

South Asia

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The Sufi Shrines of Jammu

The more than a decade-old civil war in the disputed region of Jammu and Kashmir, which till today shows no sign of abating, has resulted in the death of an estimated 40,000 people. Inter-community relations, which have historically been relatively cordial as compared to the rest of South Asia, have sharply deteriorated, and today a gulf of hostility and suspicion separates Hindus and Muslims. However, despite this hardening of communal boundaries, at the popular level many Muslims, Sikhs and Hindus in the Jammu province continue to share a common religious culture, centred round the shrines (*dargahs*) of Sufi saints.

Jammu is popularly known as the 'City of Temples', owing to its large number of Hindu shrines. However, Jammu is also home to numerous Sufi *dargahs*, which are important centres of pilgrimage, bringing together people of different castes and communities. In this, these shrines play a unique role, there being no other such structures which perform a similar function. In a society where caste and religious differences are so marked, this role of the shrines is a particularly important one. For the Hindus and Sikhs who flock to the shrines, the buried Sufis are seen as powerful spiritual beings (*devtas*) that can grant them their wishes. For the Muslim devout, they are considered to be intermediaries (*wasilah* or *zariya*), who can plead with God on their behalf in times of need, to have their requests fulfilled.

The following article deals, briefly, with the principal Sufi *dargahs* of Jammu town. It may be noted here that although these are Muslim shrines, they are today, for the most part, frequented more by Hindus than by Muslims. Muslims form only a very small proportion of the population of Jammu town. In the 1947 Partition riots, Jammu saw a large-scale slaughter of Muslims, with thousands killed and many more forced to flee to Pakistan. Jammu town was almost completely depleted of its Muslim population, and it was only from the 1950s onwards that small numbers of Muslims began settling here from other parts of the state.

We now turn to a brief discussion of the major Sufi *dargahs* in Jammu town.

Pir Raushan 'Ali Shah

The first major Sufi to come to the Jammu region was Pir Raushan 'Ali Shah, whose *dargah* is located at Gumat, in Jammu town. Some believe him to have been one of the Prophet's companions (*sahabi*),¹ but Kardar estimates his arrival to have been in the 13th century, before Timur's invasion of North India.² He is said to have performed many miracles, by which the Raja was so impressed that he became his devotee and requested him to settle in his city. When the Pir died, the Raja laid him to rest with full honours and had a grave of stone and mud constructed for him. The grave is a simple, dome-less structure some 20 feet (9 *gaz*) long, hence its name, Maqbara Naugazan. The saint is also remembered as Naugazi Pir, apparently because he measured 9 *gaz* in height. Today, his *dargah* is a major place of local pilgrimage. Both Hindus and Muslims light little clay lamps and place them in an alcove adjacent to the grave, in the hope of the Pir being able to help them. His *urs*, the festival commemorating his death, which attracts thousands of people from Jammu, Kashmir and Punjab, is held every December.

Pir Lakhdatta

The name *lakhdatta* literally means 'the giver of hundreds of thousands'. It signifies this Pir's status as a giver of Sufi wisdom.



Banihali writes that after the yogi overcame his initial opposition to the Pir, the two 'developed a great respect for each other'.⁷ They decided to settle down together in the cave where Pir Mitha lived. This cave is known as Pir Khoh or the 'Cave of the Pir'. According to one writer, '[t]his clearly shows that in God's court there is no question of caste and creed'.⁸ Legend has it that the yogi entered the cave and travelled all the way to Matan in Kashmir, never to return. After he disappeared, his disciples came to the Pir and requested him to accept them as his followers. The Pir declined, saying that they should be faithful to their guru. When this failed to satisfy them, the Pir said that they could, if they wanted, take his title of 'Pir' along with theirs. That is why the cave is today called as Pir Khoh and the heads of the Nath yogis who reside there are known as Pirs.⁹

Pir Mitha died in 1476 CE and is buried in a locality in the heart of Jammu town named after him. Like the other Sufi shrines in Jammu town, Hindus vastly outnumber Muslims at his *dargah*. The majority of the pilgrims belong to the *kashp* caste, a Hindu community traditionally considered 'low' in the caste hierarchy. Some believe that the *kashps* are descendants of the early *bhishti* disciples of Pir Mitha. Although they are all Hindus, they regard Pir Mitha as the guru of their community. It is the custom for the *kashps* of Jammu to visit the *dargah* every morning after having a bath. All their auspicious ceremonies are conducted only after paying respects at the shrine.

