Ismailism. He accused the dai of fostering heterodoxy in doctrinal matters, including continued visitation to the Sun temple.¹⁰ Subsequently due to al-Muizz's concerns, the famed Sun temple, which contained the idol that Muhammad bin Qasim thought was a living man, and that represented the prophet Job according to Ibn al-Athir, was finally destroyed. It should be noted however that since both Ibn al-Athir (b.1160), and Ibn Khaldun (b.1332)-who called Multan the home of the 'great idol,' lived after the Fatimid era; the report on the late 10th century destruction of the Sun temple is either untrue, or that Multan's Sun religions implyre asserted itself with the temple's reconstruction.

The Sun temple did eventually fall into disuse over time, until its last remaining fragments were destroyed in 1992 by iconoclastic elements from Multan itself, as a reaction to the Babri mosque event in Lucknow. But the effect of the veneration of the Sun and its influence on Multan's spiritual heritage has remained ever enduring. In this author's own work, the massive Shah Rukn-e-Alam monument which dominates the old city's skyline, and adjoins the Sun temple site, has been shown to have been ritually constructed according to the exaltation of the Sun. In addition, some old ceremonies at the shrine of Shah Shams in Multan, which tie his monument to that of the Suhrawardi Sufi Sakhi Sarwar (d.1174), buried at the foot of the Sulaiman Mountains, are arranged astrologically around the exaltation period of the Sun, in the first month of the Indian calendar, *Chetir*. Similarly in nearby Uch, which remains inside Multan's religious and cultural sphere, the *urs* or yearly death commemorations of the Suhrawardi Sufi Jalal al-din Surkhposh(d.1291),were traditionally organised in the month of Chetir, making them correspond with the Sun's exaltation, in addition to the Persian New Year. In short, it can be easily argued that any story of religion and spirituality in Multan historically, no matter what its origins were, was in the end determined by two factors very Multani, namely the veneration of the Sun, and heterodox, or rather multi-faith beliefs, connected to it.

Aside from the main Sun temple, one other site in Multan until recently retained an Islamic era connection to the ancient Sun worship that defined the city. This is the site of Suraj Kund, located in a village of the same name, which lies 5kilometres outside the main city on the SurajKund road. Derryl Maclean, in his book *Religion and Society in Arab Sind*, speaks of some historical sources referring to a second Sun temple located in Multan,¹¹ which may well have been at the site of Suraj Kund. In this, Suraj Kund shares its name with a more famous counterpart situated outside of Delhi in the Indian state of Haryana. The Suraj Kund complex in Haryana constitutes mainly of a water reservoir constructed in the 10th century by the pre-Islamic *Tomar* Rajputs who ruled the area, and the name means the ‘pond of the Sun,’ where ‘kund’ means pond or lake in Hindi.¹² It is invariably the product of Sun worship in the greater Punjab region, and must also have been connected to Multan’s old Sun temple. A third lesser site called Suraj Kund, which also boasted a temple complex in the past, exists in the Indian state of Punjab.

It is noteworthy that Suraj Kund in Multan did have a bathing pool with alleged miraculous powers of healing, and that word Kund here probably also meant ‘pool’ or ‘pond.’ The construction of the pool at the site in Multan is relatively new, and is associated to the Sikh era. It was reportedly commissioned by Rangit Singh’s governor Sawan Mal, who also constructed a gurdwara at the site. Hence, the Multan poolin existence today is not nearly as old as that at the Haryana site.¹³ An older edifice of the pool probably existed in Multan before the Sikh era. However, Multan’s Suraj Kund, located not too far from the ancient Sun temple on the citadel mount, has another claim to fame. It is the site of perhaps the greatest hagiographic event ever to have been performed in the medieval world by a human being-one which is recounted in various ways by the different traditions that eulogise it. In fact, the occurrence of this certain event may well have inspired the embellishment of the site by the Sikhs.

