Journal of the Punjab University Historical Society
Volume: 38, No. 02, January–June 2025

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Emotions and Miracles: Folktales of the Mian Mir Shrine in Nineteenth-Century Lahore

Abstract

This study explores the emotional and cultural dimensions of folktales associated with Hazrat Mian Mir, a renowned Sufi saint of Lahore, during the nineteenth century. By examining oral traditions, historical records, and visual depictions, it investigates how narratives of Mian Mir's miracles (karāmāt) fostered deep emotional bonds between the saint and his devotees. Drawing upon Robert Darnton's interpretive framework and Peter Berger's concept of Nomos, the research reveals how these stories shaped collective belief, providing moral guidance and spiritual consolation. The study further analyzes the shrine's evolving significance under Sikh and British rule, demonstrating its role as a shared site of interfaith devotion and emotional expression. Through paintings and orally transmitted folktales, Mian Mir's legacy emerges as both a spiritual and cultural phenomenon, illustrating how emotions, memory, and devotion intersect in the making of sacred narratives in colonial Punjab.

Key words: *Sufism, Mian Mir, Emotions, Folktales, Paintings, Culture of Devotion, Colonial Lahore*

Introduction

Recent scholarship on Sufi folktales[1] has primarily focused on their heroic and legendary dimensions, emphasizing the ways in which Sufis assisted communities and achieved popular veneration. However, the affective dimensions, particularly the emotional relationships that devotees formed through these narratives, remain largely unexplored. [2] This study examines the emotional engagement of devotees with the Sufi saint through the oral transmission of miraculous and supernatural accounts associated with him. The central argument posited here is that shrine-centered folktales evoke profound emotional responses among devotees, ranging from joy to tears, by recounting the saint's miraculous deeds and acts of compassion. Such narratives, often regarded as manifestations of the saint's *karāmāt* (miracles), deeply influenced the spiritual and emotional lives of their audiences. Focusing specifically on the folktales surrounding Hazrat Mian Mir,[3] a renowned Sufi of Lahore, this chapter explores how these stories of his supernatural powers cultivated an enduring emotional and devotional connection between the saint and his followers in the nineteenth century.

In this article, I have used Robert Darnton's[4] approach to understand the folktales of Hazrat Mian Mir and their emotional impact on devotees. Darnton, in his famous work *The Great Cat Massacre* (1984), explained how a French folktale from the seventeenth century revealed the anger and resistance of ordinary people

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against the injustices of the upper class. In a similar way, I look at how the folktales of Mian Mir reflect the emotions, hopes, and faith of his followers in nineteenth-century. To understand this emotional bond, Peter Berger's idea of *Nomos* is used to describes how people create a meaningful world through shared beliefs and stories.[5] Berger contends that shared narratives and ideas help people create a symbolic cosmos that gives their experiences meaning and shape. In the same way, the folktales of Mian Mir supplied followers with a religious framework through which they interpreted life, sorrow, and divine kindness. Not only did hearing tales of his compassion and miracles amuse them, but it also strengthened their faith and sense of kinship with the saint. These tales turned everyday events into hallowed meetings, transforming the shrine into a place where feelings like happiness, hope, and devotional tears could be expressed. Mian Mir's miraculous presence guided, comforted, and emotionally united his followers long after his physical departure, allowing the devotees to embrace a shared universe of meaning through this Nomos.

Sufi folktales

In nineteenth-century South Asia, Sufi folktales were a vital component of popular culture, expressing the emotional and spiritual relationship between saints and their followers. Those who frequently visited shrines and listened to these tales interpreted them in ways that resonated with their own lives, thereby strengthening their emotional bond with the Sufi. The miraculous stories associated with Hazrat Mian Mir, in particular, left a lasting emotional impact on his followers, many of whom continued to record and circulate his miracles well into the colonial period.

