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Family of Qamar Din, Legacy Bearer of the *Larhi* System of the Subcontinent

Abstract

Subcontinent is a region that has cultural traditions of its own. There was never a line drawn between the arts and crafts and both were declared as expressions of the highest order. Individuals associated would consider their work as sacred and many of them encouraged their coming generations to follow the legacy of their forefathers. The youth used to feel pride in continuing the family profession, which led to family oriented system called Larhi system in the local terminology. Larhi is the word used for a pearl string and these individual artists would declare themselves the pearls of the string or Moti of the Larhi. Current research is based on the discovery of one such painter family that has been following the Larhi system for more than three hundred years and continuing till today. They also witnessed the turning point of the Subcontinent when the British took over and faced the wrath of bad times. This family also represent all those 19th century masters who never had the chance to show their work in the formal exhibitions¹. Unlike Abdul Rahman Aijaz, Sheikh Ahmad, Sateesh Gujral, Amrita Sher Gil and Abdul Rahman Chughtai², their art was never considered “creative enough” to be put on display but they were responsible for taking the load of commercial market. Along with that they were producing some highly original and creative works as well.

Introduction

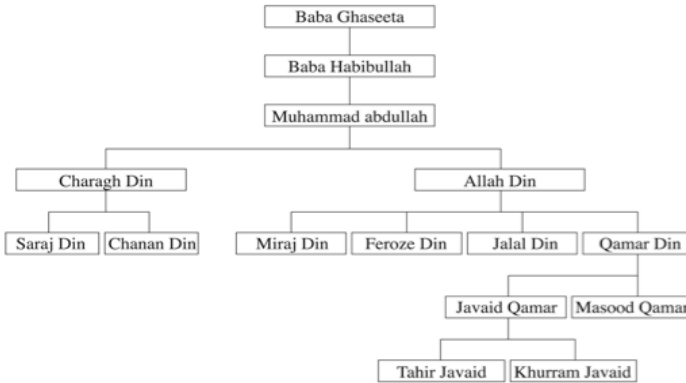
All the major cities of the Subcontinent have tradition of arts and crafts since time immemorial. City of Lahore is no exception in this regard where we find artefacts since prehistoric times. Many individuals were associated to these professions and these individuals were frequently related to each other. It is also a well-known fact that in Lahore many families were active in different artistic expressions. Sons adopted the profession of their fathers and continued the *Larhi* i.e. chain system. Two such families were discovered and both are carrying the legacy in their own way. They were Imam Din and Hibiullah family. Current research is focused on the contributions made by Habibullah family.

Habibullah Family

The family of Imam Din were carpenters and the other branch of the family Habibullahs were painters of high merit.

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FAMILY TREE OF HABIBULLAH



(Plate A)

They were related to each other through inter family marriages and most of the relationships are too complicated. One of the artists named *Khalifa* Qamar Din, is the focus of current research. I met him and found him extremely intelligent man with a great sense of humour. Apart from that he was a man of extreme patience who answered my never-ending questions for hours. His hearing power was damaged so most of the time he would answer the questions by writing on a paper. Even though this style of communication is very difficult to carry but we two were able to manage it in an extremely synchronised manner because he was eager to impart his knowledge and information and I was eager to learn.



(Fig. 1)

