

Sufism and Sufi Practices in Pakistan: A Case Study of ‘Notan Wali Sarkar’(1917- 1994)

Muhammad Iqbal Chawla

University of the Punjab, Lahore.

Introduction

Literature is agog with stories about the life, thoughts and practices of several Syeds and Qalandars but not many words have been spent on the life of Mian Abdul Rashid Panipati, popularly known as ‘Notan Wali Sarkar’. A man of simple tastes and great spirituality, Mian Abdul Rashid is considered by his followers as one of the greatest *Qalandars*. This paper delves into the life of the mystic who is known little beyond Sargodha, Pakistan, and has even been cold-shouldered by historians.

Call it divine design or sheer coincidence, Mian Abdul Rashid was born in Panipat (India), the land of Qalandars, (Eaton, 2003) and finally settled in the city of Sargodha which is known for its mystics, pirs, Syeds, and most importantly, for the Gaddis of Pir of Sial Sharif and Pir Karam Ali Shah. Even two decades after his death (he was killed by his nephew), Sargodha still resonates with the tales of Mian Sahib who was always dressed in dhoti, kurta; the man who loved the betel leaf, tea and smoke from the hookah (water pipe) after every meal, a routine that he stuck to until the last breath. He had very simple food habits and would often be found meditating by fire or cleaning the enclosure with water. He always advised his visitors to recite the holy Quran, stay clean, and observe fasting. He had no material lust apart from his very basic needs. Instead, he spent a very simple life as all his temporal needs were met by the visitors whom he asked for alms. His followers gave him all the money they could spare in the belief that the money somehow would be returned to them many times over in the future. Even those who met Mian Sahib the first time were impressed by his austere lifestyle, profound thoughts, interesting practices and spiritual acumen. However, there was more to Mian Sahib than the life of an ascetic.

To his followers, he was a *Qalandar* who committed acts under the influence of ‘other-worldly’ forces which apparently were unacceptable even according to the Shariat. Often, when an absolutely unknown disciple began journey from any place in Pakistan, to visit him in Sargodha for blessings, Mian Sahib would talk about that disciple several times much before he actually stepped into the ‘dargah’. Mian Sahib knew the desires of his disciples even before they expressed them. To

a visitor he seemed to be totally self-absorbed and his ordinary raiment enhanced that effect. His disciples believed that during his life, and even after death, people like Mian Abdul Rashid “are ‘friends of Allah’ about whom Allah has said that when they leave worldly desires, they get quite close to Him and in that case their hands, eyes and ears become those of Allah. They can touch and feel everything and hear from a distance and they can see any hidden thing.” Mian Sahib had a large following in Pakistan and in other countries as well.

The present author is not in a position to decide the place of Mian Sahib and to judge whether he was a Qalandar or not in the Sufi Order but multiple features of his personality, as has been narrated, speak for themselves. More importantly, his followers, including the sajudanashin (successor) of Data Sahib of Lahore, Mian Ijaz, believe that Mian Abdul Rashid was a Qalandar. Therefore, his eminent position in the Sufi order calls for a better understanding of his life, teachings and practices, as he could be considered one of the contemporary torchbearers of Sufism in Pakistan. Sadly enough only one book and a couple of articles have been written on his life and practices. In (Nicholson, 1921, Reprint 1967) case of Mian Sahib, the Sufi literature, mainly the *Malfuzat* and *Tazkiras*, have not been properly utilized. In fact, Sufi literature offers a rich collection of historical data for an analysis of social and mental structure, and power and process (Aquil, 2007). According to Khaliq Ahmad Nizam, “Reconstruction of a medieval mystic is by no means an easy job because facts and fictions and genuine and spurious, get so mixed up in hagiological accounts.” (Nizami & Nizami, 2007) However, this paper attempts to critically evaluate a few important aspects of the life of Mian Sahib, including his thoughts and practices, in the light of interviews, personal observations of the present author, and available primary and secondary sources.

