

Songs of the Sufi Mystics





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PART II

An Interview with Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan

INTERVIEWED BY JAMEELA SIDDIQI

Having explored the origins of Sufi Music at the Nizāmuddīn Shrine in Delhi (see SUFI, issue 36), we headed towards our next stop, Lahore, a historic Moghul city in the north of Pakistan.

Lahore was home to the world famous Qawwāl Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan who died in August 1997, only a day before his exclusive interview was to be broadcast as part of a BBC World Service series, “Songs of the Sufi Mystics.”

The second program in the series was devoted exclusively to Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan and his views on what it means to be a *Qawwāl*. We called on him at his house in Lahore to discuss the development of the Punjabi tradition of *Qawwālī* in Pakistan, based on the poetry of the Sufi saints of the Punjab. It was to be Khan Sahib's last interview with a western journalist.

Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan's house, in a well-to-do suburb of Lahore, is to all intents and purposes a modest family house, even though Khan Sahib was viewed in Pakistan as that country's number one cultural envoy. An armed guard at the tall, padlocked gates is the only indication that behind the high walls resides someone of national importance and international fame.

Khan Sahib had just come off a plane from Dubai after a gruelling concert tour lasting over three weeks, with daily performances in various cities in India and the Middle East. On hearing this, I was quite pessimistic about our chances for an interview. But after a short wait in the main family reception room, Khan Sahib emerged looking pale and drawn and reluctant to turn us away since, as he said, we had come "such a long way" just to talk to him.

His soft, gentle, unassuming manner in conversation was just as soothing as some of his full-throated, powerful, high-pitched scales which came to be associated with his specific style of *Qawwālī*. He had captivated audiences around the world with his own style of rhythmically repeating notes up and down the musical scale. But in speech he was as economical as he was generous in song.

A man of gigantic proportions, in more senses than one, Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan had the rare ability of being conspicuously absent from his own performances, leaving his listeners with the impression that the Divine message of love and unity was reaching them directly from Allah and that the singer of the message was no more or no less important than any of the musical instruments which accompanied him. A rare feat for someone who was not only the world's best known *Qawwāl*, but also a man with an imposing physical presence.

He was clearly exhausted and we decided to do our best to keep the questions short and simple. After all, according to the Sufi poet Bābā Bullhē Shāh, and as Khan Sahib himself has sung on many occasions, things that can be instinctively understood and accepted by the heart, are more important than those things that have to be spoken and spelled out for the brain. Perhaps for this reason he was a man of few words. Even so, certain basic concepts had to be dealt with and explained for the benefit of radio listeners around the world. The following interview was conducted in Urdu on the 6th of March, 1997, and was later translated into English.

JS: Can you tell us what it means to be a *Qawwāl*? What does a *Qawwāl* have to do, exactly?

KS: The one who utters '*Qawl*' is called a '*Qawwāl*,' that is the saying of our elders, the old Sufi sages, and all those great mas-

ters. When *qawl* (meaning the 'utterance') is given the form of a song, it becomes *Qawwālī*. There is a set form: *hamd* is sung in praise of Allah, *na't* in praise of the Prophet Muhammad. Then there are specific hymns dedicated to Hazrat 'Ali called *munāqibāt-i 'Ali*, and these three things form the core repertoire of *Qawwālī*. The duty of a *Qawwāl* is to reduce the distance between the Creator and the created. Those who feel cut off from their source can be reminded of their true roots through *Qawwālī*. That is what a *Qawwāl* must do.

JS: How do you feel when you are performing *Qawwālī* music?

KS: The sign of a good *Qawwāl* is that whatever he is singing, he is steeped in that. If I am singing a particular kind of verse, then whoever that verse is praising, that reality is before me. It takes me over—it becomes part of my being, and listeners react to that feeling, in the sense that in that one moment of realization, they realize that I am representing all of the qualities of that verse—whatever the verse is saying and whoever it is praising. The sign of a good *Qawwāl*, or any other musician, is his ability to draw his listeners into the reality of that essential message which is being sung. A good *Qawwāl* ceases to exist when he is performing. He simply becomes a vehicle through which that message passes. If the singer takes on the qualities of the verse that he is singing, then listeners pick up the message of the verse with ease.