During the nineteenth century, British scholars such as R.C. Temple, William Crooke, E.B. Tylor, and Flora Annie Steel began collecting Punjabi folktales.[6] However, their interpretations often stripped these narratives of their local meaning and spiritual depth, labeling them as mere superstitions of the lower classes. Such misreadings reflected a colonial bias that viewed indigenous traditions through an ethnographic rather than an empathetic lens. Yet, the study of folktales is essential for understanding the emotional and cultural life of a community, as these narratives provide insight into collective values, faith, and imagination.

Sufi folktales, like other oral traditions, carry multiple symbols and layers of meaning that differ across regions. For instance, Abdulmamad Iloliev has analyzed Pamiri folktales in Afghanistan that celebrate Imam Ali ibn Abi Talib as the "King of Men." These tales depict Ali as a heroic figure who defeats dragons and protects the weak, embodying divine strength and moral justice. Similar motifs appear across cultures, the "dragon slayer" figure, for example, symbolizes the triumph of good over evil in Byzantine, Anatolian, and Persian traditions, as seen in the *Shah-namah* and *The Tale of Prince Muhammad*. Such parallels reveal how folktales not only preserve moral values but also reflect a community's understanding of courage, justice, and faith.[7] As Aarne Thompson, the Finnish folklorist, notes, folktales adapt to different cultural environments while retaining their emotional and symbolic power.[8]

The miracles of Sufi saints often evoke strong emotions of joy, relief, and even tears among devotees, as they see in them a bridge between the human and

the divine. One folktale from Chiniot (present-day Pakistan) tells of a Sufi dervish whose spiritual presence transformed the region. When he was expelled by a local ruler, he commanded the waters of the Chenab River to retreat into a clay pot, causing a drought. Realizing their mistake, the townspeople sought his forgiveness, upon which he released the water again, an act that not only revived the river but also awakened the people's faith. Such stories reveal how Sufi miracles were understood as signs of divine justice and mercy, deepening people's emotional connection to the saint and his shrine.[9]

Sheikh Abdul Hameed recounts an incident illustrating the miraculous compassion of Mian Mir. One day, while Mian Mir was engaged in meditation in a garden, a man approached with a catapult and struck a dove perched on a tree branch, a bird that had been melodiously praising Allah. The dove fell to the ground, and the man departed, leaving behind the dead creature. At Mian Mir's instruction, Abdul Hameed brought the bird to him. With gentle touch and divine grace, Mian Mir revived the dove, which immediately flew to a nearby branch, unharmed and serene. Shortly thereafter, the same man returned and, despite witnessing this wonder, aimed once more at the revived bird. However, the stone did not reach its target; instead, it turned back and struck the shooter's finger, wounding him severely. Overcome with pain, the man collapsed to the ground. Mian Mir then commanded Abdul Hameed to approach the fallen hunter and convey his message: if he vowed never again to harm any winged creature, his pain would subside. Upon accepting this admonition and pledging to abstain from cruelty, the man's suffering instantly ceased, and he departed, healed and penitent.[10]

The *opacities* within the miracle of Mian Mir, such as the revival of the dove through divine grace, reveal the deeply rooted faith and emotional resonance associated with his persona. Stories like these, shape the collective memory of devotees, inspiring them to visit the shrine in search of spiritual solace and miraculous intervention. Pilgrims who suffer from pain, illness, or personal distress often come to the shrine of Mian Mir, drawn by the promise of divine assistance that such folktales embody. The joy, fulfillment, and emotional satisfaction of receiving blessings or perceived rewards reach their height during these visits. When I visited the shrine, I observed couples praying for fertility and the blessing of children; many returned after childbirth to express gratitude and seek continued blessings. Such practices illustrate how devotional culture and pilgrimage traditions are sustained and intensified through the circulation of Sufi folktales and miracle narratives. These stories thus serve as emotional conduits, reinforcing the devotees' attachment to the saint and their faith in his intercessory power.