In the early 1200s, a holy man called Pir Shams al-din Muhammad (lived 1165-1276), mentioned above and known in Multan as Shah Shams, came to the city walls, in an effort to make his way into the city, to settle and preach there. Shams was the chief da'ior missionary of the *Nizari* Ismaili community, delegated from its headquarters at Alamut in Iran. Shah Shams is regarded by many, along with his Suhrawardi contemporary Baha al-din Zakiriyya, to be Multan's greatest mystic. The event of Shams's arrival outside Multan, his stay, and his performance of a stupendous supernatural feat is the subject of many historic reports, but there is some confusion in their chronology. Nevertheless, Shams, whose name means 'Sun,' and Multan, still ended up evolving together in that most conspicuous of Multani religious trends, through the veneration of the Sun. Although Shams's performance of a Sun miracle is frequently mentioned in the region's oral narratives, the site where this act actually occurred is generally not identified. However, during this author's doctoral fieldwork, with the help of the Gardezi family of Multan, he identified Suraj Kund as the place where Shams enacted his miracle.¹⁴In light of this, the word Suraj Kundin Multan can also mean 'Sun hook' in Seraiki (with Kund literally meaning hook)-due to the assertion of the locals that the site's origins are solely connected to Shams's Sun miracle. Whatever the real meaning of the name (in the Multani context), one should not forget the old Sun temple of Multan, which probably endured until the time of Shams's arrival. It would not be wrong to assume, mainly because of the mention of a second Sun temple in the city, that the story of Suraj Kundin Multan has a pre-Islamic component to it.

At the time of this author's fieldwork, in spring 2006, the Suraj Kund site consisted of a small enclosure (see plate 1), with an aged tree inside it, that the villagers alleged dated back to Shams's time. The site was venerated by the villagers, who lit oil lamps and incense in it every Thursday night, to commemorate Shams's miracle. They asked for the fulfilment of legitimate desires at the site, in lieu of their ritual piety and upkeep for it. The enclosure, except the walls, was obviously

old, with the floor covered in oil lamp residue which seemed to date to an earlier era. The site was not well known outside the locality, and its discovery came as a surprise to some even in the Department of Archaeology, which is usually very well informed on built heritage in the area.

1. The site of Shams's miracle in the village of SurajKund in 2006



In 2006, adjacent to the Suraj Kund site, surrounding the central pool, there was an old gurdwara and some other Sikh era buildings. It is reported that Shams's supernatural powers had earned him a great following in Multan, especially amongst non-Muslims.¹⁵ So strong was the historical Hindu and later Sikh attachment to Shams that in the Sikh Era, his shrine was reportedly changed into a gurdwara. On a visit in 1831, Alexander Burnes records that the holy book of the Sikhs, the *Granth Sahib*, was read in the shrine by a *garanthi* or Sikh

priest.¹⁶ Needless to say, Shams's popularity with the Sikhs sparked the reconstruction of Suraj Kund in the Sikh era (see plate 2).¹⁷

2. The old gurdwara in 2006, slowly being annexed by modern buildings



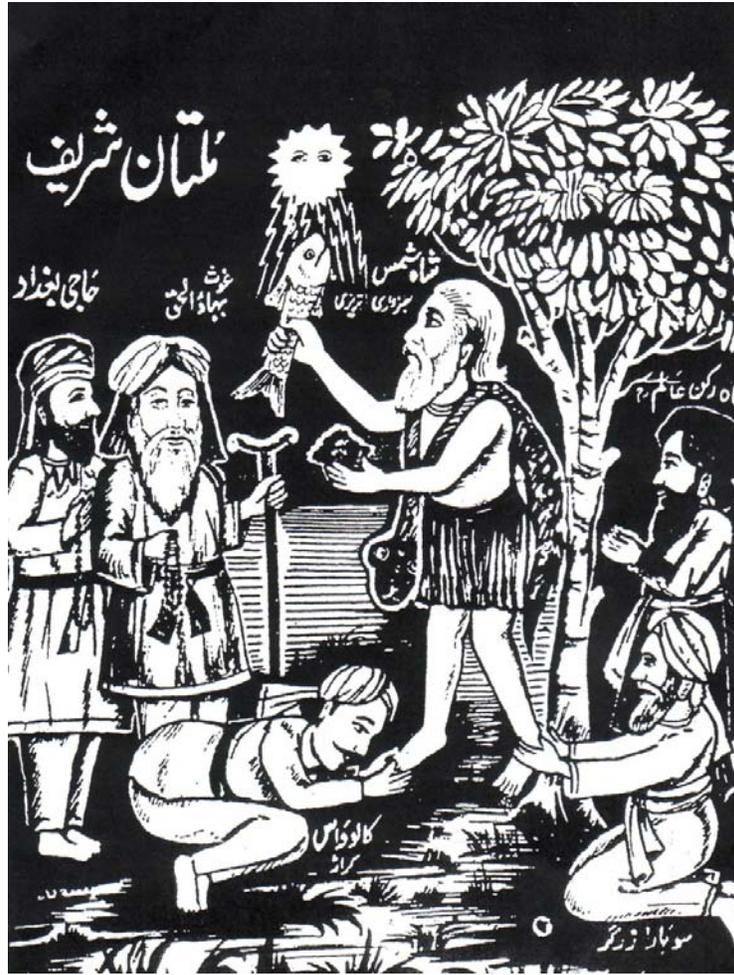
The summoning down of the Sun by Shams at Suraj Kund, through Multani oral narratives

