

Sindhi Society and Culture

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I have travelled almost half of the world. On every flight, people asked me about Sindh, its people, their social setup, their language and culture. In reply to their questions I used to give them brief lecture and as always the last question was about a suggestion to write a book in which all information was stored comprehensively.

Once I was flying from Islamabad to Manila. Apparently, a general of the Pakistan Army was sitting beside me. I was the Vice-chancellor of the Allama Iqbal Open University at that time. We exchanged our views. I also talked about the working system being adopted by the AIOU, the courses and other programmes being offered by the university through Distance Education System.

It was followed by some more dis-cussion about Sindh, its history, Sindhi language and Sindhi culture. He himself belonged to the Punjab. His inquisitive-ness very deep and said: "Excuse me Dr. Allana, permit me if I ask you a few ques-tions about some aspects of Sindhi culture which have been shown in Mr. Abdul Qadir Junejo's drama 'Deewarein'. In this drama, Sindhi Waderas have been shown as authoritarian persons and the poor Sindhi people are treated by them as mere speechless characters. Another thing which I noticed in this drama is that whenever a visitor, poor or rich, comes to the Wadera, he first pays respects with both hands folded and then shakes hands with him. Why is it so? I have never seen this system anywhere in the Muslim Society or even in Pakistan."

I then explained to him the cultural values of Sindhi society and other aspects of its culture. This is how I conceived the idea of writing a book giving a brief of Sindhi culture, its history, people, arts and crafts, their way of life, their customs and traditions, Sindhi language and literature, religion, rites and rituals, etc. The subject is ofcourse enormous and would take volumes to discuss every aspect in detail.

Sindh is a province of Pakistan essentially the Indus Delta country. It has derived its name from Sindhu River, which is its lifeline from times immemorial. In the words of Prof Pithawala: "Of the province of Pakistan, Sindh is the best and oldest from the point of view of cul-tural progress." The indepth study of Sindh upholds the perception that its history and culture have played a very important role in the history of the subcontinent."

Every nation is reflective of its culture and Pakistan is no exception to this phenomenon. Many races came here in different positions. Whether at home or abroad they desire to be identified as Pakistanis, but for quite some time, it has been debated that what Pakistani culture is? This question again entails detailed discussion, but the simple reply is that Pakistani culture exists in various forms. The geographical topography of various parts is not the same, the lifestyle differs, from place to place; customs, traditions, languages, costumes, all vary from each other. Yet they are unified. This is unity in diversity and one can rightly call it Pakistani culture.

Sindh, as a matter of fact, is a region of diverse cultural influences though the cultures every outer influence arrived in Sindh, has not only been received but their characteristics made Sindhi culture different from the rest. It is an example of various influences which have made it a crucible of a variety of cultures that inter-acted with it.

It has been said that it is one of the richest cultures in the world and it can truly lay claim as such. In the words of Dr 'Louis' Flam: "One only has to visit Sindh to be made aware of the diversity and beauty of her peoples and their language, literature, arts and crafts, music, and social customs. Historically to rudiments of Sindhi culture can be found in the civilisation represented by the ancient site of Mohen-jo-Daro.

All these aspects have been deliberated upon in this book. It consists of few chapters. Each chapter contains relevant information. For instance, chapter 4 is about Sindhi society and Sindhi culture. Keeping in view the requirements of the readers, various characteristics of Sindhi society have been discussed in this chapter. To facilitate readers it has been subtitled appropriately.

Chapter 2 deals with history of Sindh at a glance. It deals with the vast expanse of Indus Valley Civilisation, as evident from its

centres at Amri, Mehrgarh, Kot Dijji, Mohen-jo-Daro and other archaeological sites in Sindh, Harappa, and Kutch, Gujarat and Haryana states in India. It is a treasure not only from the archaeological point of view but termed as so by the scholars who are interested in history, culture, linguistics and anthropology.

Following the Civilisation of Mohen-Jo-Daro (2300 BC- 1750 BC), there is a proof of a great settlement in this valley. The early history of Indus Valley points out to the contacts of lower Indus Valley with outside world from at the time of Darius-I (519 BC - 480 BC) who annexed Sindh to Empire of Persia. Thus during these days, the Iranian culture left its influence on Sindh.

Nearly two centuries later, i.e in 326 BC, Alexander the Great captured the Indus Valley. Entering from the north, he passed through the Fort of Aror, invaded the fertile region of the ancient settlement of Sehwan. He then passed through the deltaic town of Patala and proceeded south to the castle of Barbarikan, from where he left for Babylon by land.