Baba Jiwan Shah

Baba Jiwan Shah was born in 1852 at Salehpur Chaprar in the Sialkot district of Punjab, to a Hussaini Sayyed family known for its piety. At the age of 23, upon the advice of his preceptor, the Chishti Pir Sain Baqr 'Ali Shah, he left his village, spending 12 years in meditation and austerities at Akhnoor on the banks of the river Chenab.¹⁰ He then went to Jammu town, where he took up residence in a graveyard, meditating inside the grave of the Sufi Sher Shah Wali for 12 years. After this, he spent the rest of his life in the region around Jammu, preaching Islam and acquiring disciples.¹¹ His *dargah* is found in Jammu town at a locality named after him.¹²

Baba Jiwan Shah's disciples came from all backgrounds and included Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs and others. Notable among his followers were Maharaja Pratap Singh, ruler of Jammu and Kashmir (1885-1925) and his brother Amar Singh. The king fixed a regular monthly stipend (*wazifa*) for him and would often invite him to the royal palace.

Baba Jiwan Shah died on 25 December 1919. His *urs* is celebrated every year on this day. For the occasion, food is distributed to the poor and the Holy Qur'an is recited. In addition, every Thursday several hundred followers visit his *dargah*, Hindus outnumbering Muslims. The oil that burns in the clay lamps there is taken as a special ointment to cure ailments. Many childless mothers come here to request the Baba to plead with God for a son for them.

Panj Pir

At Ramnagar, in the outskirts of Jammu town, is the shrine of the Panj Pirs, or 'Five Pirs'. The Panj Pir cult is widespread all over northern India and Pakistan. The composi-

The *dargah* of Pir Lakhdatta is located in a bazaar named after him in the heart of Jammu town. The life of Pir Lakhdatta is shrouded in mystery. He is said to have been a close associate of Guru Nanak, the first guru of the Sikhs. The cult of Pir Lakhdatta is particularly popular among the agriculturist castes of Punjab and Rajasthan, both Hindu as well as Muslim. This tradition is linked with the cult of Guga Pir, said to be a Rajput chieftain who converted to Islam. In some versions of the account of Guga Pir's life, he and Pir Lakhdatta are presented as one and the same person. According to local tradition, after his death, half of Guga Pir's body was taken by his Muslim followers and buried according to Muslim rites, and to them he is known as Zahir Pir. The other half of his body was cremated by his Hindu followers, who revere him as Pir Lakhdatta.³ Some writers hold that Pir Lakhdatta never actually came to Jammu and that the shrine that stands today at Lakhdatta Bazar was later built in his name by some of his followers.⁴

Baba Budhan 'Ali Shah

Another noted Sufi whose shrine is located in Jammu and who is associated with Guru Nanak was the Qadri Baba Budhan 'Ali Shah. His real name is said to have been Sayyed Shamsuddin, but he is known more popularly as Baba Budhan ('The Old Baba') because he was blessed with a very long life.

Baba Budhan was born near Lahore in the village of Talwandi, the birthplace of Guru Nanak. Tradition has it that he was a very close friend of Guru Nanak, and the two would often meet to discuss spiritual matters. The *dargah* of the Baba is visited every day by scores of people, mainly Hindus and Sikhs. On Thursdays, several thousands gather here, and at the *urs*, held on the first Thursday of the local month of Har, the crowds are enormous.

Pir Mitha

Pir Mitha's *dargah* is located on a hillock on the banks of the river Tawi. According to local tradition, he came to Jammu from Iran in 1462 CE during the reign of Raja Ajaeb Dev. It so happened that one day the Raja's wife fell seriously ill.⁵ The Pir is said to have cured the queen, as a result of which the king and many of his subjects became his disciples. An entire Hindu caste group, the 'low' caste *bhishtis* (water-carriers), accepted him as their spiritual preceptor. Soon, the Pir's fame spread far and wide, and many began converting to Islam under his influence. Because of this, the Pir was faced with stiff opposition from some Hindu priests. His most vehement opponent was Siddh Garib Nath, a Shaivite Gorakhnathi yogi. However, as the story goes, the two soon became friends.⁶

The association between Pir Mitha and Siddh Garib Nath is particularly interesting.

PHOTO: Y. SIKAND

► A faqir at a Jammu Dargah, medicines in the background.

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tion of the Panj Pirs varies from place to place. In some cases, it includes both Muslim as well as Hindu figures. The origins of the cult have been traced back to the Hindu cult of the five Pandava brothers, heroes of the Hindu epic, the Mahabharata, as well as the Shi'a tradition of revering the five members of the *ahl-ul-bayt*, the 'holy family' consisting of the Prophet Muhammad, his daughter Fatima, her husband 'Ali and their sons Hasan and Hussain.

Little is known about the history of the Panj Pir shrine in Jammu. Legend has it that five brothers of a Muslim family spent many years there in meditation and austerities and then they all left to go their own ways.¹³

According to local tradition, one day the five Pirs appeared in a dream to the Maharaja and admonished him for sleeping with his feet pointing to their *chillah*, the place they used to meditate. The next morning, the Maharaja ordered the spot to be excavated, and an umbrella and five kettledrums were found. Believing this to be a holy place, he ordered the construction of a *dargah* there.¹⁴ He then appointed his royal charioteer, Alif Shah, and a Muslim woman, Khurshid Begum, as custodians of the shrine.