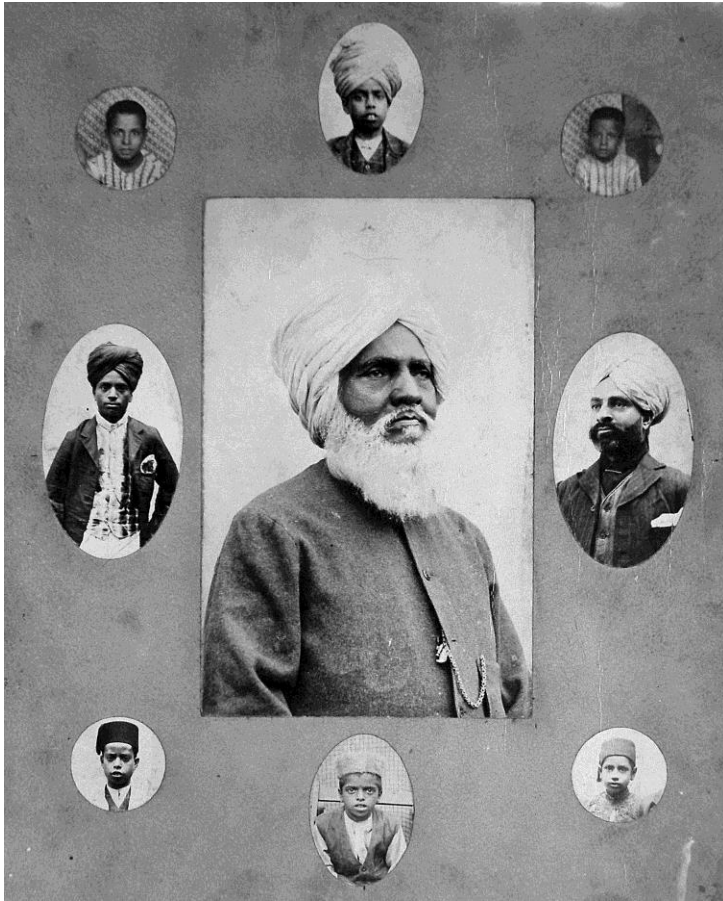
Khalifa Qamar Din was born in 1924 to a family that was highly respected in the art circles of Lahore. Story starts from his great grandfather, *Baba Ghaseeta* who belonged to the city of Lahore. In his house was born a man of great talent Habibullah Qureshi, a famous *Naqqash* of the 19th century. He was an accomplished artist and his name is mentioned by Abdul Rahman Chughtai when he writes, “In the *Kharadi Muhallah*, Mian Faiz Bakhsh, Farid Bakhsh and Habibullah were famous painter and *Naqqash*.”³ According to another art historian, Musarrat Hasan, he was active in the mid 19th century.⁴ The family also confirms that he was a *Naqqash* of high merit and very well respected by his contemporaries.

Habibullah lived inside Mochi *Darwaaza* in a big house. Acquisition of this house was a very interesting story that was shared with me by many older members of the family but the best version given was of *Khalifa* Qamar Din who narrated that Habibullah’s father in law was also a *Naqqash* and engraver of high esteem. He used to design the shields and swords of the grandees of Lahore. Once he was asked to engrave a sword for Maharaja Ranjit Singh. When the engraver presented the sword, it was so beautiful that Maharaja asked him to join his *Darbar*. The *Koftgar* (engraver) refused. Maharaja offered to *Koftgar* (engraver) that whatever he desired, would be granted. Habibullah’s father-in-law needed a house desperately because he had to look after three widowed daughters, so he asked for a place to live. Ranjit Singh was very generous towards the artists, he ordered his *Jamadar* (overseer) to take the *Koftgar* (engraver) to Mochi *Darwaaza*, along with the keys of the vacant houses, as most of them were owned by the Maharaja. Whatever house the *Koftgar* (engraver) selected, was to be given to him as a reward for his great craftsmanship. That is how they came in possession of their family house in Mochi *Darwaaza* where they lived till 1970s. Every member of the family tells this story and how they got their ancestral home but unfortunately no one knows the name of that *Koftgar* (engraver). Even eighty-four years old *Khalifa* Qamar Din was unable to remember. R. P. Srivastava did mention an engraver who refused Maharaja’s employment, “Famous stylists were Mian Pir Bakhsh *Koftgar* whom the Maharaja himself wanted to employ in the royal service which he refused.”⁵ I believe that he was writing about the same *Koftgar* (engraver). *Khalifa* Qamar told that this engraver had three widowed daughters. One of them had no child, the other one had a daughter but the third one had a son who was named Muhammad Abdullah. This Abdullah later became another talented painter of his time. Even today his skill in figurative art is legendary in the family but apparently no painting or sketch has survived of the artist’s hand.

A convincing factor of Muhammad Abdullah, being a painter of high merit is, he was the teacher of the famous artist, *Ustad* Allah Bakhsh. Although most of the people think that Allah Bakhsh was a self-taught painter but fact is “he was apprenticed with Master Abdullah at the age of five.”⁶ Muhammad Abdullah trained Allah Bakhsh in his formative years and Allah Bakhsh never forgot the kindness of his *Ustad*. Master Abdullah established an office by the name of “Abdullah & Sons” in Royal Park. This place was the centre of Bazaar style art because many theatre companies and other advertising offices were situated here.

Even today many of the printing and processing houses of Lahore are located in that area. Master Abdullah had two sons Allah Din Qureshi and Charagh Din.

