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QLANTIC
 JOURNAL OF
 SOCIAL SCIENCES

Sufi Revivalism in South Asia: A Study of the Role of Pir Syed Jamaat Ali Shah

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Abstract: *The Naqashbandiyya is the most outstanding of the Sufi orders in India. Its foundation is attributed to Bahauddin Naqashband, a resident of the town Naqashband, situated near Bokhara. It was developed by Ahmad Ata Yaswi (d. 1116 A.D.). The order was established in India by Muhammad Baqi Billah (1536–1603 A.D.) in the reign of Mughal Emperor Akbar (1556–1605 A.D.). The order was further popularized by the great Indian Naqashbandi Sufi, Shaikh Ahmad Sirhindi (d. 1624) in the 17th century. The present study analyses the religious and social services of Pir Syed Jamaat Ali Shah (b. 1841– d. 1951), a renowned Naqashbandi sufi reformer of the late 19th and early 20th century. He headed a Sufi revivalist movement in order to reform Sufism 'from within' and purge it of all un-Islamic acts and influences. To further his movement, he founded a Sufi organization, Anjuman-i-Khuddam-as-Sufiyya, with the aim of unifying the disparate Sufi orders and disseminating knowledge of Sufism.*

Key Words: Pir Syed Jamaat Ali Shah, Anjuman-i-khuddam-as-sufiyya, Risala Anwar-as-sufiyya

Introduction

Syed Jamaat Ali Shah: A Brief Life Sketch

Syed Jamaat Ali Shah was born in 1841 in the Village of Alipur Sayyidan in the Narowal District of Punjab. (Kasuri, Tarif-Amir-I-Millat, , 1994, p. 4.,) Before discussing his early education, it seems pertinent to briefly deal with his ancestors and family background. Pir Syed Jamaat Ali Shah was Syed from both maternal and paternal sides. His parents were lineal descendants of Syed Muhammad Saeed Nauruz Shah Shirazi, who had come to India along with a large contingent of Persians accompanying the second Mughal Emperor Humayun (d. 1556) in his campaign to re-conquer India. (Buehler, 1993) It is said that Humayun went to see Syed Hussain Nauruz Shah Sharizi, who was a saint of his time (father of Syed Saeed Nauruz Shah) and requested him to pray for his success. He not only prayed for the Emperor's success but also prophesied of his regaining the throne of India. (Syed Akhtar Hussain, 1975) On Humayun's request, he sent his brother Syed Hussain Shah and son Syed Saeed Nauruz Shah to India. (Syed Akhtar Hussain, 1975)

When Akbar ascended the throne of India, he was granted a cultivated piece of land some nine miles from present-day Narowal City to Syed Saeed Nauruz Shah, where he settled down with his followers. This new settlement was named 'Alipur Sayyidan'. With the passage of time, Syed Nauruz Shah's descendants settled down in four different villages, i.e., Alipur Sayyidan. Kharullahpur Sayyidan, Fathepur Sayyidan and Ounchipur Sayyidan. Syed Nauruz Shah was later buried in Ounchipur Sayyidan. A descendant of Syed Nauruz Shah, Syed Shujahuddin settled down in Abhalpur Sayyidan, Tehsil Kharian District Jhelum.

Emperor Akbar also granted some land in District Gurdaspur to Syed Hussain Shah. In 1947, the descendants of Syed Hussain Shah migrated to Pakistan and settled down in Kharian Walla Tehsil and the districts Sheikupura, Dohla, and Panjgarian, Sialkot. (Syed Akhtar Hussain, 1975) (Farooqi, n.d.)

