

Merin Shobhana Xavier, *Sacred Spaces and Transnational Networks in American Sufism: Bawa Muhaiyaddeen and Contemporary Shrine Cultures*

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The author of this book has a compelling story to tell, since she was born where the main character of the book first began his spiritual career. Merin Xavier is a Sri Lankan Tamil whose family migrated to the United Kingdom from Kayts Island (near Jaffna) to avoid expulsion by the Tamil Tigers during the civil war. She then returned briefly to Sri Lanka as a doctoral student to study Muhammad Raheem Bawa Muhaiyaddeen

(ral.), a non-literate Tamil holy man who, at first, was notoriously difficult to define as fitting into any one specific category. He was a *guru*, a *svāmi*, a *shaykh*, etc. But most importantly, he was Bawa (Tamil *pāvā*), a spiritual “father” to a variety of different people around the world. Xavier’s family ended up in Canada, where she eventually completed her doctoral dissertation (Xavier 2015), upon which this book is based.

Guru Bawa, as he was most commonly known in his earlier days, was, in fact, an unaffiliated Sufi, despite what some of his critics who labeled him a Hindu might have thought. This is quite clear from his earliest publication in Tamil titled *Kurumanī* (1961), where he used Hindu terminology to describe what is clearly a Sufi cosmology. Later, he became associated with the Qadiri order of Sufis when his mosque was constructed far away from his place of origin. This fact suggests that Bawa went through a series of transformations as his identity and teachings evolved, thanks to a chain of incidents that led to his departure for the United States in 1971.

Xavier charts the teacher’s journey in the first chapter of her book, where she follows Bawa’s movements from Jaffna to Philadelphia. Borrowing liberally from a variety of secondary sources that she blends in with her own interviews and conversations with people in Sri Lanka and North America, she describes how Bawa’s reputation spread from Jaffna to other parts of the island nation, which gradually led to the establishment of an organization titled the Serendib Sufi Study Circle in Colombo (SSSC). This organization consisted of a variety of spiritualists who were mostly Muslim but also included Buddhists and Theosophists, giving the newly formed group a strong perennial tone, which is noticeable in the English volumes they published based on Bawa’s teachings (Bawa 1970–2001). It was while residing in Colombo that Bawa established contact with a woman in the United States who desperately wanted to meet him. To this end, she raised funds to bring him and his small entourage of interpreters to Philadelphia, where she had earlier met one of Bawa’s Sri Lankan admirers. Her contact just so happened to be a student at a local university who then went on to write his doctoral dissertation on Bawa and his American followers (Mauroof 1976), which was the first academic writing on what is now known as the Bawa Muhaiyadeen Fellowship, Guru Bawa’s North American headquarters.

It was not originally Bawa’s intention to stay in the United States, but his visit kept getting prolonged until he established roots in Philadelphia and eventually even had the aforementioned mosque built in 1984. Even so, he felt a responsibility for those he left behind in Sri Lanka, so he returned four times before he died in 1986, after which he was buried on a plot of land earlier purchased by the Fellowship to serve as a graveyard. A shrine was eventually built over it, which now serves as a pilgrimage site for his few thousand American, Canadian, and South Asian admirers.

In chapter 2, the author focuses on the everyday practices of Bawa devotees in Jaffna, while chapter 3 does the same for Pennsylvania. Chapter 4 turns its attention specifically to women’s experiences in the Fellowship. Finally, chapter 5 explores how Bawa moved from being called Swami, another one of the teacher’s generic names most often associated with Hinduism, to his designation as Qutb, a highly reserved term for a special teacher who appears only once in a rare while. In her brief conclusion, the author focuses on three ideas: “(1) racial and cultural categories and the use of congregational parallelism as an analytical category, (2) the processes of Islami-zation and negotiations of authenticities, and (3) Bawa’s directives on the roles of women in his transnational communities” (201).

The overall goal of the book is to provide a study of the development of Guru Bawa as he evolved from a local preacher in northern Sri Lanka into an international figure based in North America. To do this, the author emphasizes the importance of shrines, as her title and subtitle suggest. The problem, however, as her title and subtitle also suggest, is that the book falls short on both accounts. In essence, Xavier attempts to write two books in one, yet the two never converge as one, despite citing a vast number of secondary sources to make her case. What results is thin ethnography with a heavy veneer of theorizing. Moreover, much of what has been argued in this book is derivative of what had already been written before she even wrote her dissertation, often not acknowledged by the author, who borrows heavily from previous work done on Bawa Muhaiyaddeen. To compensate for this, the author tries hard to come up with fresh perspectives by quoting certain authors out of context to set up straw men or by attempting to make minor matters into major investigative breakthroughs, such as when she discusses race, for example, within the Fellowship.

Mechanically, the book still has a doctoral dissertation-type feel to it, despite the fact that Xavier thankfully trimmed it down somewhat for this publication. Even so, the book could have used much better editing, since there are numerous grammatical and typographical errors throughout. Foreign words are a jumble of terms from Persian, Arabic, and several South Asian languages, but no diacritical marks are used whatsoever, which leaves those readers who are linguistically sensitive perplexed and wanting more. A glossary of terms and their etymologies at minimum would have been useful here. Lastly, the index is quite short and inadequate. Several authors who are cited repeatedly are not included, while others cited less are, and those entries that are included are not listed exhaustively. Moreover, there are works cited in the text that are missing from the bibliography and works in the bibliography that are not cited in the book.

All of the above criticisms suggest to the careful reader that Bloomsbury and/or the author (or both) were not very studious or cautious in putting this book together, resulting in a number of serious flaws that cannot be summarized in a brief review. What the reader is left with is a volume with some occasional flashes of insight, but one that seems sloppy, rushed, and published prematurely, despite the many superlatives printed on the back of the book provided by pre-publication reviewers who are not familiar with the ethnographic material presented therein. By the time I finished the book, I did not feel as compelled as when I began but was left uncomfortably wondering about its originality and questioning its citation of sources.

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Frank J. Korom
Boston University