



## What Dargah has to do With Sufism?

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### Introduction:

An attempt has been made in the present paper to answer the question – what *Dargah* has to do with Sufism? I will try to answer this central question based on two sources; first, primary source— my fieldwork conducted in *Dargahs* in different parts of Karnataka, and second, secondary sources such as scholarly studies on *Dargahs* and Sufis. The paper tries to demonstrate, through the above mentioned two sources, that there is no connection between *Dargahs* and Sufism, except the fact that some *Dargahs* belong to Sufis. The paper is divided into three parts. The first part of the paper clarifies the concepts – *Dargah* and Sufism. The second part of the paper identifies the importance of the central question of the paper in the context of intellectual debates on Hindu-Muslim interaction. The third part of the paper answers the question based on the analysis of primary and secondary sources.

### Clarification of the Concepts:

There are two concepts in the central question raised; Sufism and *Dargah*. This part of the essay makes it clear as to how this paper makes use of these two concepts. First Sufism: Sufis are identified as mystics of Islam. Scholars, in general, called the practices and preaching of Sufis as Sufism. This clarification about Sufism is enough for this paper. The second, concept of *Dargah* phenomenon of *Dargah*: This is the world of practices taking place in Sufi

shrines, tombs of sadhus and saints, some unanimous *babas*, and around sacred things belonging to some individuals. In these practices both Hindu and Muslim communities take part. This is what I call *the Dargah* phenomenon. Based on the fieldwork, *Dargahs* in Karnataka may be divided into three types. This classification is based on the belief of the people who visit *Dargahs*; based on how people perceive such places and what they think of these places belong to. The generalizations we make about *Dargahs* should apply to all the three types of *Dargahs*.

### Classification of *Dargahs*

1 There are certain *Dargahs* to which both Muslims and Hindus go they perceive that these *Dargahs* belong to Muslim *babas*. For example, Sayyad Madani of Ullala in Mangalore, Sayyad Aminuddin Ganjalbaar or Gajabar Saab of Hukkeri, Saints of Gorigundi in Chickamagalore, etc.

2. There are certain places which are called *Dargahs* and *devastanas* (Hindu temples), where tombs of *babas* and idols of Hindu deities are worshipped. For example, Hanagere Katte and Savalagi, etc.

3. In certain places the same place/object is perceived differently by Hindus and Muslims; Muslims believe that such places/objects belong to the Muslim community and Hindus believe that the same places belong to Hindu saints and traditions. For example, Datta-Baba of Bababudan Giri in Chickamagalore. Maunuddin or



Mauneshwara  
Thinthini.ChangapeerChangadev  
Yamanuru, etc.

of One can notice the comments of Vasudha  
of Narayan, who has worked at *the*  
*dargah* of Shahul Hamid (ca. 1513–1579)  
in the city of Nagore, a Tamil-speaking  
region of South India.

**Context of the central question:**

What *Dargah* has to do with Sufism? is an important question in the context of the debate over the issue of interaction between Islam and the tradition of India. Secularists and most Muslim scholars have argued that there is a close connection between *Dargahs* and Sufism. They build this argument to counter the arguments of Hindu-nationalists who have inherited the tradition of the Orientalists. Orientalist historiography described Medieval India as a phase of the unending war between Hindus and Muslims. The Hindu-nationalist thinking, which carried further the description of Orientalist historiography, describe Hindus and Muslims as pole apart. In the present context, because of frequent Hindu-Muslim conflicts, the argument of Hindu-nationalist is being reproduced. Contrary to Hindu-nationalists' representation, Secularists and most Muslim scholars try to give a different picture of Hindu-Muslim relations during Medieval India. They try to demonstrate that the medieval Indian history is not merely a time of Hindu-Muslim conflict but also a period of Hindu-Muslim amity. They further argue that the same amity is continued now also. To support their argument Secularists and Muslim scholars put forth the ideals of Sufism and Sufis as an alternative to the representation of Muslim aggression. The philosophy of tolerance and peace of Sufis, in their opinion, has led to Hindu-Muslim amity in *Dargah* practices. They demonstrate that *Dargahs* as the best examples of Hindu-Muslim harmony and co-existence.

While terms like "Hindu" and "Muslim" are often used today to compartmentalize people and to articulate politically rigid categories, a nuanced understanding of the relationship between Hindu And Islam must take into account the political, social and intellectual Contexts of the two traditions. ...

