Naqvi, Wajiha Ather. 2022. “Searching for *sur* through Sufi-Islamic Devotion.” *Dastavezi* (4): 45-55

DASTAVEZI
THE AUDIO-VISUAL
SOUTH ASIA

# Searching for *sur* through Sufi-Islamic Devotion

Wajiha Ather Naqvi

**Abstract**
Drawing on my vocal training experiences from my on-going Hindustani classical music apprenticeship under a *Qawwali* practitioner in Karachi, Pakistan, since 2016, this multi-mediated essay, which includes an audio recording of my performance, demonstrates how specific ideas of Sufi-Islamic devotion are cultivated and embodied in Hindustani classical music through both song lyrics and bodily actions. Through this piece, my attempt is to dispel certain unfounded public misconceptions within Pakistan on music’s compatibility with Islam, particularly with respect to the Pakistani state’s complicated relationship towards its Hindustani classical music heritage.

**Keywords:** Hindustani classical music, Islam, South Asia, Pakistan, voice

**Audio:** https://crossasia-journals.ub.uni-heidelberg.de/index.php/dasta/article/view/19129/18646

## Introduction

From an active cassette tape culture to a mushrooming underground local music scene to an influx of private Western and Indian music satellite TV channels, most urban youth growing up in Karachi, Pakistan during the 1990s, like myself, were exposed to much musical activity around them. Yet despite the subcontinent's rich heritage of Indo-Islamic devotional music, many Pakistanis continue to attribute music (and dance) primarily to a “Hindu culture.” A popular notion heard within the Pakistani cultural

imagination till today is that these traditions are antithetical to Islamic values.[1] It was perhaps due to Islam's allegedly contentious relationship with music and my fascination with such contradictions that I became interested in the anthropology of music from the Islamic world while earning my postgraduate degree in the United States in 2010. After my return to Pakistan, I began vocal training in Hindustani classical music[2] in 2016 under the apprenticeship of a Muslim *Qawwali* practitioner, which eventually led me to embark on a performance career with one of Pakistan's leading music shows, Coke Studio.

Not only was I eager to gain a practical and theoretical understanding of this ancient high-art music, but I had assumed that my natural sense of rhythm and key was perhaps the only prerequisite needed for me to succeed. However, over the course of my training, I realized that my practice was as much about technical competence as it was about acquiring a "new" voice and reconfiguring my knowledge of the Hindustani classical musical tradition, one that was embedded within specific Sufi-Islamic values of knowing and being in the world.

Building on reflections from my own (ongoing) Hindustani classical music apprenticeship in Karachi, Pakistan, which has included the making of an audio recording of my performance, this multi-mediated essay will describe how Sufi-Islamic devotion is embodied and performed in Hindustani classical music. Challenging common misconceptions in Pakistan of Hindustani classical music, which stem from its being termed insufficiently or less "Islamic," I will highlight how certain forms of Sufi-Islamic embodied knowledge have provided a critical vantage point towards the cultivation of my Hindustani "singing voice." Lastly, while these reflections are drawn from my personal experience as situated in Pakistan, the intention is not to overemphasize its Islamic influence, but rather to complicate Pakistan's fractured relationship to its shared Indic/non-Muslim past via Hindustani classical music.

1 Contrary to the popular notion of music's impermissibility within Islam, music has a controversial status within Islam precisely because of the diverging and diverse opinions within Islamic scholarship on what elements constitute music, and thus on the very usage of the word music itself.

2 Also referred to as North Indian classical or simply North Indian/Hindustani music.

### *Qawwal Bachche* and the search for "*sur*"

> *"Everybody is blessed with* sur*, but whoever actively seeks* sur*, will be provided its knowledge and blessings by Him. If I take my Allah's name in* sur*, then this is preferred."*
>
> *Ustad Naseeruddin Saami (senior member of the* Qawwal Bachche*)*

Most scholars on South Asian music history agree that contemporary North Indian classical music (as known today) has evolved broadly out of an overlapping network and performance exchange within elite Mughal courts, Hindu temple music, and Sufi mystical practices, since the 13th century. Barlow and Subramanian write that "this inclusive devotional sociability, and its preoccupation with music, lay at the core of the Hindustani ethos and lasted till the early 20th century" (2007, 1782). Subsequent to the 1947 partition, however, the formation of the two opposing state interests and ideologies of India and Pakistan began to divide and categorize the subcontinent's music along religious and nationalistic lines.

