

Muslim Shrines and Multi-Religious Visitations as a Symbol of Peaceful Co-existence: A Study of three Prominent Sufi Shrines

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Abstract

Followers of all religions co-existed peacefully in the Indian sub-continent, showing acceptance and tolerance towards each other. Recent incidents such as the Hindu-Muslim riots, anti-Christian riots, and attacks on the Shia community, show that the tolerance taught by Sufism is largely missing today. In religious life of Indian people, the dargah or shrine plays a central role. Followers of all religions still visit their shrines to pay their respects. The paper attempts to highlight that a dargah is a meeting place of cultures, where people of all faiths come and pay homage to these shrines. In this paper, a special focus is on the Dargah of Khwaja Mu'inuddin Chishti (Ajmer), Dargah of Nizamuddin Auliya (Delhi), and dargah of Salar Masud Ghazi (Bahraich, U.P.), where both Hindus and Muslims visit to pay their respects—thus representing a sign of peaceful co-existence between various faiths. The paper concludes that shrines/Dargahs are truly the continuity of tradition of communal harmony and peacemaking.

Introduction

In the pluralistic society of India, many religions coexist and cooperate with each other. Hindus and Muslims live closely together and meet every day. Their religions might seem very different from each other—with the monotheistic Islam on the one hand and the polytheistic Hinduism on the other hand. They do, however, have many things in common. A

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mystical branch of Islam, Sufism, brings Hindus and Muslims together when the devotees from both religions visit the same saints and thus meet at the sacred places. This paper will show that a *dargah* is a meeting place of cultures, where people of all faiths come and pay homage to them and exchange their ideas as well. In this paper, a special focus is on the *Dargah* of Khwaja Mu‘inuddin Chishti (Ajmer), *Dargah* of Nizamuddin Aauliyah (Delhi), and *dargah* of Salar Masud Ghazi (Bahraich, U.P.), where both Hindus and Muslims go to pay their respects—thus represents a sign of peaceful co-existence between various faiths.

This paper is divided into three main parts. In part one, the word shrine and its development in the Indian sub-continent has been discussed. The focus in the second part is on *Dargah* of Mu‘inuddin Chishti, *Dargah* of Nizamuddin Auliya and *Dargah* of Salar Masud Ghazi: A Symbol of peaceful Co-existence. The third part consists of discussion and findings before conclusion.

Before going into details, I would like to define the word “Shrine” and its development in multi-cultural societies in brief.

The Arabic term “*qubah*” (a tomb surmounted by a dome) refers throughout the Muslim world to saints’ shrines and mausoleums and place of special spiritual significance the word “shrine” meaning “box” was originally used for container, made of precious materials, used especially for relics or a cult image. By extension, it has come to mean a holy or sacred place containing the reliquary or tomb dedicated to a particular hero, martyr, saint or similar figure of awe and respect. The word “grave” (in urdu *qabr*) is used for burial place of a common man. When a dead person begins to be venerated as a saint, a simple grave becomes a shrine (*mazar*, *ziyaratgah*). Further, if the visitation is increased to thousands, many new components related to the shrine or to facilitate the visitors, are added. In contemporary context, the whole unit is called Shrine Complex.¹

In Arabic and Persian languages, numerous terms have been used to denote the shrine or burial place. These terms were adopted in Urdu language. “*marqad*” is another equivalent word used for “*khwabgah*” meaning “place of rest or sleep”.²

In the beginning, graves were not raised higher from the ground level. No structure of any kind was constructed over the graves. First generation of Muslims took cue regarding the burial place from the Prophet Mohammad who died in 632 A.D. *Hujrah* was separated from the prophets’ mosque with a wall after the burial of the Prophet Mohammad . In the late years of seventh century, the *hujrah* was reconstructed in black stone and plaster, in an irregular square plan form. Two caliphs, Hadrat Abu Bakr Siddiq (d. 634 A.D.) and Hadrat Umar b.

Khattab (644 A.D.) were also buried in the same enclosure. After seventy years of death of Prophet Mohammad a much venerated tomb was constructed at his grave by Umayyad caliph al-Walid-I.³

Originally the exterior colour of the dome was blue. Later on the colour was changed into white. In 1838 A.D., when Sultān Mahmood reconstructed the dome, white colour was changed into green. From that time onwards, the dome at the shrine of Prophet Mohammad became known as “Green dome” (*gunbad-e Khaḍra*). This dome form and its colour has become a symbol of reverence for the Muslims of the entire Islamic world⁴.

