

# **The Mir Musicians of Pugal: Thoughts and Questions on Interventions and Sustainable Livelihoods**

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# Mirs of Pugal

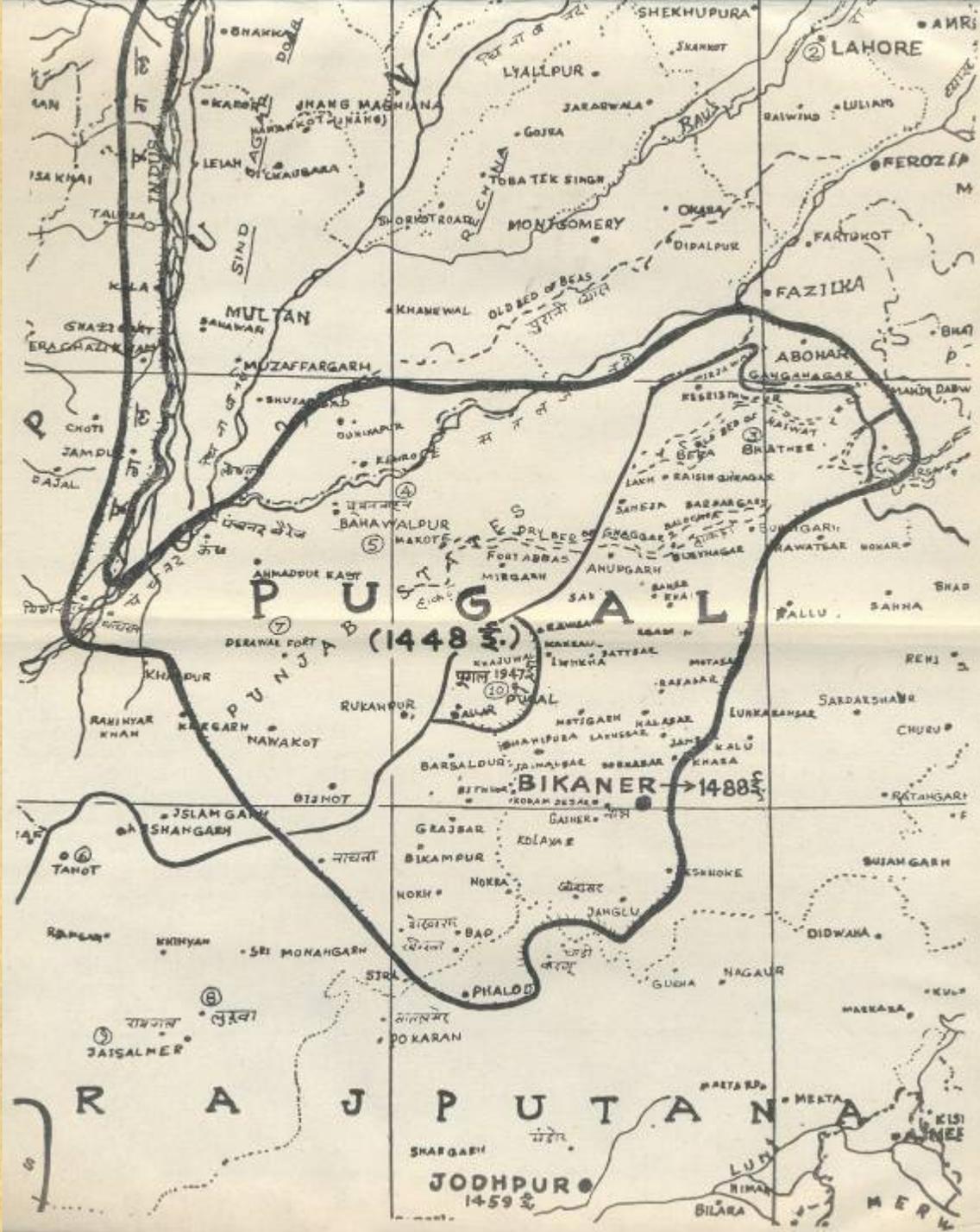


# Mirs of Pugal

## Background

- Community of hereditary musicians
- In villages scattered along the India-Pakistan border in northwest Bikaner
- Singing Sufiana music for over 500 years
- Kalaams of Baba Sheikh Farid, Baba Bulleh Shah, Hazrat Shah Hussain, Hazrat Sultan Bahu and Khwaja Ghulam Farid
- They sing in Seraiki, Punjabi and Sindhi