Within Pakistan, the state struggled to own or define Hindustani classical music compared to its folk or *Qawwali* music, particularly due to the former's overt Indic and non-Muslim/Hindu association.[3] (Saeed 2008, 241). Therefore, even though most traditional music from North India and Pakistan is organized around principles of Hindustani classical music: "Hindustani classical music, and *raga* in particular, are concepts that have for the most part been associated with music from present-day North India despite their wide usage in contemporary Pakistan as well" (Ayyagiri 2012, 12). In this regard, my teacher's connections to Hindustani classical music extend to well before partition, reaching back through its 800-year-old ancestral musical lineage, called the *Qawwal Bachche* (Children of the *Qawwal*) which itself can be traced back to the disciple of a 13th century music connoisseur and Sufi poet Hazrat Amir Khusraw[4], and to the shrine of Sufi Saint Hazrat Nizamuddin Awliya, in Delhi. With certain musical practices rooted in the Sufi-Islamic tradition of *sama*[5]*,* they continue to be associated primarily with *Qawwali*, even though their hereditary musical repertoire consists of

3 This is not to say that Pakistan does not continue to have a small but active community of classical musicians and also a corresponding niche in their audience of high-art music listeners, though they are predominantly heard in private urban-elite spaces/gatherings.

4 Also popularly regarded as the founding father of *Qawwali*.

5 An Arabic word that means "to listen"; it also refers to a Sufi mystical practice that makes use of sound, music, and recitation for the sole purpose of coming closer to God.

other Hindustani classical genres.[6] It is thus important to consider that my personal experience of learning Hindustani classical music from a hereditary Muslim *Qawwali* practitioner in modern-day Pakistan must be viewed from the perspective of the subcontinent's own evolving political and historical contexts. One of the central tenets within this hereditary lineage is a singular focus on attaining a deep knowledge of the *sur* (a single musical note or pitch). In technical terms, to be in *sur* (*sur mein hona*) means that one can sing at the right musical pitch. Yet, simply being able to sing in tune does not represent the multiplicity of meanings associated with *sur*. For instance, understanding *sur* also requires training in diverse knowledge forms, ranging from poetry, language, and philosophy to religious texts.

Most importantly, while a technical understanding of *sur* can be acquired or developed, it is fundamentally entangled with an innate, esoteric sense of sonic knowing that resides, vibrates, and can be experienced within every living being. At its philosophical core, this sound knowledge has the potential to transform humans and to connect deeply with their inner self, mind, and body. For my Muslim teacher, this sound knowledge is also an Islamic knowledge interwoven with man/woman's innate longing to be close to the Divine, i.e. Allah, where the self and Divine are, in fact, two sides of the same coin.

## Cultivating a Hindustani voice within a Sufi-Islamic sound-world

According to Weidman, "sonic and material experiences of voice are never independent of the cultural meanings attributed to sound, to the body, and particularly to the voice itself" (Weidman 2015, 233). Though Hindustani classical music is performed with instruments, it primarily uses the voice, i.e., *awaaz.* One of the examples used by my teacher to substantiate music's acceptability within the Islamic tradition is the reference to the Quranic phrase "*Kun Faya Kun"* (Be! And it is) that marks the creation of the world for pious Muslims. *Kun,* which means "existing" or "being" in Arabic, is a divine word that sounded the world into existence. The voice is superior to Muslims, because it embodies the sacred, as the sounded word of God.[7]

6 For a brief background on the history and contributions of *Qawwal Bachche*, see my article: https://www.dawn.com/news/1497271

7 Both terms, *awaaz* and *sur*, also overlap in musical terminology, as one cannot be expressed without the other: the voice is material proof that *sur* exists.

Most of my lessons take place inside my home, allowing for a relationship based on one-on-one interaction with my teacher. As a hereditary custodian of this specialist music, he is also seen traditionally as the custodian of his students' voices. Much like a sculptor who molds raw material into concrete form, he assumes a responsibility for shaping my "singing voice." During the formative years of my training, I would often grow agitated with my inability to produce certain vocal ornamentations and aesthetics that are characteristic of this musical tradition. "When will I learn how to deliver these sounds?" I often asked. In response, my teacher would temper my sense of frustration by explaining that it would take time and practice to create this voice ("*awaaz banana"*) and to put/create musical spaces in the throat ("*gale mein jageh daalna/ bithana"*). He would frequently use phrases such as "*savaarna*" (to beautify), "*sametna*" (to gather/organize), "*nikhaarna*" (to groom) to explain this palpable method of cultivating the voice.