Jamaat Ali Shah's father, Syed Karim, was a Sufi scholar as well as the landowner of Alipur Sayyidan. He had three sons; Syed Najabat Ali Shah, Syed Jamaat Ali Shah and Syed Sadiq Ali Shah. (Syed Akhtar

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Hussain, 1975) At the age of four, Syed Jamaat Ali started his early education in a nearby mosque. After learning some parts of the Quran, his father took the services of Hafiz Shahab-ud-Din Kashmir to help his son learn the Quran by heart. He was taught Urdu and Persian by Maulana Abdur Rashid Alipuri; Maulana Qari Hafiz Abdur Wahab Amratsari taught him grammar and logic. After that, he joined Dar-ul-Uloom Numania, Lahore, where he benefited from Maulana Ghulam Qadir Bahirawi and learned religious sciences from him. (Syed Akhtar Hussain, 1975)

He studied religious sciences in India from two well-known reformists Naqshbandi Sufis Maulana Irshad Hussain Rampuri (b. 1832- d. 1893), writer of the famous book *Intesar-ul-Haq* in the answer of *Meary-i-Haq* by Mian Nazir Hussain Delhvi (d. 1902) in which he (Mian Nasir Hussain) criticized Imam Abu-Hanifa. Alama Shibli Nomani also studied *Fiqha* from him, and Maulana Shah Fazl Rehman Ganj Muradabadi (b. 1794- d. 1895), disciple-caliph of Shah Muhammad Aafaq (d. 1835) and a renowned theologian of his time. He also studied from Maulana Abdullah Tonki (b. 1850- d. 1920). He was a great authority on Islamic *Fiqh*. He taught Arabic at the Oriental College and Government College Lahore. Jammal Ali Shah also studied from the first Rector of *Nadwat-u-U/ama*, Maulana Muhammad Ali Mongiri. He received permission to transmit *Hadith* from Muhammad Abdur Rahman Panipati, and when he traveled to Makkah, Maulana Shah Abdul Haq Allahabadi Makki gave him authorization to narrate additional *Hadiths*.

Syed Jamaat Ali Shah also studied religious sciences from Maulana Faizul-Hussain Saharanpuri, Maulana Hassan Kanpuri, Maulana Mir Muhammad Abdullah, Maulana Muhammad Mazhar Saharanpuri and Maulana Muhammad Omar Ziauddin Istanbo (Kasuri, Asatidha-yi-Amir-i-Millat, 1996) li. All his teachers were well-known theologians and scholars of their time.

Coming from a family of Qadiri *Sajjadanishins*, Syed Jamaat Ali Shah's first informal contact with Naqshbandiyya order was through his father, who had been initiated by Syed Hussain Shah (Syed Jamaat Ali's maternal grandfather). Baba Faqir Muhammad Churahi (d 1897) formally initiated Syed Jamaat Ali into the Naqshbandiyya - Mujadidiyya order in 1891 (Buehler, 1993). Soon after, he received permission to initiate disciples into the Naqshbandiyya order. He 'stands out as the most well-known Indian Naqshbandi-Mujaddidi of the twentieth century India prior to independence'. (Buehler, 1993)

He also took an active part in politics, particularly in the Khilafat Movement and the movement for the recovery of Shaheed Ganj Mosque in Lahore. He was also elected the founding president of the All India Sunni Conference (1925) and presided over all three All India Sunni Conferences held respectively in Muradabad (1925), Badaun (1935) and Benarus (1946). In addition, he played an instrumental role in the Pakistan Movement by supporting the All-India Muslim League and Quaid-e-Azam Muhammad Ali Jinnah.

After Pakistan gained independence, he, with other leading Ulama and *Mashaikh*, started a movement for the enforcement of *Shariat* in Pakistan. He died in August 1951 and is buried in Alipur Sayyidian. The annual festival celebrating Syed Jamaat Ali Shah's death anniversary (urs) is held on the second month of the semi-solar *sambat* calendar, *Bisakh* 28-29, roughly corresponding to May 11-12 of the Gregorian calendar is attended by hundreds and thousands of his followers from all over the world.