According to the folklore of Multan, Shams came to Multan with some followers after escaping from his enemies in Uch. When he reached the outskirts of the Multan, he camped at a site outside the city walls as a gesture of respect to the Sufis already present in the city; probably a reference to Zakiriyya. He initiated contact with Zakiriyya through his

disciple. Zakiriyya replied by sending a bowl full of milk through his own disciple, stating that there was no room for any more Sufis in the city. In response, Shams floated a rose on the milk signifying himself, and sent it back to Zakiriyya, suggesting that he would supersede all the other Sufis of Multan. But he was turned away and refused entry. He was also denied the sale of food on the orders of the elite to dissuade him from staying on further. These events were orchestrated at the behest of the learned men and clergy.

Although he could do without food for any number of days being a true dervish, Shams was unable to obtain food for his disciple, who was just a boy. He called out to a flying dove to come down; in a more common version of the story, it was a fish that obeyed and jumped out of a nearby pond. Shams then summoned the Sun down and used its heat to cook the fish. When news of this reached Multan its elite, including Zakiriyya, came with an official entourage, begged Shams's forgiveness, and asked him to enter the city and stay. Hence after his Sun miracle, Shams gained entry into the walled city, never to be molested again. Based on Multani oral traditions, the story of Shams summoning down the Sun is quoted with some variation, but with the same chronology, by Colonial era historians.¹⁸

This act (and through it Suraj Kund) is even remembered in Multan's religious art. A popular poster from Multan published in Frembgen's book, *Friends of God*, depicts Shams's Sun miracle, whilst recalling an uncanny similarity to Suraj Kund. Both the old tree inside the enclosure, where the devotees lit oil lamps, and the pond behind the tree, are represented in the poster (see plate 3).



3. Poster art from Multan, depicting Shams performing his Sun miracle after arriving in the city (at Suraj Kund). Zakiriyya is seen (on the left), welcoming Shams with his entourage¹⁹

During his time in the larger Indus region, the list of Shams's performance of supernatural feats outweighs that of all other Sufis and spiritual personalities who came before or after him. They include amongst others, sailing a boat made of paper with his followers on board outside of Uch, to escape his enemies, and raising the dead child of a nobleman. But the

summoning down of the Sun in Multan is by far the most remarkable story of all; for this is something unheard of even in the hagiographies of the Abrahamic prophets, or known of the avatars of the Indo-Iranian religions who preceded them.

However today, the story of Suraj Kund has changed. In this author's last research trip to Multan, in February 2014, he had the misfortune to retrace back the steps of his doctoral fieldwork for the first time in 8 years. He was confronted by a different reality when he reached the village of Suraj Kund. In place of the enclosure where Shams called the Sun down stood a mosque, newly erected. The young boy from the village who accompanied the author said that the enclosure had been pulled down recently-in the last six months; even the old *papal* tree had been cut down to the same effect, to make way for the mosque. Only the point where the villagers previously lit oil lamps was spared, as small niche in the mosque's side wall. The gurdwara was gone, and the Suraj Kund pond full of rubbish, and in a state of complete disrepair. The only historical building left standing was one with some *Gurmukhi* or Sikh writing on it, in which a family was squatting (see plates 4,5, and 6 for details). This was to the obvious ignorance of the Department of Archaeology, which is usually very efficient when it comes to taking care of functioning shrines, mainly due to the economic benefit that the state derives from them.