The importance of aesthetics and beauty is integral to the Sufi-Islamic tradition because for many Muslims, all forms of beauty are a reflection of and originate from Allah's infinite existence. Accordingly, "to create beauty is thus an act of both worship and invocation" (Frishkopf and Spinetti 2018, 11). Similarly, the concept of a beautiful voice draws on the same belief (as also reflected in the *Qawwal Bachche*'s understanding of *sur*) in God's divine attributes that are embodied within each of us, as a reminder of God and of our own inner beauty.

Having grown up without formal vocal training, my vocal aesthetic was heavily adopted from listening to particular kinds of American/English popular music that rendered in my voice a more staccato singing style in which the delivery of musical notes is typically quick, short, and independent of each other. To a large extent, this required me to unlearn my self-taught, abrupt, choppy western pop-oriented vocal delivery and to acquire a new understanding of vocal aesthetics and *sur*. This experience made me realize that being able to sing this style of music does not only depend on a person's technical ability to sing in tune but also draws on each individual's own sedimented listening histories and cultural attunement.[8] Most music belonging to the Hindustani classical tradition does not rely on written notation or theory; hence, a primary part of cultivating the voice revolves around active listening, repetition, and memory. A major dimension of my learning depends on repeating, almost imitating my teacher's exact

8 For example, a discernible stylistic difference in Hindustani classical vocal is the use of longer, connecting notes because each musical note (within a *raag*) has an interdependent harmonious relationship that originates with the first note of the scale, the tonic or root note *sa.* This does not only mean knowing the sounds of each single, distinct note but developing a sensibility based on knowledge of pitch that recognizes smaller, identifiable micro-notes within two singular notes.

vocal delivery, and reciting the same from memory. Attentive listening (to both oneself and one's teacher) is a deliberate part of the ear-training and sound knowledge; such areas of study, in turn, when developed and also practiced with constant repetition, begin to sediment specific vocal behaviors, patterns, and sounds.

Acquiring these vocal behaviors also means engaging with other parts of the body and bodily knowledge through facial expressions, breathwork, hand movements, etc. For instance, knowing when to pause or take a breath, how to use the hands and arms, where to point the head while singing are all critical components for producing the voice itself. As Weidman states, "voices are not only a sonic phenomenon; they are material in the sense that they are produced through bodily actions" (Weidman 2015, 235).

At the same time, this method of attentive listening and the accompanying power of sound/voice draw on my teacher's long-standing ancestral tradition of Sufi-Islamic practices of the *sama* and its corresponding Sufi sound body. According to Kapchan, this sound body is the "affective" dimension of the material body that listens, feels, resonates, creates, and transforms, particularly because of the Sufi belief that the "human body itself contains technologies that remain hidden to the self" (Kapchan 2015, 34-40). Hence, attentive listening is a critical method for understanding *sur* but primarily a spiritual quest to connect with Allah through the self, i.e., through the material voice and body.

Lastly, cultivating this Hindustani voice is just as much about intimately discovering oneself through one's own voice. For instance, I was often told "to pay attention to my own voice" or "know my voice" ("*apni awaaz par fikr karo/apni awaaz ko pehchano*"), which not only meant paying attention to technicalities of pitch but being able to recognize my own unique, individual voice and its relationship to the rest of my body. Eventually, through a reiterative loop of listening, repeating, and vocalizing, one experientially comes to both "know" and "feel" what sounds right when one is performing.

## Performing Sufi-Islamic devotion in Hindustani classical music

Most professional practitioners of Hindustani classical music spend many decades of their own life learning its intricate technicalities. Since it is typically performed in front of an audience, many do not start performing in public until they reach an advanced

level of understanding and technical prowess. However, one of my main objectives in learning Hindustani classical music was not to become a professional classical singer but to assist my vocal practice and research.[9] Accordingly, I will now use examples from my own audio recording to explain how I perform Sufi-Islamic devotion in Hindustani classical music. More specifically, I will highlight how it is *both* the lyrical content *and* the particular forms of vocal and bodily behaviors (embedded within a Sufi-Islamic sound world) that accentuate feelings of devotion in Hindustani classical music, from the perspective of a performer.

This traditional composition is called a *sadra*, a type of Hindustani vocal genre performed in a 10-beat rhythmic pattern (called *jhaptaal)*. Its lyrical form is a *hamd* (an Arabic word and type of devotional Islamic poetry that refers to the exclusive praise of God) with words in (old) Hindi, also called *Brajbhasha*. This is one of the prominent literary languages of North India which actually predates the creation of Hindi and Urdu. Given the improvisatory nature of Hindustani classical music, the same compositions can be performed in multiple ways; however, they still need to conform to specific rules associated with each particular *raag.* Known as the "king of morning *raags*" and traditionally performed in the earliest morning hours, this particular composition was taught to me in *raag Bhairon* (or *Bhairav*), which embodies highly devotional and meditative, introspective, and contemplative qualities.[10] *Bhairav* is also one of the names (and manifestations) of Lord Shiva within the Hindu religious tradition.

