The shrine of Shâh Abdul Latīf Bhittai in Bhit Shâh is one of the largest and most visited Sufi shrines in Sindh, Pakistan, and the poetry written by this 18th century saint is widely read by the Sindhi speaking public and studied as a literary classic not only in Pakistan but also in India and the West. Owing to the exalted status of Shâh Latīf, scholars of Sufism and shrine goers alike speak with reverence of the tradition of faqîrs reciting his poetry musically at his shrine. However, to date no scholar has published research on the social organization of these faqîrs or the nature of their musical knowledge.

I am interested in the Shâh Jo Râg, the oral musical tradition performed by the faqîrs of Shâh Latīf. It is a special repertoire used for singing the saint's poetry and said to have been taught to faqîrs by the poet himself. Around 100 faqîrs form groups to sing and play the accompanying dambûro (a 5 string plucked instrument) at the shrine every day, and devotees of the saint from all over Sindh also invite faqîrs to perform on special occasions. In order to learn more about this unique music culture, I established initial contacts at Bhit Shâh in April 2014, and conducted a preliminary fieldtrip in Bhit Shâh this winter with the support of an AIPS travel grant. The results were beyond my expectations. I was able to record various faqîr groups singing different renditions of 29 out of the 31 surs (chapters) of the Shâh Jo Risâlo, the compilation of Shâh Latīf’s poetry. The orally transmitted version of the Risâlo is quite different from the ones in published volumes, which necessitates further comparison. I found an ustâd to apprentice with, Rasûl Dino 'Araf Faqîr Mantâr Junejo, who has 35 years of experience singing at the shrine. From the lessons with him I learnt that each sur has a distinct musical structure, consisting of introductory sections played on the dambûro, its own opening call, and melody for rendering the baits (verses). In the short time available, I was able to learn to play the dambûro and sing the bait and wai of three surs. Interviews with faqîrs brought up questions of the economics and recruitment of faqîrs, and the networks of transmission of the Shâh Jo Râg. This trip helped me realize the immense richness of this musical tradition, one that I would like to continue exploring for my Ph.D. research.