

## Rohi Rang (colours of the desert): A Sufi music performance by a group of Mir singers from Pugal, Western Rajasthan

### Mirs of Pugal and their tradition of Sufiyana Kalam

Deshkal Society organized a Sufi music performance by a group of Mir singers from Pugal, Western Rajasthan on 29th March, 2005 at the Triveni Kala Sangam, New Delhi. This initiative was part of the society's effort to facilitate in creating newer spaces of representation for culture and development of marginalized communities. While inaugurating the programme, Chairman of the society and eminent sociologist Prof. Imtiaz Ahmed remarked that we all suffer from a wrong notion that traditional music lacks adaptability to circumstances. Quite contrarily it has been transformative in nature and has effectively negotiated the changing circumstances providing strength to the process of building bridges between different communities in our country. He further said that there is immense scope to carry out research on such traditional forms of music that has flourished under the multifarious landscapes and ripples of time in a vast country like India. Sanjay Kumar, the secretary of the society thanked the well-wishers of the society for their tireless support for such causes and reiterated that the society is committed to facilitate the knowledge based activism and in this regard it will continue to hold such programmes in future too.



### Contours of the tradition and landscapes

Pugal is around 80 km northwest of the Bikaner city. The musical tradition of Sufiyana Kalam in Pugal developed in a predominantly 'pastoral' context in late medieval and early modern times. From medieval times Pugal had been an important settlement on the route from northern India to Bahawalpur and Multan. This musical tradition is popular around 80-90 km south and north of Pugal.

Vast stretches of sandy plains, extensive grasslands interspersed with dunes merging into limitless horizons dotted with long lines of caravans formed the geographical backdrop in which this musical tradition unfolded. In addition to centuries of contact along trade routes, cultural exchanges built around marriage and kinship ties have woven together different communities in these contiguous regions. These have bequeathed to the Pugal region the rich spiritual traditions of Sufi mystics of the earstwhile West Punjab, Bahawalpur and Multan.

The north western region of the Bikaner district is dotted with many popular dargahs, the most popular being those of Panch Peer, Mohammad Shah Rangeela, Charkiwala Peer, Lakh Daata Peer, Peer Pathan, Maskeen Shah, Peer Veekay Sheikh and others.

The singers of these mystical songs, mostly of the Mirasi community, are called Mir-I-Alam in the local parlance. The semi nomadic Muslim pastoralists and the Rajputs have been the main patrons of the Mirs. Be it a urs at a Sufi dargah, an auspicious occasion in a household or in clusters of temporary settlements in nomadic encampments of the pastoralists, the ecstatic performances of the Mirs have served as the means to attain heights of mystical experiences. In a predominantly pre-literate oral culture, the mehfiles of Mirs were also occasions for dissemination of knowledge—moral, spiritual and political.

The Mirs also sing compositions by Amir Khusro, Mirabai, Kabir, Achalram, the regal Mand from Bikaner and Marwari folk songs. Collective dancing to the lilting tunes of Been and Dhol are an intrinsic part of the performances of the Mirs.

## Mirs and Sufi Mystics

Kalams of Khwaja Ghulam Farid, Ali Haider, Baba Bulleh Shah, Hazrat Shah Hussain, Hazrat Sultan Bahu, and Baba Sheikh Farid in Saraiki and Punjabi, form an intrinsic part of the repertoire of Mirs. Most of these compositions stress on love as the basis of the relationship with God, they disregard religious boundaries and lay emphasis on an ascetic withdrawal from worldly pursuits and yearning for communion with god through mystical experience.



Apart from being deeply mystical, intensely humanist, and robustly pluralist, many of these compositions reflect a profound veneration for nature.

The Sufi and musical traditions of the Bahawalpur region have contributed the most in the formation of this musical tradition represented by the Mirs of Pugal. Singing sufiyana kalam of Khwaja Ghulam Farid from Bahawalpur forms the kernel of this tradition.

Ghulam Farid (1841 A.D. to 1901 A.D.) was born in Chachran in Bahawalpur state. He belonged to the Chisti order of Fariduddin Shankar Ganj. Ghulam Farid has very effectively used love ballads like Heer-Ranjha, Sohni-Mahiwal, Sassi-Punnu to vividly depict the love between the human soul and the divine. His compositions reveal a marked influence of the Bhakti movement.

Many of the kalams of Ghulam Farid popular in Pugal are compositions in praise of the pastoral landscape of the desert. One of his extremely popular kalam, 'kaldi jungle vich' is a pastoral romance, vividly describing the blooming of the desert to life after the first rains of the monsoon.

## **Waning of performing opportunities and crisis of livelihood**

After dissolution of the princely state of Bikaner in the 1950s, the fortunes and pre-eminence of the thakurs of Pugal, one of the main patrons of Mirs, dwindled gradually. The diminishing of the patronage by the Muslim pastoralists has been the result of the displacement of traditional life patterns with the coming of the Indira Gandhi Canal. The canal has brought with it the dominance of a new clock time, work discipline and a cash economy firmly regulated by the market. The making of the heterogeneous society of the IGNP Canal command area has profoundly altered the meaning of social relations, kinship ties and led to the dissolution of many socio-cultural practices that were intimately linked to the pre canal human geography and ecology. The Sufiyana kalam singing of Pugal is one such cultural practice.



It is the marginalisation of the tradition of singing sufiana kalam that sets the broad context in which we, along with a handful of Mir musicians tried to open up issues relating to the reinvigoration of the tradition and in the process try and address the 'crisis' of livelihood of the Mir musicians.

The 'live' performance was with a view to broaden the horizon and scope of the audience as well as the performing opportunities for the Mirs.

## **The Future: Representation in Urban Space**

Deshkal Society considers representation of the folk culture of these marginal communities, with all its vigour, resilience and rustic sensibilities, in the urban milieus as of utmost importance. Towards fulfilling this, it plans a process of radical pedagogy with children, primarily in urban contexts. This is to foster a holistic understanding about folk culture, its continuing relevance not only in the contemporary society, but in enriching our understanding about past and visions of future