

AIPS Summer Travel Grant Report

Pei-ling Huang

15 December 2014 - 22 January 2015

The shrine of Shāh Abdul Latīf Bhitai in Bhit Shāh 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 Shāh Latīf, scholars of Sufism and shrine goers alike speak with reverence of the tradition of *faqīrs* reciting his poetry musically at his shrine. However, to date no scholar has published research on the social organization of these *faqīrs* or the nature of their musical knowledge.

I am interested in the *Shāh Jo Rāg*, the oral musical tradition performed by the *faqīrs* of Shāh Latīf. It is a special repertoire used for singing the saint's poetry and said to have been taught to *faqīrs* by the poet himself. Around 100 *faqīrs* form groups to sing and play the accompanying *dambūro* (a 5 string plucked instrument) at the shrine every day, and devotees of the saint from all over Sindh also invite *faqīrs* to perform on special occasions. In order to learn more about this unique music culture, I established initial contacts at Bhit Shāh in April 2014, and conducted a preliminary fieldtrip in Bhit Shāh this winter with the support of an AIPS travel grant. The results were beyond my expectations. I was able to record various *faqīr* groups singing different renditions of 29 out of the 31 *surs* (chapters) of the *Shāh Jo Risālo*, the compilation of Shāh Latīf's poetry. The orally transmitted version of the *Risālo* is quite different from the ones in published volumes, which necessitates further comparison. I found an *ustād* to apprentice with, Rasūl Dino 'Araf Faqīr Mantār 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 *dambūro*, its own opening call, and melody for rendering the *bait*s (verses). In the short time available, I was able to learn to play the *dambūro* and sing the *bait* and *wai* of three *surs*. Interviews with *faqīrs* brought up questions of the economics and recruitment of *faqīrs*, and the networks of transmission of the *Shāh Jo Rāg*. 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.