The death of Alexander brought Sindh under the dominion of Chandra-gupta Maurya (325 BC) to be succeeded by Ashoka. During Ashoka's reign, Sindh was influenced by Buddhism. Ashoka was followed by Indo-Greeks, Parthians (3rd-2nd century BC), and the Scythians and the Kushans (100 BC-300 AD). The history records that the Scythian made Sindh their permanent abode, and even now a large number of people of Scythian origin live in Sindh though now they have merged with local population. Excavations at Bhambore have brought to light the Scythian race confirming their hold on the coastline of Sindh.

From the 3rd century to 5th century AD, Sindh remained under the political supremacy of Sassanid Persia. The founder of Sassanids of Persia was Ardshir Babagan, who ruled from 226 AD to 241 AD. There is some evidence that the Abhirs living to the east of the lower Indus Valley during this period acknowledged the sway of the Sassanids when Shapur-II besieged Amida on Tigris in 360 AD. He had aid of army of Indian elephants and of urban troops. According to Persian traditions, Sindh is actually gifted by its Indian (local) overlord to Bahram V, better known as Bahram Gur, who ruled Persia from 420 AD to 440 AD.

History records that Sindh came under Rai Dynasty in 499 AD when Naushirwan, the Iranian emperor ruled up to the right bank of Indus. The ruler of Rai Dynasty, Rai Sahasi-I the son of Rai Seharas, drove Iranians from Sindh and expanded his dominion up to Kirman in the Iranian land. Rai Dynasty ruled over Sindh for 143 years from 499 AD up to 642 AD.

Chach Brahman captured Sindh after the death of Rai Sahasi-II in 642 AD and thus Sindh fell under the Brahman rule, which was brought to an end by the Arab conquest in 93 AH /-712 AD. Thus the foundation stone of Muslim rule and Muslim culture was laid in the subcontinent.

The land of Sindh has shared great migrations from pre-historic times. Through out the centuries Sindh has offered its hospitality to a succession of races, but no stock has survived in its pure form. These races have integrated with local races to such an extent that today they cannot be identified. This is a composite phenomenon entirely peculiar to this region.

Thus the people living in Sindh are by and large a race by themselves denoting that Sindhi society has been a mixed society from pre-historic times to the present day.

Chapter five is about the religion, rites, rituals, beliefs, taboos, customs, ceremonies and superstitions practiced in Sindh. It is quite interesting for the students and scholars alike, for it is the first time that mythological aspects Sindhi culture and Sindhi society have been explained.

Cults are essential aspects of life. As an old civilisation, Sindh too had cults irrespective of the race and religion. Richard Burtain notes in his book:

"The Muhanas, though they keep up regular mosques and places of worship with Pirs, Mullas, and all the centres of devotion but the River Indus is adored by them under the name 'Khawaja Khizr', and is periodically propitiated by offering rice in earthen pots covered with cloth."

Like universal inhibition, superstitions too do form part of human psychic in the Indus Valley. From ancient times, the people

have retained most of the customs and ceremonies of the pre-Islamic days, which have not been overstepped till now.

There are some taboos too, even in naming their children. Naming habit is an example of socio-cultural and socio-linguistic study of Sindhi society. It is a very interesting subject which needs an indepth study. However, mythology has also played its role in Sindhi society in naming persons of all kinds.

The importance of Sindhi culture can be compared with ideas of one of the most famous Hungarian poet of the early twentieth century, Mr Gyular Juhaz:

"Let us take care of the people who sing, the people who create myths, the women who draw pictures and the men who carve wood and bone and do not become extinct, for their extinction would mean the end of mankind.

"Let us preserve, collect and disseminate their work, let us learn from them, let their art which is as permanent as nature and as continuous as history becomes a part of our own living soul."

Chapter six is about the origin, ancestry and history of Sindhi language and literature. For the study of the culture of any nation, one requires to study its language because the language also plays a vital role in expression and dissemination of culture. Language is a very important symbol of any culture. Language affects literature, and the literature of any language affects life of a nation. Language is primary mode of communication of thoughts and feelings. Language and literature are very closely related to each other. Language is the mode of communication, literature is a medium of expression of our daily life and culture. Men of letters develop their language. They read and collect literary gleaning, relate them to current myths and legends, translate treasure of traditional literatures and synthesise various cultural streams by writing the folklore.

The men of letters modernise the language and keep it alive by constant borrowing from other living languages. They point out the deep relationship between literature and its historical inspiration. They give new ideas, thoughts and inspiration to their readers through their

writings. In this chapter the use of Sindhi language has been studied in the perspective given above. Today its writers have not only brought literature from other languages but they have contributed much towards creative and original literature. They have rendered a great service to both literature and language. They have preached for national awakening, freedom and social realism. The Sindhi society embodies all ideas and aspiration of a dynamic society which can inherit and evolve the real reflection of life. It is the history of human race preserved in very simple narration of emotions, history and deeds. C.P Saintyvasa, great folklorist in his work 'Manuel Du Folk Lore,' 1933, remarked:

"Folklore is a study of traditions, and for this reason its first task is to collect and classify the facts that make up tradition, after this it must explain their nature and traditional essence. Folk tradition cannot be compared with buried treasure. It is a flow of all kinds of richness, and inventions enjoyed by the stars, performs the miracle of perpetual motion."