4. The new mosque with an older wall around, where the Suraj Kund enclosure once used to exist
5. The point of Shams's Sun miracle, which now lies adjacent to the mosque's side wall





6. The last remaining Sikh era building, now somebody's house

Much to the credit of the boy guide, who explained to this author that the person responsible for the mosque's erection, probably it's Imam with his foreign funding, had committed himself to constructing a new enclosure around the point of the Sun's descent; the future seemed disproportionately bleak. The inhabitants of the village had become unfriendly and unwelcoming. Although this author was not told directly, the driver who drove him 1000 kilometres from Karachi to Multan, himself a good orthodox Muslim from Faisalabad, was told by some villagers that the area had been taken over by 'Hindus' at some point in history, and suggested to him that the destruction that ensued was legitimate. Some other villagers however, in quiet disagreement with the majority, lamented the loss of the enclosure and the gurdwara; but, as the afternoon congregational prayers ended, they discretely stopped speaking to us. On the way out of Suraj Kund, the driver uttered 'I shall never forget this place, how can such a place be destroyed?' The Sun still shines brightly over ancient Multan, but its Muslim era built heritage, which recalls acts and deeds that



celebrate the Sun, in the likeness of its pre-Islamic past before, is slowly disappearing into the darkened mists of the contemporary era.

Notes

¹See pp. 9, 11 and 169, in Khan, Ahmed Nabi (1983) *Multan: History and Architecture*, Islamabad: Institute of Islamic History and Civilisation

²See p.127 in Ibn Khaldun, (1980) Franz Rosenthal *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction to History*, volume 1, Princeton University Press: New Jersey

³See pp.340-342 in Hollister, John Norman (1953) *The Shi'a of India*, London: Luzac and Co.

⁴See, p. 245 in I-Baladhuri, Ahmad ibn Yahya (1902) *Futuh al-Buldun*, Cairo

⁵ See p.196 in Kalichbeg, Mirza Fredunbeg (1900) *Chachnamah*, Karachi: Commissioner's Press

⁶ See p.204 in Clarke, Nicola (2012) *The Muslim Conquest of Iberia: Medieval Arabic Narratives*, New York: Routledge: Ibn al-Athir, vol. 4, p.539.

⁷See 'footnotes' in 'Ismaili propaganda and Fatimid rule in Sind,' by S.M. Stern, in *Islamic Culture*, vol. xxiii, no. 1-4, (1949), pp. 289-307

⁸ See p. 93. In Mumtaz, Hussain (1978) *Sind: Arab Period*, Hyderabad: Sindhi Adabi Board

⁹ See p.42 in Flood, Finbarr Barry (2011) *Objects of Translation: Material Culture and Medieval 'Hindu-Muslim' Encounter*, Princeton University Press: New Jersey

¹⁰ibid.

¹¹See p.137 in Maclean, Derryl (1989) *Religion and Society in Arab Sind*, New York: E.J. Brill

¹² See p.100 in Sharma, Y.D. (2001) *Delhi and its Neighbourhood*, New Delhi: Archaeological Survey of India

¹³ Records of the various *waqfs* or endowments made to Suraj Kund are present in the Colonial Era District Record held at the Pakistan Studies Department at Baha al-din Zakariya University, Multan

¹⁴Folklore on Shams was gathered from the (family) historian of the Gardezi family, who identified the existence of the Suraj Kund site to the author. In Suraj Kund, the author subsequently spoke to the village elders about Shams, and discovered it to the place where the Sun miracle was performed (second source). The Gardezi family (archives) were also consulted by British historians when they wrote about Multan, and are considered to be the most trusted in the city. See Toynbee, Arnold Joseph (1961) *Between Oxus and Jumna*, London: Oxford University Press.

¹⁵ See p.205ff in Khan, Ahmed Nabi (1983) *Multan: History and Architecture*, Islamabad: Institute of Islamic History and Civilisation

¹⁶See p.142 in Ibid.

¹⁷The Sikh era in Multan lasted from 1810-1849, but the Multan citadel was only taken by them in 1818. The Sikhs took over from the *Saddozai* or Durrani dynasty in Multan, the 'administrative' descendants of the Afghan King Ahmad Shah Abdali. Abdali, who commanded a quarter of the Iranian king Nadir Shah Afshar's army, declared the modern state of Afghanistan in 1747, on the latter's death. Abdali was born in 1722 in Multan, and a swerve left from Abdali Road, on which Ahmad Shah's birth place is marked by a water fountain in a wall, takes one out of the old city to the site of Suraj Kund, and to the location of Sham's Sun miracle

¹⁸See p.282 (volume 2) in Malcolm, J. (1829) *The History of Persia*, 2 volumes, London: Murray

¹⁹ See p. 89 in Frembgen, Jurgen Wasim (2006) *The Friends of God: Sufi Saints in Islam, popular poster art from Pakistan*, Karachi: OUP