Numerous miracles (*karāmāt*) are attributed to Mian Mir, including walking on water, flying through the air, summoning rain, appearing simultaneously in multiple locations, healing through breath, resurrecting the dead, foretelling future events, transforming earth into precious metals, and producing food or drink miraculously. Each of these accounts evokes different emotional responses, joy, relief, reverence, or awe, among devotees and disciples. The seventeenth-century Mughal prince Dara Shikoh, the only known contemporary biographer of Mian Mir, records several of these miraculous tales in his *Sakinat-ul-Awliya*. Among

them, certain stories gained particular popularity during the British colonial period, when pilgrims and visitors to the shrine often recalled these *karāmāt* as sources of hope and inspiration.[11]

One such folktale, narrated by Sheikh Abdul Hameed Benaeye, recounts that Mian Mir was once meditating by the riverbank in Mirza Kamran's Garden, when a snake approached him. The serpent uttered words in an incomprehensible tongue, then performed three circumambulations (*ṭawāf*) around the saint before departing. When Abdul Hameed inquired about the meaning of the exchange, Mian Mir explained that the snake had pledged to circle him thrice whenever they met, and he had granted the wish. The *opacity* of this tale lies in its symbolic meaning: Mian Mir's ability to comprehend the language of animals is interpreted by devotees as his capacity to perceive the unspoken sorrows and emotional pain of human beings. The folktale thus becomes a metaphor for divine empathy, instilling comfort and hope in the hearts of pilgrims who believe that the saint understands their suffering without the need for words.[12]

Another widely circulated folktale concerns Prince Dara Shikoh's illness. When the prince fell gravely ill, Emperor Shah Jahan, distressed by the prospect of losing his beloved son, sought the aid of the renowned Sufi of Lahore, Hazrat Mian Mir. The saint blessed a cup of water after reciting the *tasbīḥ* (invocation of God's name) and assured the emperor that his son would recover within a week. True to his words, Dara Shikoh regained his health, prompting Shah Jahan to send gifts of gratitude to Mian Mir, gifts that the saint humbly declined. This tale became emblematic of Mian Mir's spiritual power and humility, circulating widely during and after the Mughal period. It strengthened the emotional relationship between the saint and his followers, who found in the story a model of divine intercession and moral virtue.[13]

Such folktales, through their blend of miracle, morality, and emotion, not only perpetuate the saint's spiritual authority but also sustain the devotional practices surrounding his shrine. They embody the affective ties between the sacred and the social, revealing how the emotional landscape of faith is shaped by narrative memory and ritual experience.

Folktales and Emotions in the Nineteenth Century

Nineteenth-century sources, including historians[14] and autobiographers[15], frequently referred to folktales as valuable materials for constructing the cultural history of South Asia.[16] However, comparatively little scholarly attention has been devoted to the emotional dimensions embedded within these narratives. As Mirabeau Sone has noted in his work on African oral traditions, folktales possess the power to evoke deep emotional responses among both listeners and readers, a perspective equally applicable to South Asian contexts.[17]

The shrine of Mian Mir, regarded as a sacred site during the nineteenth century, drew considerable reverence and attention from both Sikh and British authorities. The folktales surrounding this shrine not only conveyed moral and spiritual lessons but also reflected the complex emotional and cultural exchanges between devotees and the Sufi saint. These stories were recorded, retold, and interpreted by Sikh as well as British historians, revealing distinct perspectives shaped by their respective political and religious contexts.[18] The following

discussion explores how the periods of Sikh and British rule influenced the shrine of Mian Mir and its associated folktales. By examining the transformations in the narrative and emotional landscape of these tales, it becomes possible to understand how colonial and pre-colonial powers interacted with, appropriated, or redefined local spiritual traditions and the affective bonds they sustained.

