



Front Page

China
 Southeast Asia
 South Asia
 Japan
 Korea
 Central Asia

Middle East
 War and Terror

Business in Brief
 Asian Economy
 Global Economy

Letters

Archive

About Us

Contact Us

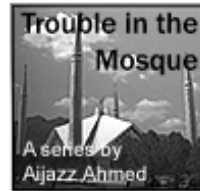
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South Asia

Between mullahs and mystics

By Aijazz Ahmed

ISLAMABAD - I forget the name of that gentleman I met three years ago in Islamabad on the evening of a Pakistan-India parliamentary conference. Nothing important in his personality, except for one astonishing fact: despite being a Hindu hailing from a traditional Indian society, he believed strongly in Muslim saints and mystics. It was this belief, and the concomitant faith in miracles and the magnanimity of god, that led this busy man to travel to Ajmair Sharif in India every year to offer food to the visitors of the shrine of Khuaja Moinuddin Ajmairi.



The story of his life, which he related to some Pakistani journalists, explained his unusual beliefs. According to him, he had lost his job around 1974 and had not been able to find another until mid-1975. Some of his Muslim friends advised him to visit the shrine of Khuaja Moinuddin Ajmairi in Ajmair Sharif, advice which he accepted out of desperation. When he visited the shrine, he emptied his pockets with a commitment that if he would get a job he would visit the shrine every year and offer food for visitors according to his capacity. That done, he was worrying about getting a ride back to his home in Bombay, when suddenly a friend appeared and offered him a lift. By the time he reached his home, he discovered a large amount of money in his pocket and an appointment letter from the BBC.

Great power to this day Indeed the saints, mystics and spiritual leaders of Islam today hold great power over a large part of the human race. It is a power that has existed for almost a millennium, and it is due largely to the faith's tradition of equal treatment to all people no matter what their religion, caste or creed.

Contrary to the mystics and the Sufis, there were those Islamic religious leaders - usually called "mullahs" - who behaved in a very different way. Their treatment of peoples from the other religions and other the sects of Islam is very harsh and insulting. "Murdering a Shi'ite is a sacred and virtuous deed" was a common saying of Maulana Haq Nawaz Jhangvi (murdered in the early 1980s), chief of the sectarian Muslim group Sipah-e-Sahaba Pakistan. And to this day, the Sipah and its splinter groups Lashkar-e-Jhangvi and Akram Lahori repeat that profanity.

This is not the real Islam. "Islam is democratic in spirit. It advocates the right to vote and educate yourself and pursue a profession," says Dr Anees Ahmed, director-general of the Dawah Academy and an

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Islamic scholar attached to the International Islamic University. In fact, hardliners who portray Islam as a religion of violence and tolerance go against the Koran itself, says Ahmed. The Koran, on which Islamic law is based, enjoins Muslims to govern themselves by discussion and consensus and not by the sword and murder of people from other religions and sects.

Historically, the mystics and the Sufis were the religious leaders, not the mullahs. In early ages of Islam after the Prophet Mohammed, all four caliphs were scholars and not mullahs. Their attitude toward religious minorities was very kindhearted and supportive. They assured full protection and religious independence and autonomy for keeping religious activities and performing worships, says Dr Manzoor Ahmed, well-known researcher and scholar. Not only were the four first caliphs and the following Muslim rulers not mullahs, they did not allow theocracy in their respective governments.

Early Indian mystics and monarchs

According to historian and researcher Dr Mubarak Ali, it was the early Indian Muslim monarchs who injected and encouraged theocracy in the relatively backward societies of the time; before them, however, it was the mystics who served as the real face of the Islamic world.

Historic events are quite supportive to his arguments. Famous mystics, poets and teachers such as the Shaikh Ismail Bukhari of Lahore (11th century AD); Sayed Ali Hajveri, alias Daata Ganj Buksh Ali Jaheri (11th century); Baba Fareed Ganj Shakar, who wrote the first recorded Urdu poetry (13th century); Khwaja Fareed of Pakpattan (13th century); Usman Marwandi, alias Lal Shahbaz Qalander, one of the great saints of Sindh (13th century); Bahauddin Zakaria Multani, who represented the Suhrawardi school of Sufism (13th century); Shaikh Ahmed Sarhandi, alias Hazrat Mujadded Alf Sani, who revived interest in Islam and the *hadiths* (sayings and teachings) of the prophet Mohammed during the reign of the Mughal emperor Akbar (16th century); and Shah Abdul Latif Bhitai of Singh (18th century).

These Sufi saints were only a few of the many icons of early Muslim Indian mysticism. None of them were reported to have issued decrees of murder - either of Muslims or non-Muslims - under allegations of blasphemy or under any other charges.

A jubilant blessing

"I received my first son because of Daata Ganj Buksh," said a jubilant Karamat Masih, a local uneducated Christian during a recent visit to the shrine of Shrine of Sayed Ali Hajveri (alias Daata Ganj Buksh Ali Jaheri) in Lahore. "He is my benefactor; I will keep visiting his shrine."