One of my reasons to record this particular composition (over others that have been taught to me) was its overtly Islamic devotional lyrical form. While reading (and understanding) Quranic scripture is paramount, most non-Arabic speaking Muslims (like myself) continue to experience and interact with the Quran primarily through sound and oral transmission. Since a *hamd* finds its source in the Quran, reciting His praise (which includes the names of God) is in itself an act of Islamic devotion.

9 The decision to produce this audio recording was made in 2020 during the onset of COVID-19, when almost the entire world was operating under lockdown conditions. This particularly impacted musicians and performing artists as physical performances had come to a complete halt, including my lessons, which had since moved online. Thus, the production process took place distributed across different time zones: recorded in Karachi, mixed in London, and mastered in Germany, thanks to the advantages of remote working made possible by digital technology. This shift from in-person physical to online training of a centuries-old oral music tradition that relies mainly on physical interaction opens future questions about how changing technologies mediate the process of learning, practicing, and/or performing Hindustani classical music itself.

10 "What is more, the *raga* itself exists both as a specifically musical formula (a set of notes that need to be sung in particular orders and ways) […] that conveys a distinct mood and set of associations accompanied by specific instructions as to the correct time or season to stimulate those associations" (Orsini and Schofield 2015, 26).

Outside their prevalence within folk and *Qawwali*, *hamds* are largely heard across Pakistan as popular forms of Islamic devotional poetry and media, dominated by male singers and recited primarily in Pakistan's national language, Urdu. Though reciting *hamd* is encouraged by Islamic scholars, certain orthodox interpretations continue to limit and exclude women's voices as well as the use of instruments. Thus, my decision to record this specific version of a *hamd* also meant challenging existing, fixed (and often arbitrary) notions of authenticity and Islamicness attributed to certain types of Hindustani music, particularly as a female Muslim singer situated in Pakistan.

The audio begins with the sound of the *tanpura*[11]*,* followed by the opening section of a Hindustani classical performance called the *alaap,* as is typical in such performances*.* I start with the tonic *sa* as the first and most critical note learned in Hindustani classical music. It functions as the musical anchor that helps set my own focus and intention for this performance, i.e. to use my *awaaz* to connect with the Divine. I return back to the *sa*[12] at 1:07 after sketching out a brief and specific ordering of notes that carries the overall introspective, reflective mood associated with the *Bhairon* scale. With my own voice echoing in the background, the reverberating drone of the *tanpura* was added to enhance *Bhairon's* devotional mood and morning time cycle, much like the divine sound of *kun,* the earliest reminder of our sonic reality and primordial existence.

As outlined in the previous section, the Hindustani voice is cultivated through different forms of bodily knowledge to deliver a performance. To sing this composition, I use a vocal technique called *ghina*[13] that uses certain pressure points on the top part of the face, between the nose and the forehead, to produce a distinct nasal-textured voice. This specific technique is used throughout the performance, heard particularly in the elongated and melismatic rendering of the phrase "*Allah ho Allah, jall-e-shaan Allah*,*"* as I both repeat and elaborate on the name of God using longer, continuous notes, sung with a single breath (1:17-1:35). A similar/parallel sonic reference for this type of nasal-voice rendering is heard in the Arabic *maqam* music system, also used in the Islamic call to prayer and other forms of Islamic scriptures such as the Quranic recitation.

I recorded this in a cross-legged position seated on the floor of my home, allowing me to find the right posture to coordinate my voice with the rest of my body.[14] As I start to

11 A long-necked string instrument used to accompany Hindustani classical music, providing a continuous drone-like sound.

12 In the Hindustani classical music system, the *sa* is the first note (and sound) out of the seven notes in a musical scale, where each sound of the musical note corresponds with its name.