Mian Mir Shrine during the Sikh Rule

During the nineteenth century, when Punjab was under the rule of Maharaja Ranjit Singh, the shrine of Mian Mir retained a position of deep reverence and cultural significance among both Muslims and Sikhs. This shared devotion was largely rooted in the spiritual association between Mian Mir and Guru Arjan Dev, the fifth Sikh Guru. Historical accounts indicate a longstanding relationship between Muslim Sufi figures and the Sikh Gurus. Giani Gian Singh, for instance, records that Sufis such as Bilawal, Sheikh Mohammed Tahri, Mohammed Mukim Shah, and Khwajah Bihari maintained cordial relations with the Sikh leadership, particularly during the period of Guru Amar Das, the third Sikh Guru.[19]

The bond between Mian Mir and Guru Arjan Dev strengthened further during a famine in Lahore, when Guru Arjan established a *langar* (community kitchen) to provide sustenance and employment to the impoverished. Mian Mir, in turn, frequently visited the Guru's *dera* (spiritual center), symbolizing interreligious harmony and mutual respect. This close spiritual relationship culminated in the historic event of Mian Mir laying the foundation stone of the Harmandir Sahib (Golden Temple) at Amritsar, as documented by Ghulam Muhayy-ud-Din, also known as Bute Shah, in his *Tawarikh-i-Punjab*. [20] Furthermore, when Emperor Jahangir ordered the execution and confiscation of Guru Arjan's property, Mian Mir is said to have intervened to delay the decree. Similarly, in another instance, both Mian Mir and Empress Nur Jahan played instrumental roles in securing the release of Guru Hargobind, the sixth Sikh Guru, from imprisonment at Gwalior.

The spiritual and emotional connection between the Sikh and Muslim communities during Ranjit Singh's reign was profoundly reinforced by the memory and miracles associated with Mian Mir. Muhammad bin Qadri, in his account of Ranjit Singh, narrates an episode in which the Maharaja allegedly ordered the demolition of Mian Mir's tomb to reuse its costly stones for embellishing the Harmandir Sahib in Amritsar. The act, however, was abruptly halted after a supposed divine intervention, Ranjit Singh's mare, *Laila*, threw him to the ground at the site of demolition. Interpreting this incident as a spiritual reprimand, the Maharaja immediately rescinded his orders, offered an apology, and instituted an annual donation of 500 rupees to the shrine of Mian Mir. This episode, widely circulated among devotees, further elevated the saint's reputation for miraculous power and reinforced the shared reverence of both Sikh and Muslim followers.[21]

Ranjit Singh's subsequent policies toward the shrine reflected a transformation in his perception of Sufi sanctity and its socioreligious influence. The inclusion of Muslim courtiers such as the Faqir brothers, Azizuddin and Nuruddin, who maintained close ties with Sufi circles, further demonstrates the pluralistic and inclusive nature of Ranjit Singh's administration. His governance, informed by respect for multiple faith traditions, contributed to the enduring

emotional and devotional connections that both Sikh and Muslim pilgrims maintained with Mian Mir's shrine.[22] By the latter half of the nineteenth century, even after the British annexation of Punjab, the shrine of Mian Mir continued to hold immense emotional, cultural, and religious significance. The narratives of his *karāmāt* (miracles) persisted in popular memory, shaping the devotional practices and intercommunal harmony that defined Lahore's spiritual landscape.

Mian Mir Shrine during the British Rule

Following the British annexation of Punjab in 1849, after the Second Anglo-Sikh War, the shrine of Mian Mir continued to hold both symbolic and strategic importance. Historical records note that during the early years of British administration, several mutineers captured near the site were executed under the orders of Mr. Cooper, the Deputy Commissioner of Punjab. As a result, the name of Mian Mir became widely recognized across the region, linking the shrine not only to local spirituality but also to the colonial military presence.[23]