Similarly, education is a very basic ingredient of human knowledge. There are many misconceptions about the education and history in Sindh. In this book an attempt has been made to give a clear idea of what had happened and how can we move ahead with historical evidence. Much has been included into the pages to follow on this subject.

Chapter eight deals with fairs, festivals, games, sports, recreations and amusements of the people of Sindh. Like the people of other countries, people of Sindh are also happy and pleasure loving. They whole-heartedly celebrate fairs and festivals. They are fond of listening music, folk songs, folklore, epics, devotional hymns, and poems and they enjoy every kind of sports and folk dances. A list of some selected fairs, festivals of Muslims, Hindus and other races along with sports and games is given in this chapter.

Chapter nine is on music and folk dances of Sindh. In this chapter not only the brief history of music and folk dances of Sindh is given but various categories of Sindhi music have also been explained. It has also been mentioned that what is the choral character of music? In addition, some light has been thrown on sacred and devotional

hymns, sung by various communities in Sindh. Some information has been given about 'Vais', Kafis' and Ginans' which are recited for devotional happiness.

It is for the first time that Ginans have been introduced as devotional hymns which are recited at different times of the day by the followers of Nizari Isma'ili followers according to the melodies of local Surs/modes. They are composed in different musical modes and thus meant to be recited by the followers / devotees for the enrichment of their souls.

As stated in chapter five, the phi-losophy of self-realisation for divine Union is expressed by all the Nizari Ismaili Sufis in their ginans. Thus ginans have profound devotional meaning. They have in them rhymes of divine love and its importance in reaching the doors of salvation.

This chapter also contains detailed information about Sindhi folk songs and their kinds, such as the songs which accompany the events of life, such as birth, marriage and other ceremonies. Similarly, seasonal and ceremonial songs, such as agricultural songs, the songs of rainy season, etc. have also been mentioned.

Sindhi folk songs have a different tradition, taste and temperament, and some important folk songs have also been described in this chapter.

Besides folk songs, Sindhi folk dances have also been introduced for the first time. One can reasonably feel that dancing in Sindh eventually has become a part of folk music for the purpose of intensive expression of sentiments of human life. Dancing in Sindh has been witnessed since the Vedic age. It was probably associated with fertility cult.

This chapter includes the description of various folk dances performed throughout Sindh on different occasions. This chapter also contains a list of names and kinds of musical instruments.

The last chapter deals with Sindhian arts and crafts. It may be worth discussion that Sindh has its own school of art and crafts which is original and has its roots in the ancient Indus Valley Civilisation.

Folk art is a major aspect of our cultural heritage and it bears all the characteristics of an authentic form. In this chapter a brief history of some of most prominent arts and crafts of people is given

shedding light on those aspects of people's art that have been hitherto not been discussed in length. This includes the details of all aspects of these arts including pattern, motifs and general principle.

A glossary has also been given in which some Sindhi technical terminology has been explained for readers and researchers. It took me about five years after my retirement, first to collect the material from various sources and then writing it in various chapters and at the end of each chapter reference of books have been given. A general subjectwise bibliography has also been given at the end of the text.

This is actually the labour of my love with Sindh and its people. Many friends and well-wishers of Sindh deserve my thanks, who got the work accomplished. My special gratitude to my sister, Mrs. Mahtab Akbar Rashdi, former secretary Culture and Tourism Department, who took special interests in getting this work done. I am grateful to Mr. Shams Jafrani, Secretary Department of Culture and Tourism to allow my book published as decided by Ms. Rashidi, and to Mr. Manzoor Ahmed Kanasro, former Director Culture whose efforts too contributed this book's completions. I find no words to express my gratefulness to Mr. Aziz Shiakh, and Mr. Saleem Noorhusain who have edited the text of this book. I am grateful to M. Aftab Abro for the publication of this book The Department of Culture and Tourism has graciously provided all the picture and photographs included in this book which have made this book very interesting and knowledgeable.

I have said in other books of mine that I am a lay man in this field and a student of Sindhological studies, and only a part of which has been explained in this work.

I would like to conclude with two paragraphs reproduced from the foreword written by my American friend, Dr. Louis Flam, who said:

"To see the richness of Sindhi culture one only has to visit Sindh to be made aware of the diversity and beauty of its people and their language, literature, arts and crafts, music and social customs. The local rudiments of Sindhi culture can be found in the civilisation represented by the ancient site of Mohen-jodaro dating back to the third millennium BC."