13 Also an Arabic term used for a song or singing.

14 This is also how I practice with my teacher and how Hindustani classical music is typically performed.

sing the melody from 1:18, I gradually begin to raise both of my arms as they move away from my body but with palms open towards the ceiling—much akin to the gesture used in Islamic prayer. The arms gently rise (and fall), like the waves of an ocean swaying back and forth, synchronizing this circular motion with the melody's modulating vocals and lyrical cadence. At the same time, each line of the *hamd* is composed to fit seamlessly within a single breath of each rhythmic cycle, as per the aesthetic style of the *sadra.*

Since this performance was recorded in a single take, the breath is audible after every sung lyric: *Allah ho Allah* (1:46). Breathe. *Jall-e-shaan Allah* (1:50). Breathe. Jall-e-*shaan Allah* (1:55). Breathe. *Tero naam liye meri howe tasallah* (2:05). Breathe. And so forth. The synchronization of voice, body, and breathwork is critical to all Hindustani classical music performances. Here, it is the coordinated movement and synergy of mind and body conducted in that specific moment of time that begins to transform my own subjective experience, enhancing my feelings for and relationship to the Divine. This, as Kapchan explains, is a "body attuned to and transformed by the vibrations of its environment – in this case, one in which the presence of an invisible intelligence (God) is felt" (Kapchan 2015, 38).

"You are singing for God—sing it with love, sing it with beauty" would be my teacher's response when I would ask how to inculcate feeling in my voice. Though one aspect of this "feeling" is expressed through words and poetry, its material and aesthetic quality for cultivating feeling in the voice (also associated with beauty) involves facial expressions, such as smiling. Therefore, while the words in this *hamd* literally verbalize the Islamic devotion, the voice must be both receptive and trained to evoke the same feeling of sacredness.

Singing a praise of Allah is as much an act of devotion as it is an act of finding joy, exuberance, and exhilaration that enhance my felt relationship and connection with the Divine. In this recording, I smile throughout, but particularly during 2:41-2:48 when I celebrate the gentle falling of raindrops (*rim jhim barse hain*), much like the Divine light that touches all of us. Smiling while singing helped create a certain lightness and buoyancy in the voice, which is then better able to induce emotions of love, warmth, beauty, devotion, and *sur*, all at once.

## Conclusion

Through this multi-mediated essay, I have tried to show how my Hindustani music training as an apprentice in a specific hereditary musical lineage called the *Qawwal Bachche* has been cultivated within a specific Sufi-Islamic sound knowledge. This training is also reflected in my own audio recording. Moreover, using examples from my performance, I demonstrate how it is both devotional text *and* the proper Hindustani vocal etiquette of *sur* (including bodily actions) that is ultimately able to enhance the meaning and sacredness of the words. Thus, the overall objective of this piece has been to counter certain unfounded public perceptions within Pakistan about the incompatibility of music and Islam, particularly with respect to Hindustani classical music.

To some readers, this performativity of a Sufi Islamic sound-world within Hindustani classical music might read like a deliberate attempt to Islamicize the past, a re-construction of the modern post-colonial identity, a product of the Islamic Republic's nation-building coming to full fruition. Therefore, it is essential to emphasize and clarify that my intention for this essay has not been to proselytize or favor a Sufi-Islamic narrative, but rather to highlight a plurality or multiplicity of shared practices that have always existed within Hindustani classical music. Most importantly, my intention has been to highlight my personal experiences as a singer and Hindustani classical music apprentice in contemporary Pakistan, where perspectives on overlapping Indic-Islamicate traditions are becoming increasingly marginalized, particularly within the context of rising fundamentalist sentiments and divisive ideologies across both sides of the Indian-Pakistani border.

## Bibliography

Ayyagari, Shalini. 2012. "Spaces Betwixt and Between: Musical Borderlands and the Manganiyar Musicians of Rajasthan." *Asian Music* 43 (1): 3-33.

Barlow, Jon, and Lakshmi Subramanian. 2007. "Music and Society in North India: From the Mughals to the Mutiny." *Economic and Political Weekly* 42 (19): 1779–87.

Frishkopf, Michael Aaron, and Federico Spinetti, eds. 2018. *Music, Sound, and Architecture in Islam*. Austin: University of Texas Press.

Kapchan, Deborah. 2015. "Body." *Keywords in Sound*, edited by David Novak and Matt Sakakeeny, 33-44. Durham: Duke University Press.

Orsini, Francesca, and Katherine Butler Schofield, eds. 2015. *Tellings and Texts: Music, Literature and Performance in North India*. Cambridge: Open Book Publishers.

Saeed, Yousuf. 2018. "Fled Is that Music." *India International Centre Quarterly* 35 (3/4): 238-49.

Weidman, Amanda. 2015. "Voice." *Keywords in Sound*, edited by David Novak and Matt Sakakeeny, 232-245. Durham: Duke University Press.