Jamaat Ali Shah's Role in Sufi Revivalist Movement

The need for reform in the Sufi orders had been felt by genuine Sufis for a long time because many unIslamic customs and practices had crept into Sufism. Shaikh Abdul Hasan Ali bin Usman al-Julbabi al-Hujwiri (famously known as Data Ganj Bakhsh), in his monumental treatise entitled *Kashf-ul-Mahjub* divided Sufis into twelve groups. Among these twelve, two of them were *mardud* (condemned), and the remaining ten were *Maqbool* (approved). (Rizvi, 1965)

Every true Sufi condemned the false Sufis and their un-Islamic practices. At the time of Shaikh Ahmed Sirhandi (d. 1624), the *Shariat* and *Tariqatare* were considered different from each other; it means that Islam and Sufism are two different things. It is evident from the letters of Shaikh Ahmed Sirhandi and the account given by Shaikh 'Abdul Haqq Muhaddis Dehlavi that he divides the false Sufis into three groups:

1. Those who were not familiar with the decrees of the *Shari'at* and had not even heard of the traditions and aphorisms of the ulema. They were thus illiterate and needed to be educated and brought back

to the truth.

2. Those who completely ignored the *shari'at* and held to the skirts of the Almighty and attached no importance to others, Shaikh 'Abdul Haqq considered them to be *kafirs* (infidels).
3. Those who mainly and strictly adhered to the practices and traditions of their *pirs* (spiritual guides). Further, they held that their *pirs* had never indulged in acts ordinarily considered unlawful on good authority (Umar, [1993](#)).

Shaikh Ahmad Sirhindi pioneered the first major reform movement in the Indian Subcontinent (which was simultaneously a Sufi revival movement). His efforts were directed towards the reform of Muslim Society in general and Sufism in particular.

He was not only concerned, as were the mystics of the preceding era, with expanding the faith amongst non-Muslims; he also aimed at consolidating it by reforming it and removing its un-Islamic trappings. An uncompromising monotheist, he did not agree with Akbar's religious experiments, which he had made with the ideological support of pantheistic thinkers. He condemned the prevalence of *bid'at* (innovation). He permitted the exercise of *Qiyas* (analogical reasoning) and *ijtihad* (independent reasoning), provided it was within the framework of the Quran and the Sunnah. He condemned the ulema and sufis of his day who encouraged deviations from the Sunnah under the garb of *ijtihad*. He approached the rulers, the Sufis and the ulema in order to bring about a change in their outlook on life. It was due to his efforts that Jahangir (R.P. 1605-1627, 4th Mughal Emperor) abandoned Akbar's (R.P. 1556-1605, 3rd Mughal Emperor) policy of doing religious experiments; the Sufis came closer to the *Sharia* and rejected the doctrine of *Wahdat-a/-Wajud* (Unity of Being), and the ulema turned to the revival of religious learning. (Yasin, [1958](#))

In India, the 18th century A. D. saw the revival of Islam. Two notable individuals, Shah Wali Ullah (r. 1703-63) and Shah Kalim Ullah (r. 1650-1729), made efforts, one on the intellectual level and the other on a spiritual to restore the fundamental principles of Islam. Shah Wali Ullah provided fresh momentum for the resurgence of religious science. He created a new school of scholastic theology, healed the rift between mystics and jurists, moderated the debate over *Wahdat-al-Wajud* between its proponents and detractors, and sparked a renowned interest in religious study. He attempted to instill a new spirit of dedication in all segments of Muslim society, including rulers, nobles, ulema, mystics, soldiers, traders, and so forth. Shah Kalim Ullah's work was in a different direction. He revived and revitalized the Chistiyya order on the line of the saints of its earlier Sufis and checked the growth of esoteric tendencies. (Philosophy, [1996](#))

The 19th century saw the decline of the Muslim political power in South Asia and the emergence of new masters of India in the form of the British. This era also witnessed the decline of the Muslim society in India in all fields of life. To meet the new challenges of Western thought and culture to the Muslim society in India, Sufis started their Sufi Revival Movements (Gilmartin, [1988](#)), which attracted educated urban Muslims to Sufism.