During 7th and 8th centuries A.D., the grave stones showing the date of death, name, etc. were not erected at graves. In 9th century, some ‘Abbasid caliphs (758-1258 A.D.) were buried in their own houses following the tradition of Prophet Mohammad. During these years, richly worked silk shrouds, elaborately carved coffins made of exotic and expensive wood were used. In later years, inscribed funerary gravestones, in the form of *mehrab* over the graves, were erected. The inscriptions comprised *B’ismillah*, the name and the date of death of deceased and sometimes ended with a prayer for the blessing. The earliest recorded shrines were erected over the graves of noted companions of Prophet Mohammad.⁵ None of these shrines, however, now exists anymore.

Shrine in Indian Sub-Continent

John A. Subḥan has mentioned earlier Muslim shrines in Indian Subcontinent. Among these, the oldest shrine is of Ḥaḍrat Bibi Pak Damana (d. 680 A.D.), located off-Empress Road, in Moḥalla Muhammad Nagar near Shimlah Hill Lahore. The shrine was re-constructed in year 1969-70 by a devotee Shaykh ‘Abdul Majid, who was devotee and member of Religious Purposes Committee at that time.⁶

One of the earliest shrine is the of Sayyid Salar Masud Ghazi (d. 1033) in Bahraich, it was re-constructed in 1046, by one of the devotee Zahra Bibi, the congenitally blind daughter of one Sayyid Jamaluddin of Radauli who had regained her sight on praying to the Ghazi.⁷

The third oldest shrine is of Ḥaḍrat ‘Ali Hujwiri who is commonly known as Ḥaḍrat Data Ganj Bukhsh (d.1072 A.D.). It is located outside Bhati Gate of Walled City of Lahore. Hujwiri came to Lahore and settled outside the city, at bank of river Ravi. He constructed a small mosque in his life towards south-west side of his *hujrah*.⁸

In the mid-decades of the thirteenth century A.D., Baba Farid shifted to Ajodhan presently known as Pakpattan, and laid down the foundation of the Chishti Ṣufi order in Punjab. Baba

Farid (d.1265 A.D.) was buried in his *hujrah* and this laid down the foundation for Chishti *khanqah* in Punjab.

In later centuries, Şufis of other silsalahs like Suhrawardiyyah, Qadiriyyah etc. established their *khanqahs* in Punjab. The Suhrawardiyyah flourished at Multan and Uch Sharif. Qadiriyyah flourished at Uch Sharif during 12th and 13th centuries and at Lahore during 16th and 17th centuries.⁹

The shrines in Indian subcontinent have developed four features that defined its particular role in Muslim communities. First is its appeal that transcended the boundaries of communities and casts and attracted people from different sectors of the society. It consequently acted as a powerful syncretism force in a land characterized by variety in religions, beliefs and customs. The second function of shrine is to act as a means of integrating local cultural system into a larger one associated with the Muslim rulers, though remaining nevertheless a local manifestation. Third, the shrine has owned and its administration has controlled considerable economic resources in the form of property, land and cash income. Fourth, the shrine became a symbol of power, both spiritual and secular. Spiritual in the sense of association with God and fulfillment of earthly desires through acceptance of prayer (*du'a*) and secular in the sense that economic wealth and social status could be transmitted to the individuals concerned with its administration.¹⁰

Characteristics of *Dargah* of Mu'inuddin Chishti, *Dargah* of Nizamuddin Auliya and *Dargah* of Salar Masud Ghazi: Symbols of Harmonious Coexistence

Hindu tradition and Islam might at a first glance seem very different from each other, but they have many things in common in theology, practice, and religious reciprocity, especially in the context of Sufi shrines and martyr's tomb—the places of faith healing and harmonious co-existence. Similarly the mystical branches, like the *bhakti* movement and Sufism came closer to each other and thus learnt and influenced each other¹¹. The Sufi Jalalalludin Rumi(1207-1273AD) in the 13th century discussed the different ways verses from the Qur'an can be interpreted in favor of service to god and to the humanity. The verse:

وَإِذْ جَعَلْنَا الْبَيْتَ مَثَابَةً لِّلنَّاسِ وَأَمْنًا وَاتَّخِذُوا مِن مَّقَامِ إِبْرَاهِيمَ مُصَلًّى¹²

(And We made the House to be a place of visitation for the people, and a sanctuary), saying other way as: Make of the place where Abraham stood to pray your place of prayer.¹³ Rumi does not interpret the house in the verse to be the Ka'bah in Makkah, but applies a spiritual interpretation instead. The Sufis say that— it refers to our inner world— provides a sanctuary

where we can commune with him in peace and security¹⁴. Sufi tradition always promotes the causes and ways of harmonious coexistence.