# Map of Historical Pugal





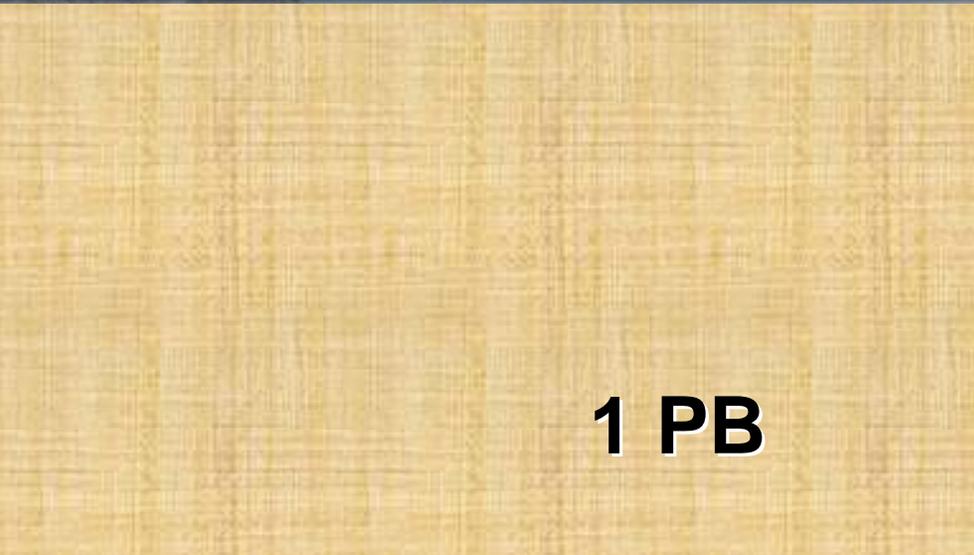
Images of Present Day Pugal

# Mirs: Challenges

- Poverty—Most of the Mirs are struggling to make ends meet
- Break down of pastoral economy and patronage system—coming of the Indira Gandhi canal. Loss of dignity in their profession
- No political clout. Till very recently, government cultural agencies were not even aware of their existence
- Change in demographics—local people don't understand Seraiki, Sindhi, Punjabi—problem finding a local audience



# Indira Gandhi Canal



**1 PB**



- Censorship—Restrictions imposed by Orthodox clerics who claim that music is un-islamic
- Physical distance between Mir villages makes it difficult for the community to come together
- Mutual distrust and ego problems amongst the musicians
- Lack of education
- Generation gap between the veterans and the youngsters
- The challenge of finding a place for themselves in today's changed scenario

# Mirs: Potential for Empowerment

- Keepers of hundreds of years old Sufi poetry and stories
- Innate sense of rhythm and music
- Increased awareness; efforts from within the community to reinvigorate interest among the musicians and local audiences

- Analyzing Interventions
- Sustainable Livelihoods
  - Capacity Building
  - Finding an audience

# Analyzing Interventions

- **Beyond 'Projects': Sustaining work with the community**

In general, engagements with a community for outside researchers and organizations tend to be 'project-based'. Once a project is over, the outside party withdraws, and gets involved in the next project. However, sustained work is crucial to make any real change possible. While it is important for the community to take responsibility and be actively involved in the revival process, it is crucial for NGOs and involved individuals to be there for logistic support, crisis management etc.—to take up the role of catalyst and facilitator.