JS: You are undoubtedly the best known *Qawwāl* in the world. Is this kind of fame and the adoration that it brings consistent with being a Sufi?

KS: Name, fame, wealth, honor. All these things are a gift from Allah. Otherwise we *Qawwāls* are basically the kind of people who belong with the *faqirs* (the poor). That is where we really belong. It is only by the grace of Allah that I am given this honor of being well-known, wealthy, honored and respected. But you don't need any of those things to be a good human being. What makes you a good human being is to be aware of other people's feelings and to never become arrogant about your own talent or fame. The most important thing is to never hurt anyone's feelings, because if you hurt someone's heart, than you hurt God, because God resides in all human hearts. That is what we say in Punjabi.

SJ: The Punjabi tradition of *Qawwālī* is widely popular. How would you explain its very special appeal not only in Pakistan but around the world?

KS: The original language of *Qawwālī* is Persian, the language of Iran. That is where *Qawwālī* really belongs—Iran, Khurāsān, Afghanistan, Turkey, etc. From there the mystics came into India and in India they absorbed the local culture and the old Indian languages, notably *Braj Bhasha* and *Purbi* (eastern dialects of medieval Hindi). But by the time the *Qawwālī* form of singing reached the Punjab area, it took on a completely new color, especially with the verses of the early



Khan being interviewed by author Jameela Siddiqi shortly before his death in August, 1997

Punjabi poets such as Bāba Farīduddīn Ganj-i-Shakar, Dātā Ganj-Bakhsh and Bābā Bullhē Shāh. In Punjabi the depth of the message improved and became even more beautiful because Punjabi, by its nature, is a very direct language. There is a way to say things very concisely, precisely and directly in Punjabi in a way that is not always possible with other languages, and this directness is very consistent with the Sufi principle of truth. While *Qawwālī* aims to reduce the distance between Creator and created, when it is sung in Punjabi, the reality that dawns on the listeners is of a kind that is immediately very clear and very direct, whatever the listeners' *ahwāl* (spiritual states) may be.

SJ: Why does *Qawwālī* appeal so much to Western audiences?

KS: *Qawwālī* was first only heard in India and Pakistan. Myself and the late Hājī Ghulām Farīd Sabrī of the Sabrī brothers were among the first to bring this to the West. It is essentially the underlying message that gives it a unity—the essential Sufi message of peace and love. Then there is the rhythm. No other music has the beat of *Qawwālī*—and that is the reason for its popularity in the whole world. This is the language of music which is a universal language. The language of music is understood everywhere.

SJ: How do you feel while performing *Qawwālī* on a concert stage, as opposed to performing it in its original context, like a private *mahfil-i samā'* (assembly of listeners) or at a Sufi *dargāh* (shrine)?

KS: *Qawwālī's* real setting is at the shrines of the great Sufis,

the *dargah's*, or at the *khānaqāhs*, which are particular centers for the gathering of communities of Sufis under the supervision of a master or an appointed shāikh. Anywhere else, in any other context, *Qawwālī* becomes merely a thing of entertainment, just like any other music. It becomes enticing, and at that level there are thousands of listeners because it is now a fashion to host a *Qawwālī* performance for social reasons, like weddings or parties. Proper *Qawwālī* can only be sung at the *khānaqāh* of a Sufi master, or at the graveside of a late master. But now, *Qawwāls* also sing for social reasons. Even so, there is always hope that it will touch some of those party-goers in a special way. This is why, even in party or wedding settings, most *Qawwāls* follow the set running order of *hamd*, *na't* and *munāqihāt*.

SJ: So, how do you feel when people treat it as entertainment?

KS: Times are changing, and we have to change with them. *Qawwālī* has become so popular and so common place that every listener relates to it at his or her own level. That cannot be helped. A listener can only react to *Qawwālī* in accordance with his own level of awareness. The performer, for his part, has to respond to a particular mood among the listeners, and the performance can only match the mood of listeners. That is how *Qawwālī* can become diluted, so much so that every present-day song that can be included in the repertoire has indeed been included. Some of these songs are purely romantic songs—we say, only '*ishq-i majāzi*', that is love of humans, as opposed to '*ishq-i haqīqī*' or love of the Divine. *Qawwālī* is all about '*ishq-i haqīqī*' and it can only be about that.