Mostly Sunni Muslims go to *mazars*, but some Shias may go as well. Going to the *mazar* is not as important among the Shia community as with Sunni Muslims. At the ground level, if a Sunni Muslim says that a problem was solved or a wish was fulfilled by their visit to the *mazar* a Shia Muslim will also visit the place. According to Mr Alim Husayn, a prominent member of the Shia Community in Banaras, Shia Muslims only go to the mausoleums or *mazars* of the first twelve Imams. Many Sufi saints are not martyrs, since they have not died in a holy war. He also states that Shia Muslims do not think that going to *mazars* is a duty¹⁵.

The *mazars* are integrating places for Hindus and Muslims both, where generate a feeling of co-existential inclusion/integration, since both Hindus and Muslim visit the same *dargahs* (tombs) of the saints, and most of the times their motives reciprocate within the common arena of receiving blessings (*duakhani*). This tradition can be traced back to the Mughal emperor Akbar (1556-1605) who was known for visiting shrines and graves of Hindu saints, and was credited to introduce a path of syncretism among the various paths called *Din-e Ilahi*, which was centered at Gyanavapi mosque in Banaras. The interaction between the two traditions, i.e. Hindu tradition (esp. *bhakti*, and *nirguna*) and Islam (esp. Sufi) has encouraged cultural harmony and co-sharing of religious performances that ultimately helped to make acculturated pattern of mosaic spaces and places where pilgrimages and auspicious visitation (*ziyarat*) accepted as the main force¹⁶.

The *dargah* of Mui'nuddin Chishti, *dargah* of Nizamuddin Auliyah and *Dargah* of Salar Masud Ghazi, exemplify the symbols of harmonious coexistence where Hindu-Muslim participates on the occasion of *urs* and fairs. Of course relatively these *mela* at martyr's tombs are overall dominated by Muslims, however, Hindus have important role in each and every festivities and also in giving financial donations to organize the *melas*. The reasons behind this mixing include their mutual cohesiveness being living in the same neighborhood, preponderance of the low caste community, both Muslim and Hindus, who feel safer to maintain companionship, wherein such *melas* provide opportunity for amusement, recreation, and religious satisfaction and also for purchasing kitchen utensils. This is interesting to know as to why Hindus and Muslims both one taking equal share in visiting *mazar*. Simple reason has been the contiguity of tradition and receiving of merits, especially getting relief from the unidentified diseases related to spirit possession, and also issues related to unemployment, social-defame, marriage, having son, etc. Naive People believe that the miraculous blessings

from the *pirs* and *mutawwali*, would certainly give them relief from such sufferings. However, many visitors attend these fairs for entertainment; of course such visitors disturb the serenity, piousness and harmonious environment of the place and inherent spirit. The variation of Hindu sharing is a subject of place-affinity and the local socio-cultural environment.

As I, mentioned above the *dargahs* of sufis attract a large number of devotees from all communities who visit these *dargahs* regularly for fulfillment of their desires/requirements. Thus, the *dargah* promote peaceful co-existence in multicultural societies. Therefore, it is important to give details in brief of these three *dargahs*.

The *Dargah* of Khwaja Mu‘inuddin Chishti at Ajmer

Khwaja Mu‘inuddin (1141-1236), was one of the most outstanding figures in the annals of Islamic mysticism and founder of the Chishtiyya order in India. His tomb is venerated by Hindus and Muslims alike and Hundreds of thousands of people from all over the Indo-Pakistan sub-continent assemble there on the occasion of his *urs*.¹⁷

The *dargah* area contains many buildings—gates, mosque, hospices, langars, etc — constructed by the ruler of Malwa, the Mughal emperors, nobles merchants and mystics during the past several centuries. It was during the reign of Akbar (1556-1606) that Ajmer became one of the most important centers of pilgrimage in the country. The Mughal emperors displayed great reverence for the mausoleum of the saint. Akbar undertook journey on foot to Ajmer, and Shah Djahan’s daughter Djahan Ara, cleaned and swept the tomb with her eyelids.¹⁸

The various customs and ceremonies that developed under the patronage and control of the Mughals, Rajputs, and Marathas generated an atmosphere of mutual understanding among different sections of society and gave stimulus to the growth of cultural affinity and a spirit of cordiality between Hindus and Muslims of the subcontinent. The appointment of non-Muslims to the important posts of *mutawwli* (custodian) and *amin* (revenue officers), etc., their participation in the ceremonies at the shrine in an official capacity, the grant of stipends and daily allowances to Hindus- including *zunnardars* (Hindu priest), *bairagis* (Hindu fakir) and the fixation of their shares in the daily *langar* (free food) reflected the increasing presence of non-Muslims in the internal management of the *dargah*.¹⁹

