

## Enigma of the dual-identity saints

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Zulfiqar Ali Kalhoro looks into contradictory accounts around mysterious saints from a turbulent period in Sindh's story



Shrine of Pir Patho

There are many saints who carry dual identities in Sindh. It is the most complex subject for the students of history, comparative religion and anthropology in Sindh due to the lack of available literature on the nature of dual-identity saints and shrines in Sindh. Whatever is available is highly contradictory and lacks scholarly explanations. These contradictory accounts, mostly written in tazkiras in Persian by 17th-, 18th- and 19th-century historians of Sindh confuse the reader most. One gets even confused when one reads the translations of these tazkiras in Sindhi where some of the facts are clearly misleading.

One such case is that of Pir Patho, venerated by both Muslims and Hindus under two different names: Pir Patho and Gopichand. His identity is the most contested in Sindh. This contestation is due to his dual identity as a Muslim saint with different names – Sultan Pir Patho, Sultan Shah Alam, Sultan Pir Shah Hussain, Firuz Shah, etc. He was initiated into the Suhrawardi tariqa by Sheikh Bahauddin Zakariya. He became known as Gopichand for Hindus. The original Gopichand had renounced the throne of Ujjain and became an ascetic – and he lived a century before Pir Patho but it seems that the latter apparently used that name to convert Hindus to Ismailism. Gopichand was a nephew of Raja Bharthari. Lal Shahbaz Qalandar is also known as Raja Bharthari to his Hindus devotees. The Ismailis also claim that he was an Ismaili saint.



Inside Pir Patho's shrine

The Hindus of Sindh still venerate Pir Patho. They recognise him under both names Pir Patho and Gopichand

The shrine of Pir Patho (died in 1246/1267) is located 25 km south of Thatta on a hill which is named after him, previously known as the Hill of Pir Ar. Pir Patho was most probably an Ismaili saint. There are two explanations which needs to be taken into account. Firstly, all of the dual-identity shrines and saints in Sindh are associated with Nizari Ismailism as this was the mode of conversion of the Ismaili pirs to conceal their true identity. They practiced taqiyya while converting Hindus to their faith. This was apparently done by Ismaili saints to continue their missionary activities on one hand and prevent themselves from Sunni persecution on the other. Secondly, the most important thing to take into consideration was the use of the term 'Pir' which was first used by Ismailis in Sindh. All of their saints were referred to as 'Pirs' be it Pir Satgur Noor, Pir Shams, Pir

Sadrudin, Pir Hasan Kabiruddin, Pir Tajuddin, Pir Dadu, Pir Pithoro, Mangho Pir, Rama Pir, etc.

According to Syed Abdul Qadir the author of *Hadikat al-Auliya*, Pir Patho belonged to the Aplan caste and his real name was Hussain. The Aplan caste, now spelt Uplano, live in Shah Bundar taluka of Sujawal district. His father's name was Rajpaar son of Lakho. He was a mystic and kept himself away from people and hid himself in a cave until he became a disciple of Sheikh Bahauddin Zakariya. Mir Ali Sher Qani, the author of *Tuhfat al-Kiram*, Sheikh Muhammad Azam, the author of *Tuhfat al-Tahirin*, Syed Tahir Muhammad Nisyani, the author of *Tarikh-i- Tahiri* – all give almost the same information about Pir Patho.



Interior view of Pir Patho Astan in Diplo

None of the above-mentioned books discussed another identity of Pir Patho as Gopichand which is popular among his Hindu devotees. Some literature produced during the British period in Sindh was also not of much help to establish his affiliation with any of the religious movements or the sects. Some books and articles published in British India, particularly the book *Gorakhnath and Kanphatta Yogis* by George Weston Briggs clearly mentions that Gopichand is known in Sindh as Pir Pathao (he writes Pir Pathao instead of Pir Patho). He also discussed the story of his living in a cave and his veneration under the name of Gopichand by Hindus of Sindh. This story later fascinated other British period historians to focus on its dual identity. In this regard, Carter's work is also worth mentioning – who largely based his arguments and story on Briggs's work.

It is interesting to note that Sakhi Jamil Shah Girnari is also called Gorakhnath in Sindh. He is also known by various other Hindu names in Sindh, which I will discuss in the next article. The tale of taking over the control of cave from Dayanath with the help of Gorakhnath apparently relates to Jamil Shah Girnari who is believed to have been the first GadiNashin of Pir Patho's dargah. This also shows how religious rivalry between groups of ascetics – Dayanath, Gorakhnath and Sufis – existed in 13th-century Sindh.

The Hindus of Sindh still venerate Pir Patho. They recognise him under both names Pir Patho and Gopichand. The Hindu Lohana community, amongst whom he might have preached Nizari Ismailism, has built his astans in some of the towns of Sindh, prominent amongst them are the astans at Diplo, Islamkot and Mithi in Tharparkar district. In these astans are placed the photos of Pir Patho's dargah along with the miniature cave in which he is believed to have been hidden and prayed.

The Ismaili connection of Pir Patho cannot be ruled out. The stories, given by Syed Abdul Qadir, Mir Ali Sher Qani and the others in their books, about how Pir Patho hid himself in the cave, actually refer to his taqiyya that the Ismaili saints practiced and the concealment of true identity was their peculiarity. It was also a practice among that the Nizari Ismailis that the place where their religious leader resided was kept secret and revealed to a few chosen followers. One should also not forget that the Nizari Ismailis also lived under Hindu or Sufi guise in Sindh. This is one of the reasons that Pir Patho carried dual identities for concealing his true identity and might have revealed his true identity to a few of his disciples, which never found a place in the above mentioned books. One should also critically read the books of those historians who were more influenced by Suhrawardi and Qadiri Sufis' teachings and seemed to have apparently ignored many things which were

related to Ismailism. Ironically, these books are full of the praises and miracles of Suhrawardi, Qadiri and Naqshbandi Sufi saints, but at the same time devoid of any information on the Ismaili saints who were their contemporaries. Even if they were mentioned, they were presented with the distorted facts as in the case of Pir Patho – who was presented as a Suhrawardi Sufi saint instead of an Ismaili Pir.

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