There is an intriguing family photograph that shows the fine technique of photography used in a very creative manner.



(Fig. 2)

These are the portraits of young and old members of the family represented in different sizes according to their age and status, placed around the image of Muhammad Abdullah. Smaller portraits show the cousins and other youngsters who joined different fields of art when they grew up. Muhammad Abdullah's son Allah Din Qureshi was born in 1860. He was married to Qamar ul Nisa, a very gifted and hardworking woman who was the sister of one of the members of Imam Din family.



(Fig. 3)

Family tradition of art and craft was carried on by Haji Allah Din. He had four talented sons, Maraj Din, Feroze Din, Jalal Din and Qamar Din. The eldest three were experts in block making for printing and signboards for the roads. They also used to make the enamelled name and number plates, first for the British Government and later for the Government of Pakistan, a highly technical work that was done very successfully by this family. Feroze Din completed his studies from Mayo School of Arts in 1920s but stayed in the family business. He was a mason; carpenter, designer and also knew calligraphy. When Master Abdullah's son Allah Din died, his son Qamar Din was only six years old. He stayed with his family for the next two years and studied till class two when *Ustad* Allah Bakhsh insisted to supervise the grandson of his *Ustad* Abdullah. His house was in Prem Gali Gowal Mandi and the building was called *Daroghawalian Di Gali* (the street of overseers). Later on Allah Bakhsh shifted his studio from Gowal Mandi (an area near Mochi *Darwaaza*) to Muslim Town. "His studio, which he first established in Gowal Mandi and later in Muslim Town was busy and active place where a number of people came to learn from the *Ustad*, who did not charge anything for teaching them."⁷ But this place was far away from Qamar's house. At the persistence of Allah Bakhsh and for the better future of her son, the mother let him

go and Qamar stayed at Allah Bakhsh's house for the next nine years i.e. from 1932 to 1941.⁸

It was the tradition of that time that the son of an *Ustad* was called *Khalifa* (successor). Since Muhammad Abdullah's son Allah Din was dead, so Qamar was given the title of *Khalifa*, as he was the grandson of Allah Bakhsh's teacher.

"*Ustad* Allah Bakhsh was a very versatile painter. It is said that he painted one hundred and fifty figures in a day and often sketched in the Hira Mandi."⁹ (Red Light area of Lahore) His obsession with figurative drawing was transferred to his student and we see many practice drawing/paintings by Qamar also.



(Fig. 4)

Although Qamar Din's stay with Allah Buksh was very rewarding artistically but at a personal level, he suffered a lot. He was involved in all the household chores. Out of many, one was to carry heavy bag of wheat from Muslim Town to a

flourmill in Icchra and return trip in the hottest of weathers, always on foot. These are the two localities of Lahore with a distance of three kilometres approximately.

When in 1936 Ustad Allah Bakhsh went to Patiala at the invitation of Maharaja,¹⁰ *Khalifa* Qamar accompanied his *Ustad* and worked there. *Khalifa* Qamar said that the Maharaja was very generous towards the artists and loved to have men of merit around him. But Allah Bakhsh could not stay there for more than one year and came back in 1937,¹¹ so did his student. Qamar Din was learning a lot from his teacher but his mother was missing him very much so she forced Allah Bakhsh to send Qamar back home. The son came back but now he was sent to learn lathe work. When the *Ustad* came to know about the fate of his pupil, he interfered and took Qamar to the Kapur Printing Press where Allah Bakhsh worked from 1938 to 1947.¹² Around 1942 Qamar joined the same press and worked there for the next 27 years.

After partition Kapur Printing Press was renamed as Pakistan Printing Press, allotted to two partners Mian Shafih and Mian Mumtaz. The press is credited for drawing the first maps of Pakistan that were used in every department later on. It was a highly detailed work and *Ustad Khalifa* Qamar Din was an expert in it. He was also a member of the team of those artists who prepared the first maps of divided India that were discussed in different meetings of the British government with leaders of Congress and Muslim League. *Khalifa* Qamar informed that those maps were changed at the last minute and the team of same artists at Kapur press redrew the maps within three days. "I did not go home for two nights and three days, we worked on those maps all the time."