Siyar al-Arifin gives details which contain interesting information about the *dargah*’s role in the cultural integration of the two major communities-Hindus and Muslims-in India. Visitors to the *dargah* Ajmer included both Muslims and Hindus who approached it, as they

still do today, with different spiritual, psychological and economic problems, and returned in peace and filled with hope on account of their faith in the *barakat* (blessings) of the *dargah*.²⁰

Unconverted Hindus also often remained sincerely attached to the *dargah*, paid visits there, made offerings in cash or kind. Their descendants followed this tradition. It is worth recalling that in medieval times Hindus and Muslims often vowed offerings to a patron saint or deity if their prayers were answered. Sometimes, faced with serious problems such as the illness of an only son or the desire for a male child, Hindus seem to have vowed that they would accept Islam. For Hindus, and often for new converts to Islam whose conversion was partial, the *dargah* was a substitute for the idol.

The *Dargah* of Nizamuddin Auliya in Delhi

At a time when Indian political discourse is heated up with debates between communalism and secularism, the shrine of Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya situated in the Nizamuddin Basti of south Delhi represents a perfect embodiment of a religious symbol with secular values. Needy person get relief while patients are cured through its blessing. The *Shaikh* laying buried is not the lamp of Delhi but of the entire country. People turn up there in crowds, particularly in Sunday. In the month of *diwali* the entire population of Delhi visits its and stays in tent around the spring tank for days. They take baths to obtain cures from chronic diseases. Muslims and Hindus pay visits in the same spirit. From Morning till evening, people come in groups and busy themselves in marry making in the shade of the trees. They are provided with an occasion for great merriment, the sound of music coming from every corner. The *urs* is also celebrated with great enthusiasm.²¹

Thousands of people from different parts of India and other countries, backgrounds, classes and even religions visit the Nizamuddin *dargah* regularly every year. Muslims are the largest group of visitors, Hindus coming next, followed by Sikhs, and occasionally a few Christians. Most of them come to pray at the tombs Hazrat Nizamuddin (1239-1325) and his disciple, Amir Khusrau, since he is believed to serve as the gate keeper of the *dargah*, and then at the tomb of Hadrat Nizamuddin a considerable number of visitors meet their *pirs* (spiritual directors), who claim to be descendents of Hadrat Nizamuddin.²²

People come to the *dargah* mainly to acquire something, be it from God through the intercession of the saint, or from the saint who is seen as God's representative, or from the *pirs*. It is true that pilgrims come to the *dargah* with all kinds of petitions and requests. Those who find it difficult to communicate verbally with the saint write out their petitions on pieces

of paper which they tie to the grilled walls surrounding the shrine of Hadrat Nizamuddin. Others tie strings and pieces of clothe torn from their clothing to the grilled wall of the shrine to remind the saint of their requests and themselves of their commitment to feed or cloth the poor of the *dargah* as soon as their request have been granted. Some pilgrims seek cures beyond the competence of ordinary doctors. A few pilgrims come to beseech a favourable verdict in their court cases. Some people are brought to the *dargah* by family members, well-wishers and friends to be exorcised from evil *jinnns* or spirits.²³

People of all faiths are loved here. A different religion is no barrier since all people are the same in the eyes of the saint. Because there is one God, all people equally, whatever their faith or atatus-all people are equal here. The *pirs* effect cures as also miracles through *tawizes* (amulets), which are prayers, often verses from the Quran. The *pirs* and *pirzade* are also approached for advice on all kinds of problems, both spiritual and mundane, and for monetary help.²⁴

The *Dargah* of Sayyid Salar Masud Ghazi in Bahraich

The Indo-Islamic cult of Ghazi Miyan, originally Ghazi Saiyyad Salar Masud (1015-1034), a grandson of Sultan Mahmud Ghaznavi, is representative of a religious syncretism, still prevalent among both Hindus (of course low castes) and Muslims, that has become a source of surprise and embarrassment to (especially modernists of) both the high traditions. Anthropologists find it easy to pose as champions of an Indian folk religion that would conform neither to the Brahmanical nor to the Quranic models: the ideal hunting ground for leftist Indian intellectuals in search of a ‘subaltern’ (pre-) consciousness that would have resisted domination by both church and state. Of course Ghazi Miyan is absent from standard chronological histories of the Sultan of Ghazni and other official histories, Masud Ghazi, having various appellations like Ghazi Miyan, Bade Miyan, or Ghazi Dulha (lit. Hindi Ghazi bridegroom) has none the less overwhelming popular presence²⁵.