Jamaat Ali Shah established his religious leadership in the Sufi revival movement by actively propagating Islam as he traveled on foot to many villages and towns throughout the Punjab. Not only encouraged the regular performance of obligatory religious duties according to Islamic law but also supervised the construction of mosques. (Buehler, [1993](#))

The type of Sufism he represented and promoted was bolstered by the erudite Maulana Ahmed Raza Khan Bareilvi (d. 1921), who formulated an original school of religious thought with his thousands of legal opinions and prolific writings. He is also considered to be the founder of a Sunni sub-sect named after him as 'Brelvis.' "Maulana Ahmed Raza Khan Bareilvi legitimized the Sufi revival movement, which Syed Jamaat Ali Shah utilized to support his activities. The distinctive Bareilvi perspective, legitimized by Maulana Ahmed Raza's innumerable *fatawa* (erudite legal opinions), bolstered the program of the revival of Sufis as their same Shaykhs transmitted Bareilvi ideas and practices to their disciples". (Buehler, [1993](#))

With this leaned support, Syed Jamaat Ali departed radically from his Naqshbandi predecessors, and a new expression of Naqshbandi religiosity came into being. Hence, the new inspiration of Jamaat Ali Shah was, in fact, one of the cornerstones of the Sufi revivalist movement in India. (Buehler, [1993](#))



(a) The Sufi Organization: *Anjuman-i-Khuddam-as-Sufiyya*

In 1904, Syed Jamaat Ali Shah attempted to institutionalize his Sufi revival movement and to expand its activities beyond the Punjab by founding and heading the *Anjuman-i-Khuddam-as-Sufiyya* (Association of the Servants of Sufis). In this way, he established the first successful Sufi organization in the Punjab. (Buehler, 1993)

The fundamental intent of this organization was to unify Indian Sufis. The goal of unification of disparate Sufi orders acquires immense significance, keeping in view the conflicts and controversies among them on various spiritual issues. Therefore, the organization primarily aimed at reconciling the various Sufi groups. However, this measure was specifically meant to counter Scriptural groups such as the *Ahl-I-Hadith*, who had been pejoratively labeled *Wahhabis*. These groups are said to have advocated an alternative Sunni orthodoxy devoid of traditional schools of Law. Moreover, these groups were vehement critics of Sufism and had rejected Sufism altogether.

It is significant to point out here that Jamaat Ali Shah not only tried to counter the anti-Sufism views and notions of these groups but had simultaneously been making efforts to revive Sufism by clearing it of all corrupt practices that had crept into it. It was mainly because of these corrupt practices that anti-Sufism groups emerged. One such significant and powerful anti-Sufism movement was launched by Mohammad bin Abdul Wahhab of Nejd (Ahmad, 1972) (Arabia). Another important contemporary critic of Sufism was Muhammad Abduhu" (Philosophy, 1996) (d. 1905), an Egyptian reformer.

Turning back to the *Anjuman*, its explicit goals written in large script on the front page of the first issue of the *Risala-i-Anwar-us-Sufia* were;

1. To unify all the Sufi groups, e.g., Naqshbandiyya, Chistiyya, Qadiriyya, and Suhrawardiyya.
2. To spread knowledge of Sufism.
3. To make books on Sufism available.
4. To circulate the *Risala (Anwar-as-Sufiyya)* in which exemplary character and conduct of Sufis are featured. (Philosophy, 1996)

The enterprise of propagating Sufism was itself a modern phenomenon. Syed Jamaat Ali, rather than have seekers come to him, as educator Shaykhs had done for the prior millennium, took advantage of the geographical mobility provided by the modern railroad and traveled the length and breadth of India. (Philosophy, 1996) (Farooqi, n.d.) He could rarely be found at his home in Alipur. In 1908, for example, he remained out of station for at least eight months of the year, spending five months in Mysore, Bangalore and Hyderabad Deccan. For the long return train trip to the north, the Nawab of Hyderabad rented him a private car. In the words of a biographer, "[a]s the train stopped along the way, people wanted to see him and to give him fruit and flowers, a small scale version of how Mahatma Gandhi was greeted when traveling." (PPA)

It is beneficial to point out here that many contemporary religious scholars had rightly rejected the use of modern tools and technology, which were introduced in India by the British. These scholars represented an extreme reaction to the technological advancement achieved in the West and imported into India by the colonial rulers. Being reactionary in their approach, these Scholars had kept themselves aloof from modern facilities and thus had bereft themselves of their advantages. On the contrary, Jamaat Ali Shah's approach to technological advancement was modern, as he not only appreciated these but also made use of them for the purpose of fulfilling his mission.