...A visit to the dargah of Shahul Hamid in Nagore reminds us of this permeability thus helping us to understand just how frequently religious "boundary crossings" can and do happen in India (1998:34)

Secularist and Muslim scholars go further and argue that Sufism while interacting with different Indian traditions, has created a syncretism and what we witness in *Dargahs* is that syncretism. In their opinion, this syncretism in *Dargahs* is responsible for bringing Hindus and Muslims together. They make use of the fact that Hindus and Muslims come together in *Dargahs* to refute the argument that Hindus and Muslims are poles apart. One can observe the following lines:

The sanghparivar, that possesses a destructive culture, does not know of the unique religions our country had formed. They are adept at dividing all things into Hindu and Muslim; they are unaware of the mingling culture available here. They only have a list of where all controversies need to be created. They portray religions in India as if they were always



at war. But there are stories of sects, religions, and communities mingling like river waters and flowing into the sea. Like them, Bababudanagiri is a unique place of mingling and positive interaction. The mingling of the word, 'giri', a Sanskrit word, with 'Bababudan' indicates the beginnings of such mingling. There is inter-mingling in the practices of this space. And the behavior of the people. And the philosophies found in the space. (64-65).

The description of *Dargahs* places of syncretism is a contribution of Secularist thinking. *Dargah* practices are the best examples for them to refute the argument of Hindu-nationalists. These scholars think that the philosophy of Sufis has made this syncretism possible in *Dargahs*. Let us have random examples of this kind of arguments: firstly, Momin

The Muslim mystics played a significant role in the indigenization process. They maintained that Islam should be presented to the Indian people in their own cultural idiom. The Sufis, especially of the Chishtiya order, were the first among the Muslim intellectual elite to interact closely with the Hindu masses. They had an attitude of tolerance and understanding towards Hindus and Hinduism. The success and popularity of the Chishti saints throughout the country were largely due to the fact that they understood the cultural traditions and religious attitudes of the Indian people. They also adopted many Hindu customs and ceremonies...

...The Sufi ideal of service to humanity as the essence of faith held a tremendous attraction for the masses. ShaikhNizamuddinAwliya, a prominent

Chishti saint of Delhi, used to say that the highest form of devotion was helping the poor, the distressed, and the downtrodden. ShaikhHami-duddin Sufi, a disciple of ShaikhMuinuddinChishti, settled in a small village and led the life of a peasant. He dressed like a typical Indian peasant and was a strict vegetarian...

.. The Sufis learned the local languages and conversed with people in their own dialect. This helped in removing the barriers of caste, class and creed. Significantly, the Bhakti movement which emerged as the torchbearer of Hindu-Muslim cultural syncretism in later years was considerably influenced by the humanistic viewpoint of the Sufis.(1977:242-3) and now Suvorova,

The role of the Initiators of Hindu-Muslim cultural dialogue fell to the lot of Sufi preachers and missionaries of the twelfth to fourteenth centuries, who, in order to introduce Islam to the broad masses of the urban population and to be understood better, actively made use of concepts, images and legends of local religions and cultural traditions.....

...Consequently, by the fifteenth century in many regions of the subcontinent, a unique cultural syncretism had taken shape, which is known as 'mixed', 'composite', 'common' culture or the culture of Hindu-Muslim synthesis (2004: 4-5).

We can agree with the argument that Sufism is different from other Islamic sects. But what we have to examine that *Dargahs* are the results of Sufism and Sufis are responsible for syncretism in



*Dargahs*. Whether *Dargahs* are places of syncretism or not is a different question. The present paper does not deal with this question. Secularist and Muslim scholars are tagging the *Dargah* phenomenon with Sufism. Therefore, the issue of *Dargahs* and Sufism helps to understand the nature of *Dargah* also. Some of the scholars argue that Sufism is an alternative to Islam on the basis of *Dargah*. Can we come to this kind of conclusion about Islam based on *Dargahs*? Since certain *Dargahs* belong to Sufis, is it possible to think that Sufis are the agents of *Dargahs*? After addressing these questions we can go to understand the nature of *Dargahs*. The following sections of the paper explore this.

#### **What is the relationship between Sufis and Dargah?**

When we pay attention to the available evidence it seems there is no relationship. This we can prove in two levels; primary data collected through the fieldwork and secondary data of the studies already undertaken. Let us begin with the first one

**From the Primary Sources:** The results in this section are based on the fieldwork conducted in various districts of Karnataka visiting almost three hundred dargahs. This data collected through questioning the people and the observation.

A. Do all Dargahs belong to Sufis?

The answer is no. the fact that some dargahs belong to Sufis. but not all. Dargahs, where both Hindu and Muslims go, do not necessarily belong to Sufis.