This paper is based upon the oral historical account which is a modern trend in historiography. The oral history accords more importance to interviews/survey and questionnaires than documents to arrive at a truth. The present author interviewed the crème of the society who have witnessed or experienced Mian Sahib’s miracles. As such, these educated elites are convinced that Mian Sahib was close to God and had all the characteristics of a Qalandar. This paper, hopefully, will fill the research gap in the history of the Saints, the Sufis and their shrines in Pakistan.

Early Life

Mian Abdul Rashid (1917-1992) was born in Panipat (India), in a Qureshi family. His father was a butcher by profession. His mother died when he was only six years old and this was a big loss for him. His father, Maulvi Abdul Majeed, who was an Imam Masjid, remarried and moved to Sonipat, a step that did not bode well for Mian Sahib. His stepmother had five sons and treated Mian Sahib unkindly. Disheartened, Mian Sahib left his father’s home and returned to Panipat to live with his paternal uncle (elder brother of his father).

Mian Sahib' ancestral city Panipat has produced mystics and sufis like Bu Ali Shah Qalandar and Ghous Ali Shah Qalandar. (Digby, 2002) Mian Abdul Rasheed's ancestry runs into Sant Sain Tawakal Shah of Ambala (India). His family's veneration for their shrines was not unusual, but Mian Sahib's special attachment to the shrines, Gaddinashins and visitors to these shrines was of an extreme kind. His favorite hobby was to clean these shrines and spend most of his time in worshipping. Mian Sahib developed special spiritual relations with the visitors' as well famous sufis of that time who visited the shrines of Bu Ali Shaha Qalandar. He met Hazrat Walayat Ali Qalandar, whose shrine is at Malir in Karachi, and received spiritual blessings from him. Throughout his life Mian Sahib called him 'Sanoli Wali Sarkar' with love and veneration. Needless to say, Mian Sahib gave his first oath of allegiance to Walayat Ali Shah.

At the age of Mian Sahib, he migrated to Pakistan along with his father, uncles and other relatives. After staying for some months in Lahore, Mian Sahib moved to Chinot, a historic city of the Punjab and later spent some time in Gojra. Finally, he moved to Sargodha and settled in a mosque which is now known as Masjid-e-Afghania. The mosque was built in Mian Sahib's honor by one of his disciples, Mohsin Khan, a Jhjhri Pathan. Mian Sahib spent the rest of his life there. He was martyred and buried in Sargodha. His shrine was built at the same place where he had spent his whole life.

Regardless of the influence of Qalandari Silsila in Panipat or through God-gifted qualities that generated in him the characteristics of a Qalanadar, the author believes, following a thorough research, that Mian Sahib's spiritual characteristics prove that he was a Qalandar of his times.

Spiritual Journey of Mian Abdul Rashid

The spiritual journey of Mian Sahib can be divided into three phases:

1. Early life at shrines
2. Ba'yat (oath of allegiance or initiation)
3. Independent

Early years (1917-1957):

In the formative years, Mian Sahib was learning, meditating and at times, exhibiting his spiritual powers to the people. He took the oath of allegiance for initiation from Bu-Ali Shah, Syed Walayat Ali Shah and Baba Faiz Khan. During the formative phase, he was not totally independent in his actions and seemed to be under the influence of his Pirs/mentors.

Middle phase (1957-1977): During the middle phase, he was learning, meditating, but showing his spiritual powers more openly to his disciples. During this period he was experiencing such things which at times made him unpredictable, like a person who was lost in another world. At age 40, he claimed that he had been given special responsibilities by Allah in the discharge of his duties to mankind. During this phase, his visitors and disciples considered him a 'Majzob' as most of the time he remained semi-nude and frequently spoke

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uncouth language and strongly discouraged people to visit him. His disciples believed that Mian Sahib actually was judging their endurance and faith in him as, in spite of all this, they believed that Mian Sahib's company and prayers would solve their problems, which, mostly, as it turned out, happened to be true.