- **Role of local NGOs**

The attempt to help by developmental NGOs needs to be analyzed critically. Looking at 'support' only in terms of offering money for services, has led to folk musicians being roped in to sing 'message songs' about education, girl child, HIV etc. The following feedback from one of the Mirs is quite revealing:

*“They [the NGOs] make a programme for duration of an hour and that’s what one has to follow. But there is nothing artistic in these programmes. It doesn’t give us a feeling of accomplishment or sakoona (satisfaction). People also don’t attend. They feel that it’s a government programme so it will be boring—no entertainment. I have also done that kind of work—singing songs with a social message. I feel that if someone wants to give a message to the people, they should organize a programme with music so that people will gather, and once the audience is there, you can convey your message to them directly. But if you try to convey it through the medium of my song, then that becomes a different art altogether. There is bound to be confusion. I wonder if any coherent message gets through to the people. We can sing those songs, but it doesn’t work, neither the music, nor the message. Now if you tell an uneducated man to spread awareness about AIDS, he will be able to say only what he has been made to memorize.”*

## ■ Evaluation Cycle

There is a serious need for reflection, self-critique and introspection and a sound evaluation cycle; a need to share and analyze failures as much as successes. Integrating research, dissemination and evaluation should be the goal if we are working towards sustainable livelihoods.

## ■ Need for an Open Approach

Interventionists should be aware of the danger of bringing in their own biases and influencing/imposing them on the community. Taking a strong ideological stance with its inbuilt biases can be quite counter-productive. For example, who decides in matters of the whole community or some individuals from the community as to what is the “right” approach; who are the “right” people to work with?

## ■ Sharing Research

From the very inception of the research process, the dissemination of results is a critical consideration. However, in the context of the Mirs, we have found research, analysis and evaluation, if any, have not been shared amongst the interventionists. This leads to repetition of research, and work proceeding in a haphazard manner.

# Working with the Government

- The Government is one of the stakeholders
- Need to sensitize Government Agencies
- Share research, understanding, analysis, ideas
- Work towards policy change

## *Thoughts of a Mir musician:*

*“From the time I understood the importance of music, I have taken it up. Whatever it is, it seems like one cannot live without what is an integral part of one’s being. I don’t want my people to make music a means to earn their livelihood. It is art, and if your art is made into a means to earn money, then the art will be destroyed; it will just become a business. If someone has fields, he should work on it. Alongside it, he can sing. When a program comes up, he can go and sing there. But music should be primarily for one’s own satisfaction; only then will it survive. If we make it our source of livelihood, then it won’t work. This is what I believe.”*



Farooq, Mahajan

Abdul Jabbar, Pugal



Vasu Khan, 1PB

# Capacity Building

- **Honing Knowledge and Skills**

Some of the singers have learnt the kalaams, but do not know the meanings of the words or about the poetry or philosophy. So its not just about memorizing the lyrics, but understanding the meaning and the essence, the stories of Pirs etc. Could we renew the idea of guru-shishya parampara in today's times?

- **Participatory Research**

Could we train some of the youngsters in research? A researcher from outside can work with them—each learning from the other and undertaking truly participatory research.

- **Expanding the Repertoire**

# Marketing & Finding an Audience

- Local Audience

*“In order to gain the interest of the local audience we have to do so with out charging money. People do not value free things and we hope we don’t have to sing for free too long.”*

Can a musical form survive and thrive without an organic relationship with the local listeners?