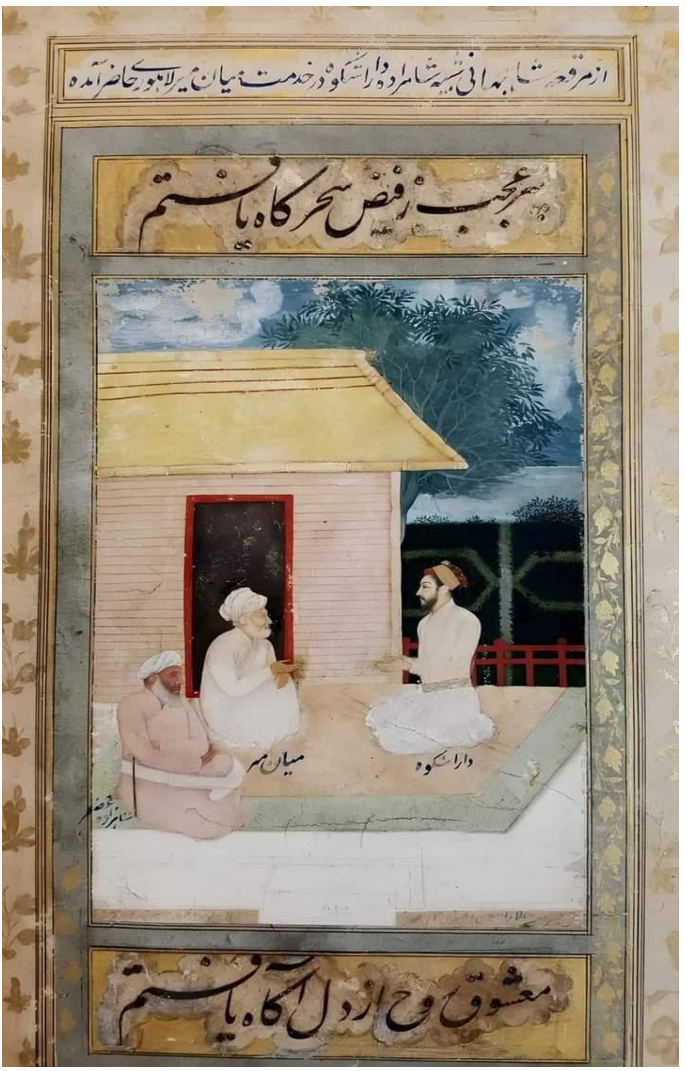
In the mid-nineteenth century, the British established their first major cantonment near the shrine, which was subsequently named the Mian Mir Cantonment, a designation that underscores the enduring prominence of the saint's legacy even under colonial rule. The selection of this site reflects both geographical convenience and the shrine's cultural significance within the urban and spiritual landscape of Lahore. The surrounding area of the shrine evolved into an important administrative and commercial hub during British rule. A grand *Sadar Bazaar* was established in Mian Mir to facilitate trade for British troops stationed nearby. Local merchants, many of whom were drawn from the neighboring villages, opened shops and businesses that they often named after Mian Mir, invoking his *barakat* (blessings) for prosperity. This continued practice of associating economic activity with spiritual reverence reveals the persistent emotional and devotional ties between the local population and the saint.[24]

Thus, even amid the structural transformations of colonial governance, the shrine of Mian Mir retained its dual significance, spiritual for the local Muslim and Sikh communities, and geographical for the British military administration. The naming of the cantonment and the flourishing of commerce around the shrine reflect how Mian Mir's sanctity and memory continued to influence both the sacred and secular dimensions of nineteenth-century Lahore.