Final phase (1977-1992): During the final phase of his life, he was amazingly polite, accommodating and refined. He displayed unbelievable spiritual leadership to address people's problems. He attracted thousands of visitors and followers who came to witness the series of miracles he used to perform. His miracles helped his visitors/patients to shelve if not solve problems totally. More than fifty percent of miracles and 'other-worldly' acts associated with Mian Sahib belong to this period. In addition, a majority of his disciples expressed their oath of allegiance to him during this period.

Sufism

Sufism, "*Tawawwuf*" which is an inward aspect of Islam and the legitimacy of Sufi's claim of wielding miraculous power came from the grand tradition of Islam, mainly the life and teachings of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) (Burckhardt, 1983). Mysticism has been a main ingredient of Islamic theology and through theory and practice the religion of Islam spread throughout the world. The Sufis and their lifestyle, thoughts and actions attracted millions of people who embraced Islam. These Sufis addressed problems of numerous people, including spiritual, economic, social, cultural and anthropological. Abdul Rashid was not a Majzob as is generally described by some writers, but he was a Qalandar. Majzob is a person who is absorbed in, or enraptured by the love of God, generally having lost sanity and self-control. A Qalandar has characteristics of libertine mendicant with non-conformist tendencies. According to the set definition of 'Qalandar', Mian Abdul Rashid was a 'Qalandar' of his times. His followers/disciples believe that he had all the characteristics of a Qalandar: Firstly, he was enlightened when he was only six years old. When he was forty, he claimed that he was awarded a Qalandari. Secondly, he did not marry and spent his life in the enclosure of a mosque built on the brink of the graveyard. Thirdly, he was assigned a special sign of "currency notes" and fourthly, he adopted "abusive language" to address his audience. More importantly, in life, Mian Sahib could not only foresee and forecast, but was instrumental in addressing most of the spiritual, economic and social problems of his visitors. Even now, his disciples state that he comes into their dreams and helps solve their problems. Although followers of Sufis are usually from the lower rank of the society but the majority of Mian Sahib's disciples are from the middle class and educated elite of the society.

Miracles/ Legends

According to Annemarie Schimmel “...Story (stories) may sound exaggerated to the modern reader, but it shows how the Sufi was expected to behave—truthful in his mystical states and correct in his transaction with men.” (Schimmel, 1975). There are various stories about Mian Sahib’s spiritual powers. His followers and disciples believe that he had unimaginable spiritual powers to address their challenges. A Sufi is begged by his visitors and followers for his help as a the reliever of illness and misery, of dispute and crime, (Green, 2006) His visitors and disciples were convinced that Mian Sahib was close to God and their problems were solved by God because of Mian Sahib’s recommendations.

Of the thousands of tales about Mian Sahib’s spiritual miracles, I would like to quote only a couple of stories. The author conducted a group interview with some important disciples of Mian Sahib. Here are the findings of that interview.

1. Khalid Khan, Gaddinashin Notan Wali Sarkar, and Mahmood Ali, (Ali, 2014) disciple from Gojra, repeated an anecdote that Maulvi Abdul Majeed, father of Mian Sahib, had shared with them. When Mian Sahib’s mother was pregnant and close to delivery date, Maulvi Abdul Majeed often noticed a divine light emanating from the his wife’s side. However, after the birth of Mian Sahib that light never appeared again. It made him believe that his son is a special gift from God. (Khan, 2014)
2. Engineer Rao Muhammad Riaz, talked in great detail about a personal experience. In 1968, when Rao was a student of engineering and was traveling from Lahore to Abbotabad by a train, Mian Sahib met him at Lala Musa Railway station and predicted that he would be appointed S. D. O Sargodah. The prediction came true. Rao claimed that even after his death, Mian Sahib appears in his dreams and helps solve his problems. Rao had been suffering from serious disease and a boil appeared on his belly. The doctors told him that if the boil persists, it could prove fatal. But Rao claims that Mian Sahib appeared in his dreams, treated the boil. Rao’s boil disappeared and he feels healthy now. (Riaz, 2014)
3. Bugged by family problems, lawyer Qureshi (Qureshi, 2014) came to Mian Sahib to discuss his family matters. However, even before Qureshi could utter his sister’s problems with her in-laws, Mian Sahib said that he knows what Qureshi Sahib was about to say before all other disciples. Therefore, Mian Sahib stopped him from sharing his problem and prayed to God to help him solve family problems. (Chawla, 2014)
4. Mian Ijaz Ahmad Hajveri, (Hajveri, 2014) sajanashin of Hazrat Data Gunj Buksh, gave his oath of allegiance to Mian Sahib in 1973 on the advice of Hazrat Data Gunj Baksh, who came into his dream to advise him. He also shared his experiences with Mian Sahib. He said that he had a serious disease and Hazrat Data Ganj Buksh came in his dream and advised him to meet Mian Sahib. He came to Sargodha and Mian Sahib treated his disease and he totally recovered. He narrated another anecdote that he heard from his spiritual brother (Pir Bhai). In 1993, when he was sitting with Mian Sahib, suddenly Mian Sahib uttered “I had hurt my legs by saving your daughter