The shrine of Sayed Ali Hajveri is by no means the only one in Pakistan. Almost all of the mystic shrines - especially those dedicated to Shah Abdul Latif Bhitai and Lal Shahbaz Qalander - are very popular among non-Muslims in Sindh. And not only among Muslims. "I am a regular visitor of the shrines of Lal Shahbaz and Shah Bhitai. They are in my heart and soul, and I cannot keep myself away from them," said Ram Perkash, a well-educated Hindu.

"Not only myself, but most Hindus living in Pakistan think the same way. They are also regular visitors of these and certain other shrines

and living mystics." Few mullahs (except the four imams of Islam) can match the spirit, status and religious character of the Sufi mystics, said journalist and historian Qazi Javed. From the Imam Abu Hanifa to the Imam Shaafi, each and every imam resisted the cruelties and inhuman attitudes of certain Ottoman caliphs, Javed says. Often the imams stood against the caliphs for the democratic rights of the masses. By contrast, many present-day mullahs are an integral part of the military establishment. Today our mullahs stand behind dictators to grab the basic rights of the people.

Theocracy in the Indian subcontinent was a gift of the Mughal monarchs, beginning with King Aurangzeb Alamgir, who ruled from 1658 to 1707. Alamgir charged his blood brother Dara Shikoh with an allegation of blasphemy in a stratagem to gain the crown. He not only hanged Shikoh but also made his father blind to secure his rule. Even before the Mughals, monarchs had used mullahs to tighten their grip on the masses. They got decrees against religious minorities and political opponents to hang them in the name of Islam.

Yet it was not the sword or the role of the theocrats which spread Islam in South Asia, says Dr Mubarak Ali. Mystics and saints like Amir Khusroo, a court musician in the early 14th century and a reported expert in 16 contemporary languages, including Arabic, Sanskrit (the mother of the Hindi and Urdu languages), English and Bengali; Maulana Rumi, a great poet and mystic of Iran; Sayed Ali Hajveri; Bahauddin Zakaria Multani; Khuaja Moinuddin Ajmairi; and others preached brotherhood and humanity. They influenced millions of people and converted them to Islam because of their teachings and preaching of peace.

Sayed Ali Hajveri and Shah Abdul Latif Bhitai especially were against any discrimination against Hindus or other religions. They opposed the Mughal rulers' atrocities against infidels, and efforts to convert Hindus and other religious communities to Islam under threat of death.

In the 18th century, Shah Wali Ullah wrote a letter to Shaikh Ahmed Sarhandi, alias Hazrat Mujadded Alf Sani, and the Mughal monarch, suggesting and advising Hindus to either embrace Islam or be ready for execution, said Dr Mubarak Ali. Shah Wali Ullah also invited Nadir Shah of Iran and Ahmad Shah Abdali of Afghanistan to invade India when the Mughal monarchy became weak after Aurangzeb. Shah Abdul Azizi and Shah Ismail, both sons of Shah Wali Ullah, were hardliners. Ismail and Shah Ahmed Badshah started an armed struggle against the then non-Muslim ruler and refused to join with Hindus and other religious communities. Maulana Abdul Hai was another pioneer of jihad in central India. Haji Shariat Ullah also supported jihadi activities in Bengal and did not include non-Muslims in his struggle. The mullahs in Pakistan have largely followed the footsteps of theocracy in history, arming themselves with the ammunition of violence, hatred and sectarianism, says Momin Khan, a left-wing political activist.

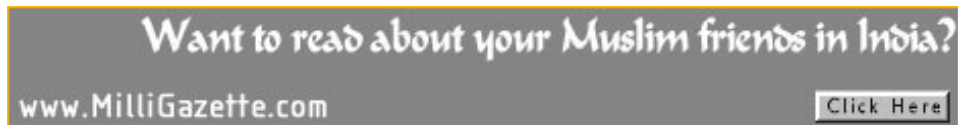
They frequently issued decrees against their enemies and opponents. They not only spread hatred but portrayed Islam as a religion that may not bear others and Allah as a force ready to condemn people to hell for even minor mistakes. This mindset was spread in mosques, as there is no particular priestly hierarchy among this strain of mullahs. With Islam, each individual is responsible for the condition of her or his own soul. Everyone stands equal before God," said Dr Anees

Ahmed of the Dawah Academy. He adds that the theocrats, for their own political and other interests, managed to keep *paish* imams (those who lead prayers at mosques) and muezzin employed. On the other hand, anybody who fulfills the religious requirements of Islam can lead *namaz* and other religious ceremonies, Anees says; Islam has no priesthood.

Their political activities and their preachings of power to typically uneducated mindsets has helped them to influence large sections of Pakistani society, creating sectarian groups and fomenting intolerance and violence among the youth. This is seriously damaging Pakistan's image as a pleasant, religiously tolerant and peaceful society, says Qazi Javed.

The real Islam is something different. Its true face is linked with the mystics and with love. Islam prohibits cruelties, guarantees human rights, protects other religious communities and encourages love and humanity. But the increasing influence of the religious parties my turn Pakistan into another Iraq or Iran, and it was this fear that was expressed by President General Pervez Musharraf in a recent speech. This is exactly what he is trying to prevent for Pakistan.

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