He also drew charts for irrigation department that had nine squares in an inch. Such miniature work was a hallmark of the family because his grand father *Ustad* Abdullah was also famous for his detail work. The family has no painting by their talented ancestors. But there is a reference of a very nicely done portrait of Guru Nanak by *Ustad* Abdullah but so far I have not been able to trace it. *Khalifa* Qamar had some paintings by his forefathers in his possession and he promised to show them. But when he checked the attic after many years of neglect, he discovered that the documents and the paintings that were kept in an iron box were destroyed by termite. All that was left in the box was some powder of those papers and paintings. What a loss!

Most of the paintings done by Qamar Din are also either lost or destroyed but fortunately few survived and they are in the possession of the artist who was kind enough to show them and share his views. Some of those paintings discussed below, belong to the first half of the 20th century. They contain the same influences that were prevailing in the second half of the 19th century with modern traits associated to the next century. Reason for including this information is to stress the strong impact of the learning tradition that was carried on from father to son in a chain or 'Larhi' that lasted centuries.

Khalifa Qamar Din was commissioned to make filmi posters, along with lot of copy work as part of his training.



(Fig. 5)

Some commercial drawings by *Khalifa Qamar* are still in good condition. One was done for a stationery shop, a simple drawing showing a girl sitting on an oversized book under a lamp. Her lovely face is dominating the sketch. This is a typical example of the commercial art produced and published in the first half of the 20th century.



(Fig. 6)

‘Portrait of a Young Girl in Profile’, has been painted very simply.



(Fig. 7)

Technical skill of the artist is at its peak here. In just a few strokes of watercolour he has been able to achieve maximum result. The innocence and charm of the face is alluring. Strokes of blue colour around her neck are amazing in their spontaneity. Somewhere in that entire commercial heap one can glimpse the genius of a true artist. His strokes are fresh and spontaneous. These are also *Khalifa Qamar's* creations without restrictions of the client. Here artist has given free reign to his imagination.

Small sketch of an old man done in watercolours finished by pencil, is the face of a wrinkled person that has been depicted brilliantly.



(Fig. 8)

Use of colours is minimum, pencil lines are added to enhance the effect. The artist has come a long way from traditional miniature painting. Although this work lacks the detail and finish of old times yet it is more expressionist and very modern in approach.

He never painted in oils. Watercolour was his favourite medium. He felt very sad that he never learnt to make his own pigments and used readymade colours available in the market.

I spent almost two years interviewing *Khalifa* Qamar Din at different occasions. He shared his experiences and first-hand knowledge about the art scene of Lahore. Impressed by his good memory and a wonderful sense of humour, I was still in the process of getting information about 20th century Lahore when he died on 26th December 2008. Wish I could have spent more time with him.

Many members of this family joined different printing press, etching houses, drafting departments, map making etc. A few boys went to Mayo School of Art that was later named National College of Arts. Others worked as designers, painters, illustrators and calligraphists in Urdu Bazaar, a famous market of Lahore that deals with designing, printing and publishing of the books that are sent all over Pakistan.



(Fig. 9)

One of *Khalifa* Qamar's sons Javaid Qamar became a photographer and joined Packages press in 1968 but left in 1980, began his own processing house in Urdu Bazaar and today he is running RQ printing press successfully. Javaid's two sons Muhammad Tahir Javaid and Muhammad Khurram Javaid have also joined their father. A tradition that started more than three hundred years ago is still going strong with one *Larhi* following the other.

Notes and References

- ¹ For details see Musarrat Hasan, *Painting in the Punjab Plains 1842-1945*.
- ² For details about these artists see Musarrat Hasan, *Painting in the Punjab Plains 1842-1945*.
- ³ Abdul Rahman Chughtai, *Lahore Ka Dabistan i Musawwari*, (Lahore: Chughtai Museum Trust 1979), 36.
- ⁴ Musarrat Hasan, *Painting in the Punjab Plains 1842-1945* (Lahore: Ferozsons Pvt. Limited 1998), 138.
- ⁵ R. P. Srivastava, *Punjab Painting* (New Delhi: Hans Raj Gupta & Sons 1983), 77.
- ⁶ Hasan, *Painting in the Punjab Plains 1842-1945*, 182.
- ⁷ *Ibid.*, 183.
- ⁸ Allah Bakhsh's grandson Abdul Khaliq in one of his interviews testified this fact.
- ⁹ Hasan, *Painting in the Punjab Plains 1842-1945*, 182.
- ¹⁰ *Ibid.*
- ¹¹ *Ibid.*
- ¹² *Ibid.*