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from an accident” and even showed the wounds on his legs. When he reached home he was surprised to learn that his three-year-old daughter had an accident when she was crossing the road. A horse cart wheel rolled over one of her legs, but she was not injured. For those who witnessed the accident, it was an unbelievable incident. This further cemented Mian Ijaz’s belief that Mian Sahib had spiritual powers. (Qureshi L. A., 2014)

5. Another disciple also told the author that Mian Sahib had predicted about his own murder and often claimed he is like Hazrat Yousaf and Shah Faisal. His disciples could not decipher why Mian Sahib was saying this. However, when Mian Sahib was assassinated by his nephew, they came to know about his prediction.

Understanding about politics

Although Sufi history in Indian and Pakistan social environment reveals that the Sufis kept themselves away from politics because they believed it would lead them to materialism and worldliness (Raziuddin Auquil: 2010: ix) but Mian Sahib at times showed great acumen about the political affairs of Pakistan and discussed them with his disciples. His favourite political leader was the late Zulfikar Ali Bhutto. Mian Sahib predicted a few days before his execution that Bhutto would be released from the worldly miseries on April 4, 1979 around 2 pm. (Stanley Walporte)

Practices/ Habits

Mian Sahib would always wear dhoti and kurta, although most of the time he would wear only dhoti, especially during the summer season.

1. He ate very simple food and preferred fasting even during the non-Ramadan months.
2. He smoked water-pipe (Hookah) regularly and usually preferred his disciples to smoke it as well.
3. He advised his visitors to recite the Holy Quran and say prayers and other *nwafal*. He also exhorted his disciples to stay clean, observe fasting,
4. He loved water as well as fire. He bathed frequently or cleaned enclosure with water. He always kept fire on at one side of the enclosure and sat around it to meditate.
5. He was surrounded by cats, mice, and dogs. He never hated them, rather provided them food and loved and cared for them.
6. He attended wedding parties, and other functions of his disciples.
7. He always organized langar (free food) for his visitors.
8. He was a thorough gentleman and humble and never rude to his guests.

Conclusion

A study of Mian Sahib's life - thoughts, practices and demonstrations of 'miracles'- proves that he was indeed a Qalandar. The difference between a twentieth-century Qalandar and Qalandars which preceded them is that the former, like Mian Sahib, were also aware of the modern needs, developments of the time and addressed them accordingly. In ancient and medieval times, the Qalandars lived a simple life and adopted simpler methods. A Qalandar detaches himself from most material forms of life. The kings and rulers visit them, instead of the Qalandars visiting the royalty. Mian Abdul Rashid's visitors included rulers, people from showbiz, the elite, and bureaucrats, judges, lawyers, politicians; more importantly, persons like Mian Ijaz, Gaddinashin of Data Gunj Bukhsh.

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Biographical Note

Prof. Dr. Muhammad Iqbal Chawal is Chairman, Department of History and Pakistan Studies, University of the Punjab, Lahore.