Folktales and Paintings

The folktales associated with Mian Mir have also found visual expression in paintings, which serve as powerful mediums for conveying stories, spirituality, and emotion. Artistic depictions not only preserve these narratives but also embody the affective dimensions of Sufi devotion. Among the most notable examples are paintings that represent the spiritual bond between Mian Mir and Prince Dara Shikoh. One such painting, drawn from the *Mārqa'-i-Shāh Jahānī*, vividly illustrates their profound relationship. The Persian inscription accompanying the painting (1) reflects Dara Shikoh's spiritual awakening after his encounter with the Sufi saint. It reads: *"The guidance that Mian Mir bestowed upon me nourished my soul with magic."* This visual and textual combination encapsulates the saint's transformative influence on Dara Shikoh, suggesting that his meeting with Mian Mir was a moment of mystical enlightenment.[25]

Another painting (2) portrays a similar encounter in which Mian Mir is shown instructing Dara Shikoh, emphasizing the saint's role as a spiritual mentor. These visual representations function as narrative extensions of the folktales, reinforcing the emotional and moral dimensions that written and oral traditions convey. During my field visit to the shrine of Mian Mir, I interviewed a devotee named Muhammad Hafeez Qalandari, who was lighting candles beneath a tree. He recounted the well-known folktale of Dara Shikoh's miraculous recovery after visiting Mian Mir, a story that continues to circulate orally among devotees today. The persistence of this tale into the present underscores its historical endurance, suggesting that it remained widely known even during the colonial period. According to Qalandari, the act of lighting candles symbolizes the "inner light" that visitors seek when they come to the shrine, an illumination of the soul through divine presence. Such practices reveal how emotions of peace, contentment, and gratitude are deeply intertwined with devotional rituals. These affective experiences, reinforced by the folktales of Mian Mir, continue to inspire pilgrims to visit the shrine, sustaining the emotional and spiritual legacy of the saint across centuries.



Painting 1. Scene of Dara Shikoh meeting Mian mir

Source: https://alchetron.com/Mian-Mir#mian-mir-f0b4f9e2-fe62-45af-9e3c-525c2c33a11-resize-750.jpeg

Painting 2. Scene of Mian Mir teaching Dara Shikoh

Source: https://www.alamy.com/stock-photo/mian-mir.html?sortBy=relevant

Painting (3) illustrates one of the most remarkable miracles attributed to Mian Mir, the account of his spiritual journey to Mecca and his prayer at the Cave of Ḥirā. This folktale is recorded by Dara Shikoh in his *Sakinat al-Awliya*, where he recounts an episode revealing the saint's mystical power of bilocation. According to the narrative, one night Mian Mir asked his attendant, Noor Muhammad, to bring him a water pot (*lotā*) for ablution (*wuḍū'*). However, the servant fell asleep and neglected to fulfill the request. Awaking in the middle of the night, he hurried to Mian Mir's chamber, only to find it empty. Alarmed, he searched the premises but could not locate his master. Suddenly, he heard Mian Mir's voice calling from the rooftop: "Noor Muhammad, I am here." When the servant ascended to the roof, he found Mian Mir and recounted his confusion. The saint then explained that he had just returned from Mecca, where he had been offering prayers in the Cave of Ḥirā, absorbed in divine contemplation (*khalwat*).[26]

Painting 3. Mian Mir journey to *Mecca* in dream

Source: https://www.alamy.com/stock-photo/mian-mir.html?sortBy=relevant

The servant, astonished and deeply moved, rejoiced in witnessing the saint's miraculous journey, a testament to Mian Mir's spiritual transcendence. Painting (3) captures this legendary episode, visualizing the intersection of the earthly and the divine. Although the artist remains unknown, stylistic and contextual evidence suggests that the work dates to the nineteenth century. The painting reflects the devotional culture of that era, when the miracles (*karāmāt*) and folktales of Mian Mir were not only orally transmitted but also visually commemorated. Such artistic renderings exemplify how the emotional devotion of followers found expression in both narrative and image, reinforcing the enduring spiritual connection between the Sufi saint and his devotees.