Bahraich is situated near the Indo-Nepal border in Uttar Pradesh. There is the famous shrine of Sayyid Salar Masud Ghazi, popularly known as *dargah* (or *dargah sharif*), which is the Muslim religious symbol in multicultural societies.

The cult and annual celebration on a grand scale of adherents and ‘commoners’ to his tomb at Bahraich, has remained an annual affair even since Ibn Battuta (1304-1369), one of the greatest travelers of medieval period, visited the shrine in Barhaich in 1341 and found it too crowded for any sort of comfort²⁶.

The annual marriage festival of Ghazi Miyan culminated in the breaking not only of caste barriers, but even of religious barriers between Hindus and their Muslim neighbours. Surely, such blatant transgression of the law, the dissolution of both *shariat* and *dharma* in an atmosphere of general licence and promiscuity, could hardly constitute the true end of Islam nor of Hinduism, nor of any other religious tradition, at least as observed and understood by the majority of its adherents!²⁷

Ghazi Miyan's grave was guarded by his surviving devotees. The local people began to venerate it, the Hindus being more zealous in their veneration than the Muslims. Years later a Hindu milkman, Jasu Ahir- whose barren wife was blessed with a son on praying there-rebuilt the grave with pure cow milk and costly lime. Soon thereafter the grave became an object of even deeper veneration.²⁸

In the thirtieth year of the Ghazi's death Zahra Bibi, the congenitally blind daughter of one Sayyid Jamaluddin of Radauli who had regained her sight on praying to the Ghazi, became his staunch devotee and got his grave reconstructed under a magnificent tomb. On her death the Bibi was buried in a grave near the Ghazi's tomb, which she had kept ready. As time passed the fame of the shrine and its spiritual potency spread.²⁹

Most days are busy at the *dargah*, but there is an unusual rush on the two *Idd* days, on *Yaumi-i Ashurah* in *Muharram* and on *Shab-i barat*. There are also three major periodical festivities- the *urs*, the *Basant Fair*, and the *Great Jeshth Fair*.

The groups of pilgrim-parties are still called *medni* or *barart* (marriage party). They bring *dahez* (bridal gift) and offer these at the grave of the Ghazi and Zahra Bibi. The carrying and presentation of *nishans* or *alams* (long spear-headed stiks covered with costly cloth and other decorative materials) is the main attraction of the great fair. Pilgrims seeking the Ghazi's blessing for the fulfillment of their desires touch with *nishans* brought by them the dome of Sangi Qila, taking a vow that if they achieve what they aspire for they will return to the shrine with *nishans* and further offerings³⁰.

The most remarkable miracle of Ghazi Miyan's *dargah* is said to be the recovery of lepers from their disease. The water used for the bath of *Mazar Sharif* is believed to be a cure. Pilgrims collect it in small bottles from the pond near the Sandal tree and take it back home to treat with patients of leprosy and leucoderma. Lepers themselves also visit the *dargah* in large numbers.

The legend of Ghazi Miyan is not confined to the city of Bahraich. In many other towns of northern India there are places related to his name. In Meerut a memorial to the Ghazi was reportedly built long ago by Qutubuddin Aibak, where Bale Miyan's Nauchandi is

celebrated even now with great enthusiasm, attracting huge crowds of Hindus and Muslims from the town and the neighborhood³¹.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it is safe to argue that, after the death of Sufis, their graves became a visiting place for the devotees. This frequent visitation transformed the simple burial place into a shrine that became a source of income for descendents, source of power for Emperors, good place for business and a spiritual centre for devotees.

Dargah of Mu‘inuddin Chishti, *Dargah* of Nizamuddin Auliya, and *Dargah* of Salar Masud Ghazi are a religious symbol of peaceful Coexistence, because these shrines are the meeting place of multi-cultures and multi-religions, where people from varying backgrounds meet and reciprocate their mystical experiences. They come for a variety of reasons, of course mostly for wishing, healing or prayer, but the history of the saint is not the first priority of the visitors. It is noted that, “The Hindu-Muslim cult of Ghazi Miyan merely confirms that Islamic proselytism has succeeded through a judicious blend of violent imposition of symbolic (architectural) structures and syncretising accommodation that operates on the common ground occupied by both religions”.

Therefore, *mazar/shrine* is indeed a meeting place of many cultures, exchange of mystical experiences, and ideas in India's multicultural pluralistic society; and thus results in building a harmonious and peaceful society.

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