Jamaat Ali Shah's modern approach can also be assessed from the fact that he organized *Anjuman* along the organizational lines of modern voluntary associations of the British type. He appointed Zafar Ali Peshawari as the first secretary of the *Anjuman*, who was followed by Master Karamullah Sialkoti. (*Risala-Yi-Anwar-as-Sufiyya*, n.d.) The *Anjuman* had branches in Gujrat, Kunjah, Kohat, Rawalpindi, Jhang, Lyallpur (now Faisalabad), Karachi, Lahore, Amritsar and Muradabad, with local officers appointed by Jamaat Ali. (Farooqi, n.d.) Thus, he organized a network of branches of the organization in Northern India.

The *Anjuman* spread its revivalist message throughout India by exploiting the available modern technology. People who could not meet him in person and hear his message could be reached through various publications. He enjoyed the tremendous respect and devotion of the people. "Seeing Jamaat Ali in

a mobbed train station or on a distant raised platform surrounded by thousands of other devotees at an annual meeting was an experience of a kind of personal charismatic authority, albeit certainly different from that of his Naqshbandi predecessors. (Buehler, 1993)

The *Anjuman* included many influential, educated urban members who made concerted efforts to attract more anglicized Indians. Buehler comments, "It is a unique blend of ruling Punjabi Shrine cults and modern urban institutions that have produced a distinctively South Asian perspective on Islam and on the practice of Sufism, which continues to attract adherents today." (Buehler, 1993) The *Anjuman* successfully promoted Sufism and countered the attacks of *Deobandis*, *Qadiyanis*, *Ahli-i-Hadith* and *Arya Samajis*.

(b) Mouth-piece of the *Anjuman*: *Risala-i-anwar-as Sufiyya*

The *Risala-i-Anwar-as-Suffiya*, the first issue of which was personally funded by Syed Jamaat Ali Shah, became established as the first Sufi journal in the Panjab. (Buehler, 1993) (Gerald Barrie, 1970) The *Anjuman* used the magazine to advertise its own annual meeting and to summarize the highlights of the conference for those who were unable to attend, in addition to notifying its subscribers of other sufi revivalist activities. (*Risala-Yi-Anwar-as-Sufiyya*, n.d.) Many of the articles in the *Risala* had an educational tone. Some were explicitly instructional, advising readers how to respond to detractors of Islam and Sufism. Other *Risala* articles assisted followers of Jamaat Ali in defending controversial practices by providing a number of Quranic references and proofs from *Ahadith*, particularly for defending the necessity of having a spiritual guide and the benefits of visualizing the Shaykh.

The *Risala* included articles urging good moral character with examples of earlier Muslims, in addition to hagiographies of famous Sufis. Moreover, explanatory tracts on repentance, initiation (*bayt*) and remembrance (*dhikr*), proper conduct in the Shaykh's presence, Muhammad (peace be upon him) as the greatest Prophet, the way of salvation, law and the Sufi path, and cleaning the *nafs* (self). (Buehler, 1993)

In 1923, the *Risala* added a regular section on the 'calamity of apostasy' and on the monthly progress of the *Anjuman* in propagating Islam. Along with other Muslim groups, the *Anjuman* started its campaign to defend and fight against the activities of *Arya Samajis*, whose goal was to reconvert the Muslims whose ancestors had been Hindus.

By 1925, Jamaat Ali had led thirty-one delegations all over the Punjab to counter the *Arya Samaj* Movement. In 1923, the *Risala* began featuring monthly articles describing *Anjuman's* efforts in building schools, mosques, and hospitals- a shift in emphasis that was already foreshadowed in an article in 1915. "The *Tariqa* should help people." He conceived of these concrete efforts to improve people's lives as active propagation of Islam. (Buehler, 1993) The *Risala* was delivered monthly to subscribers by using modern postal services.

Early Social and Political Activities

Syed Jamaat Ali Shah took a keen interest in the religious and social welfare of the Muslims. It is important to note that he not only worked for the Muslim community in the Indian sub-continent but also was concerned about the welfare of the Muslim *Ummah* all over the world. It can be well assessed from the fact that he donated several lakhs of rupees for the construction of a railway line to Madina and founded the Madina fund for the drought-affected people of Hijaz. (Farooqi, n.d.)