The great popularity of the Panj Pir *dargah*, especially among the local Hindus, is believed to be a largely post-1947 phenomenon. It is said that following the Partition riots in which thousands of Muslims in Jammu lost their lives and many more were forced to flee to Pakistan, some Hindus attempted to take over the shrine, claiming that it was actually a temple of the five Pandavas. They went so far as to forcibly install a Shiva *linga*¹⁵ on top of the grave-like structure inside the *dargah*. Local legend has it that the next morning the people discovered that the *linga* had cracked into pieces on its own. The Hindus took this as a sign that the shrine was actually a Muslim *dargah* and so withdrew their claims.

At present, the *dargah* is looked after by a Hindu Rajput, Kuldip Singh Charak. He is the husband of Shamim Akhtar, the daughter of Khurshid Begum, the first custodian of the shrine.¹⁶ He took over this responsibility following Khurshid Begum's death in 1986. Like a Muslim Pir, Kuldip Singh Charak also hands out *tawiz*, or amulets, for cures to those who come to him in need. These amulets are made of what is called *pir ka panchratna* ('the five jewels of the Pir'), consisting of marigold flowers placed on the grave-like structure inside the shrine, a piece of white thread, soot and oil from the



clay lamps that burn at the shrine and the ash of incense sticks.

The Panj Pir shrine in Jammu is particularly popular among the local Hindus. It is customary for drivers and travellers in buses, cars and trucks who pass by the shrine to stop there, bow their heads in respect and to offer token sums of money. Large crowds gather here every Thursday. As at other *dargahs* at Jammu, they place little balls of sugar (*prasad* or *tabarruk*) on the grave-like structure, light incense-sticks, rub the oil from the clay lamps on their bodies and apply a small dot (*bindi*) on their foreheads with the soot from the lamps. They also press the grave-like structure with their hands as if massaging the body of the Pir.

From this description of the history of the major Sufis and Sufi shrines of Jammu, it appears that Sufism has played multiple social roles in this region and is still a vibrant force and a deep-rooted part of people's cultures and traditions. By far, the most important role of these shrines today is to bring people of different castes and communities together in worship. Furthermore, as in much of the rest of South Asia, in the Jammu area, too, many Sufis have played an important role in the process of social reform, with their message of ethical monotheism, love for all creatures of God and the equality of

all human beings. This is why, in particular, as the case of Pir Mitha's *dargah* shows, large numbers of 'lower' castes were attracted to the Sufis, and in the process many of them embraced Islam. The remarkable egalitarianism of the cults of the *dargahs* is readily apparent in the case of the Jiwan Shah shrine, where a 'low' caste Chamar, regarded as a saint, is buried alongside his spiritual preceptor. It is because of this great legacy of the Sufis that, centuries after their deaths, they continue to play such an important role in the lives of their followers, irrespective of religion and caste. ♦

The Hinduized *dargah* of a Sufi saint at Chamlial, Jammu.

Pir Mitha *dargah*, Jammu.



Notes

1. Khatoon, Zohra (1990). *Muslim Saints and Their Shrines*. Jammu: Jay Kay Book House, p. 2.
2. Kardar, Abdul Rabb (1996). *The Way to Sufism*. Translated by Umar Burney. New Delhi: Shoba-i-Nahr-o-Isha'at, Anjuman-i-Minhaj-i-Rasul, p. 86.
3. Khatoon, op.cit., pp. 8-10.
4. Banihali, Manshur (1997). 'Suba-i-Jammu Ke Auliya Karam'. In *Hamara Adab* (Auliya no.4), edited by Muhammad Ahmad Andrabi. Srinagar: Jammu and Kashmir Academy of Art, Culture and Languages, pp. 251-52.
5. Khatoon, op.cit., p. 19.
6. Kardar, op.cit., p. 88.
7. Banihali, op.cit., p. 236.
8. Nath, Surendra. *Shiv Jambavant Gufa Rahasya Pir Khoh*. Jammu, n.d., p. 10.
9. The present head of the Nathpanth monastery at Pir Khoh is Pir Shivrath.
10. Interview with Muhammad Aslam, custodian of the *dargah* of Baba Jiwan Shah, Jammu, 2 December 1999.
11. Pandit Tilak Raj, *Hazrat Baba Jiwan Shah* (Hindi mss. in the possession of Muhammad Aslam, custodian of the *dargah* of Baba Jiwan Shah).
12. Sharma, Vikas (1998). 'Qutb-i-Zaman Hazrat Baba Jiwan Shah'. *Yojna* 2 (2-3), May-June, pp. 51-52.
13. Khatoon, op.cit., pp. 37-38.
14. Banihali, op.cit., p. 248.
15. A phallus-shaped stone, believed by Hindus to be the symbol of the god Shiva.
16. Interview with Kuldip Singh Charak, Jammu, 7 December 1999.

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