Some dargahs are built for soldiers; some are built for Sufi's relatives; some are built for elders in families. Some dargahs are built in the name of objects such as hairs of a baba etc. There are some dargahs that are built for unanimous people about whom we do not know anything. When asked about the person or object worshiped in some dargahs, they do not have any historical explanation. They know only miracle stories. For the people the person worshiped in dargah – whether he is a Sufi or not – is not at all that important. In the first type of dargahs, we described earlier – to which both Hindus and Muslims go – sometimes Muslims know at least the name of the saint or baba worshipped in the dargahs. Whereas Hindus do not know these details; they tell that it is some saint who belongs to the Muslim community; when asked, the Hindus say that it was a god of Muslims, which they call “Allah Swamy; Allppa; Halabi deva (god); dargahSwamy”. For these people whether the person worshipped in dargahs is saint or baba or Sufi does not matter. If this is the case of the dargahs which are exclusively identified as Muslim, no need to imagine that the Hindus come to worship Sufis in the other two kinds of dargahs mentioned above. From the above analysis, it is clear that dargahs where both Hindus and Muslims do not necessarily belong to Sufis. And then people who go to dargahs do not participate in dargah practices not because Sufis are worshipped there. For the people, it does not matter whether it is a Sufi or not.

B. Is there any connection between what Sufis preached and Dargah practices?



Based on the results that we have got from the above analysis we can take following implication: When we conclude that there is no connection between Sufis and dargahs, how can we say that Sufi preaching is the foundation of the practices in dargahs? Let us now listen to what people say about their practices in dargahs: 1. in the dargahs which belong to Sufis, when asked about the preaching of Sufis, people did not know anything about it. 2. Their typical response was that they are following the practices of dargah because their "elders in the family practiced them". People do not know Sufi philosophy or preaching, and they do not connect their practices to Sufism.

#### From the Secondary Sources:

The reading of studies on Sufis also shows that Sufis are not homogeneous. They have played different social roles in their socio-historical contexts.[1] Some of them are soldiers; some of them are reformists; some are missionaries; some became Sufis to be away from people. This leads us to conclude that what we generalize about one sect of Sufis does not apply to other types of Sufis. There is another reason to show that there is no connection between Sufis and dargah practices: When some Muslim reformists, who tried to eradicate dargahs to reform Islam also became objects of worship at dargahs. This is evidence that there is no connection between Sufis and so-called syncretic practices of the dargahs. Eaton very well-formulated what happened to these reformers: It is an irony of the Reformist Sufi that in spite of their efforts to reform Islam in Bijapura, the great tombs that were constructed over their graves eventually became objects of the very sort of

popular, syncretic devotionalism which they themselves would have scorned(1978:134)

In one of his studies, Eaton explains, that there is no connection between dargah practices and the inner circle of the Sufis. To quote his own words:

All available evidence indicates that in the seventeenth century a sizable nonelite constituency clustered around famous pirs, believing in their miraculous powers (karamat) and their ability to intercede with God, taking blessings from them, lighting candles at the dargahs, or tombs, of departed pirs, and participating in festivals at the dargahs. This was the outer circle of a pir's following, as distinguished from his inner circle of murids, or initiates, and it was to this outer circle that the folk literature seems especially to have appealed, serving as the litany of what may legitimately be called Indian folk Islam (1974:125).

Scholars we cited above are of the opinion that at the time of spreading Islam Sufis were dressed as Indians and tried to place Islam in terms of Indian culture, and by showing tolerance and preaching peace and humanity Sufi created syncretism (in whatever sense his concept is used). What is the implication of this kind of observation is that Sufis used all these strategies to attract people towards them rather than spreading the syncretism? Therefore, the validity of the argument that Sufis were the creators of syncretism becomes questionable. One can, at the most, agree with an observation that the so-called syncretism might be a byproduct of Sufism. But dargah practices are also there around the Sufis who did not follow the above strategies



and who tried to eradicate the dargah phenomenon. This shows that dargah practices had no logical connection with such strategies.

### Conclusion

The foregoing discussion would inevitably lead to the following conclusion: if at all there is any connection between Sufis and dargahs, it is just that some dargahs have come into existence around Sufi burials, not more than that. In total, what the above analysis shows that there is no connection between dargah and Sufism. This leads us to the conclusion that dargah practices should be understood through the people who are practicing it. To understand dargah, we need to understand the culture of the people who practice it, namely the Indian culture, which has created the dargah phenomenon. In other words, in India, when people of different region and different languages at different times have responded in the same manner to the different types of saints, sadus, babas, and Sufis it speaks a lot about the characteristics of the Indian culture. In the context of dargah practices, it does not matter whether one is an Islamic revivalist or a Sufi, so far as these practices have no connection with what they preach.

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