In the Indian sub-continent, Jamaat Ali Shah consistently worked for the welfare and betterment of the Muslims. He contributed to the provision of basic social services in the spheres of education and health. He built schools, mosques, *madaris*, inns, hospitals and orphan houses for Muslims. Similarly, when the fundraising campaign started for the establishment of Aligarh Muslim University, he donated one lakh rupees to this cause. (Farooqi, n.d.)

It not only shows his generosity for the cause of educational uplift of the Muslims, but it also sheds light on his positive response towards modern education in general and towards M.A.O College Aligarh, founded by Sir Syed Ahmad Khan in particular. (Hali, 1957) (Graham, 1909) (Malik, 1998) (Mohsin-ul-Mulk, 1903) Here, it is worthy of mention that many contemporary religious leaders and traditionalist ulema or scholars had condemned Sir Syed Ahmed's Aligarh movement, which was aimed at educational



uplift of the Muslims, and also getting them acquainted with modern education to meet the challenges of modern times. Not only that, Sir Syed was branded as an infidel by these scholars, particularly for his rational interpretation of fundamental Islamic doctrines. (aljon, 1958) (Oar, 1957). It is in this context that Jamaat Ali Shah's positive response towards the Aligarh movement and Sir Syed's views can better be appreciated.

Jamaat Ali Shah remained at the forefront of Ulema-i-Ahl-i-Sunnat's campaign against Ibn-i-Saud and Wahhabism. (Punjab Police Abstract) He also played a leading role in the Anti-Qadiani movement. (PPA) It was he who prophesied Mirza Ghulam Ahmad Qadiani's death within 24 hours on 25th May 1908 in a public meeting at Lahore, which came true. (Farooqi, n.d.)

After the occupation of Tripoli and Benghazi by Italy in 1911 and a combined attack on Turkey by the Balkan States in October 1912 threatened the independence of Turkey, other holy places of Islam were threatened by European Powers. The leading Muslims of India founded *Anjuman-i-Khudam Ka'ba* in May 1913 for the protection of Makkah and other holy places of Islam from non-Muslim encroachment. Jamaat Ali Shah joined the *Anjuman-i-Khudam Ka'ba* and worked for the *Anjuman's* success. (Farooqi, n.d.) (PPA, 1914)

In July 1913, the Government of U.P., while pursuing its welfare works, demolished a part of Cawnpur Mosque in order to widen a road. The Muslims launched a massive demonstration to condemn it. The protestors clashed with the authorities, and as a result, nearly 30 people were killed, which gave birth to an All-India Movement known as the Cawnpur Mosque Movement. Jamaat Ali Shah fully supported the movement and worked for its success. (Lavan, 1974)

Child Marriage Act declared it unlawful to marry under 18 years for boys and under 12 years for girls. This Bill was presented in the Indian Legislative Assembly by a Hindu Member named Pandit Herbalas Sarda in 1921. Muslim members of the assembly suggested modification in the Bill that Muslims should be exempted from this act, but with the help of Hindu members, this Bill became an Act. (Farooqi, n.d.)

From the very beginning, Syed Jamaat Ali Shah opposed it and declared that if the Bill would become an act, I would be the first person to violate it. He also sent a telegram to the Viceroy and asked him to exempt Muslims from this act. He strongly opposed the Child Marriage Act and considered it un-Islamic. He also addressed public meetings in different parts of India to mobilize public support against it. (Farooqi, n.d.) (Qadari, 1999)

Conclusion

Islam was the focus of Pir Syed Jamaat Ali Shah's lifelong preaching. He traversed the entirety of India in order to disseminate the message of Islam. For this reason, he also traveled to Afghanistan and Ceylon. His preaching played a major role in the conversion of many non-Muslims to Islam. Pir sahib also actively participated in promoting the social and religious well-being of Muslims. He and his organization worked hard to check the anti-Islamic activities of the *Shuddhi*, *Sanghtan*, and *Qadiani* Movements.

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