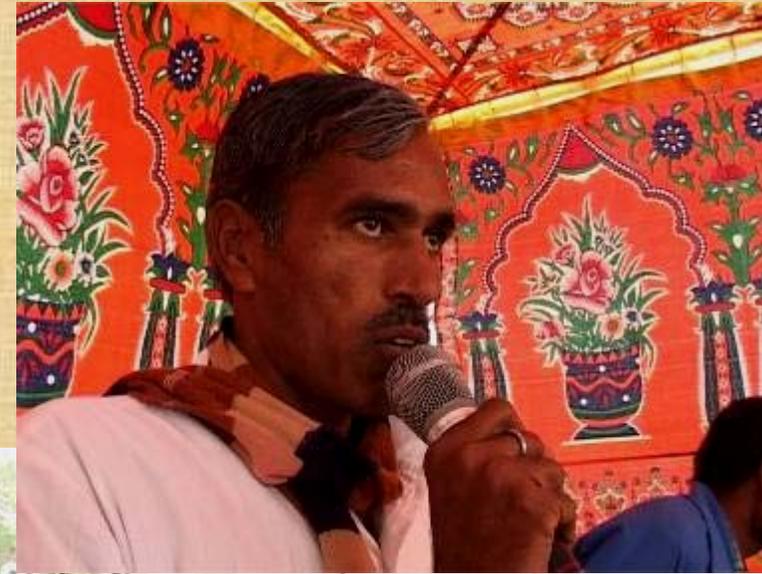
- Outside Audience

- Experiences of other communities

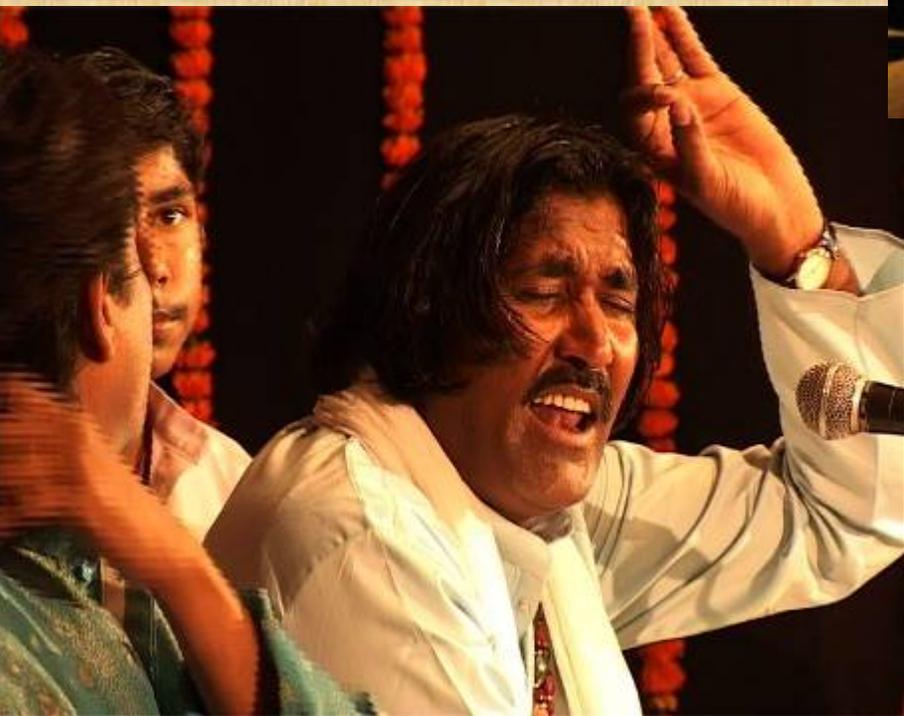
There are examples of groups like the Sidi Goma. They are of east African origin, settled in different parts of India for centuries. They used to sing and dance (and even now they do so in their Pir Bava Gor’s shrine) wearing their everyday clothes—kurta pyjamas etc. A few years back, the Gujarat Government gave them African Tribal-looking costumes to increase saleability! Now they have become very popular, and are touring within and outside India giving performances.

- Exploring websites and other new media

# Rohi Rang: Pugal, January 2007



# Concert in Delhi, January 2008



# Sidi Goma



# Conclusion

- Follow a multi-pronged approach that includes: creating awareness at all levels, organizing concerts locally and outside etc, sensitizing and working with government agencies and NGOs working in the region, helping the artists in developing their skills, honing their talent—learning more about the rich tradition they come from especially the younger generation
- Follow an inclusive approach: Not to work in isolation, but try to bring our various skills together, and work in partnership by distributing responsibilities, and keeping a free flow of information and ideas; discussing and sharing strategies, tools of evaluation, learnings etc.