Another significant painting (4) portrays the historic moment when Mian Mir laid the foundation stone of the Harmandir Sahib (Golden Temple) in Amritsar in the presence of Guru Arjan Dev. This visual representation captures a pivotal episode of interfaith harmony and spiritual fellowship between the Sufi and Sikh traditions. The painting vividly reflects the deep emotional and spiritual bond that the Sikh community shared with Mian Mir, who was revered not only as a Muslim saint but also as a symbol of unity and peace. The expressions of joy and reverence among the figures in the background convey the collective happiness and devotion of those witnessing this act of religious concord.[27]

Figure 4. mian mir laying the foundation stone of golden temple

Source: https://www.alamy.com/stock-photo/mian-mir.html?sortBy=relevant

These paintings, along with the folktales they represent, provide valuable insight into the emotional landscape of devotion surrounding Mian Mir. They reveal how narrative and visual art together preserved and transmitted the memory of his miracles and virtues. Through such depictions, devotees, both Sikh and Muslim, found a means of expressing reverence, gratitude, and spiritual affection for the saint. The integration of folktales into artistic expression thus stands as a testament to the enduring emotional connection between Mian Mir and his followers across centuries.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the study of folktales related to Mian Mir reveals how these narratives are deeply rooted in the emotions and beliefs of devotees. These tales are not just stories of the past; they continue to live through the actions, art, and emotions of people who visit the shrine. The folktales, whether told through

words, paintings, or oral traditions, show how faith and emotion are interwoven in the lives of devotees. They express the joy, hope, and contentment that visitors feel when they seek guidance or solace at the shrine of Mian Mir. The cultural and emotional strength of these folktales lies in their continuity. Even during the colonial period, when social and political changes were reshaping the region, people still turned to these sacred spaces and their stories for comfort and identity. This enduring connection between devotees and the shrine shows how the emotional bond created by folktales survives across generations.

Through these stories, we can trace how devotion takes visual, oral, and emotional forms from miracle tales to the paintings that depict them. They all reflect the same essence: the spiritual link between the saint and his followers. The emotions attached to these folktales, whether wonder, peace, or gratitude, keep attracting people to the shrine, transforming these sacred places into living centers of emotional and spiritual exchange. Thus, folktales are more than cultural memories; they are emotional bridges that connect the past with the present. The devotion, harmony, and solace reflected in these stories continue to define the spiritual experience of those who visit the shrine of Mian Mir today, making these tales an enduring part of the region's cultural and emotional heritage.

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[3] Hazrat Mian Mir shrine. Hazrat Mir Mohammed Qadri (1550-1635 A.D.), also known as "Mian Mir," was a well-known Sufi Muslim saint who lived in Lahore, Punjab, Pakistan. He was a direct descendant of the Second Caliph, Hazrat Umar ibn al-Khattab (R.A). He was a Sufi from the Qadiri order. Sheikh Khizr Qadri introduced Mian Mir to the Islamic discipline of Shariah-t-Fiqqah, or Islamic Jurisprudence, when he was twenty-five years old. The majority of his time in Lahore was spent living in mosques. He spent some time at Maulana Sayyedullah's madarasa, which dates all the way back to Akbar's reign. Mian Mir continued to visit the graves of well-known Sufi Sheikhs in Lahore in order to preserve Sufi traditions and Shariat. For more details, see, Kanahya Lal, "Tareekh-e-Lahore." Sang-e-Meel Publishers, Lahore (1990), *Tuzuk-e-Jahangiri; Memoirs of labangir·* Tr. by Alexander Rogen (lCS Reid). *'Sakinat-ul-awliya'* by Dara Shikoh, *sakinat-ul-Arfeen* by Kundan Lahori, *Hadiqat-ul-awliya* by Mufti Gulam Sarwar Lahori, *Bazurgan-e-Lahore* by Molana Gulam Tastgeer Nami, *Tehqeeqat-e-Chishti* by Noor Muhammad Chishti, *Lahore; Its History, Architectural Remains and Antiquities* by Syed Muhammad Latif, *Balad-ul-Awliya* by Tahir Lahori.

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