



MUSLIM SAINTS IN MUGHAL MINIATURES (16TH-17TH CENTURIES)

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The life of the Muslim saints, their spiritual activities and contacts with the people has been penned down by scholars as well as by the Sufis themselves. Paintings belonging to 16th -17th centuries give a broader picture of the lives of the Muslim saints or dervishes, their abodes khanqahs, contacts with the rulers, nobles and common men. In this paper an attempt has been made to sketch the lives of the Muslim saints during the 16th – 17th centuries on the basis of the pictographic study of the Mughal miniatures reproduced in albums and other important works.

Dervishes are mostly to be found in Persia and are not numerous in India. The ascetics or a sufi is known as dervish in Turkey, Egypt, Arabia and Persia, and in India, he is classed among the *faqirs*¹. Tavernier writes "*There are different kinds of Musalman Fakirs; some are almost naked, like the Fakirs of the idolaters, who have no regular dwellings, and abandon themselves to all kinds of impurity without any shame, ---There are other fakirs who are clad in garments of so many pieces of different colours that one is unable to say what they are. These robes extend half-way down their legs and conceal the miserable rags beneath. These Fakirs generally travels in companies, some fakir have more than 200 disciples, whom they assemble by sound of the drum and with a horn similar to those of our huntsmen. When marching, the disciples carry their standard, lances, other arms, which they Plant in the ground near their master when he halts to rest anywhere.*", -- "*The third class Fakirs of the East Indies consists of these who, being born of poor parents, and wishing to know the law thoroughly, in order to become Mullah or doctors, take up their abode in mosques, where they live on charity is bestowed upon them. They occupy their time in reading the Koran, which they learn by heart, and when they are able to add to this study some little knowledge of natural things, with the*

¹ Majer, C.H. Beack; *Faith ,Fairs and Festivals*, New Delhi 1977,p208.



example of a good life, according to their ideas"². These *faqirs* ordinarily travel in groups, each of which has its chief or superior. As they go completely nude during winter and summer seasons. In a painting some young *faqirs* along with the senior *faqirs* are seen seated around fire³. Their hair grows down below waist, their nails equal their fingers in length⁴ and they have the pipe of tobacco⁵. There are many little gardens with a cottage, where lives a *faqir*⁶. Several of the *faqirs* undertakes long pilgrimages not only naked, but laden with heavy iron chains, as are put about the legs of elephants⁷. Their baggage consists of four boxes full of Arabic and Persian books and some cooking utensils, and they have ten or twelve oxen to carry those among the troop who were invalids⁸.

The Mughal emperors did not adhere to the religious tradition with blind fanaticism. They were guided more by its spirit than by its letter. They did not permit art to be a stimulant to the spirit of devotion or idolatry which Islam had sought to suppress and crush, but they permitted it to have full lay in its own realm.

The artists freely painted portraits of holy men, or saintse.g. those of Sheikh Salim Chishti, Mulla-Shah, Mia Mir, Sheikh Phoul, etc. In India Muslim mysticism was enriched by Hindu idealism. The influence of this mystic marriage was bounded to be felt in art as well as literature. A painting of "priests sitting in council"⁹ Such examples can be easily multiplied. The paintings of dervishes and priest absorbed in ecstasy under a tree¹⁰ or lost in mystic dances¹¹ and visits to spiritual teacher and holy men¹²...which are all replete with religion, enthusiasm, zeal and devotion, from a group that draws its main inspiration from the mystic movement. In them mystic lines and colures are clearly visible and through them Muslim spiritual feelings express themselves effectively.

² Tavernier, J.B.; *Travels in India*, tms. V. Ball, Vol II London, 1989, 1925, PP139, -141.

³ Ibid, P.196

⁴ Ibid, p.200

⁵ Ibid, pp.145-156.

⁶ Peter Munday: *Travels of Peter Munday in Europe and Asia*, Vol. II, *Travels in Asia* ed., R.C. Temple, Hakluyt Society, 2nd series No.XXXV, London, 1914, p 106.

⁷ Tavernier, p.197, op.cit.

⁸ Bernier, F.; *Travels in Mogul Empire (1656-1668 AD)*, tms. A. Constable, revised V.A. Smith, London, 1916 p 317.

⁹ No. 13031. Indian museum, Calcutta.

¹⁰ Plate 40. Mehta, N.C.: *Study in Mughal Painting*, Calcutta, 1926.

¹¹ Plate xviii. Binyon, L: *Court Painters of the Grand Mughal*, London 1921.

¹² Plate xvii ibid.



The pictures of religious men (saints, dervishes, *faqirs*), in dancing posture, congregation of the Dervishes, their mystic contemplation under tree, visits' or offerings to teachers and holy men, indeed, deal with what may be characterized as traditional religious subjects.

Portraits of holy men or saints, identified or unidentified, are plentiful in Mughal art. The most frequently represented in Mughal paintings are Sheikh Muhyiddin Abdul Qadir Jilani (1078-1165),¹³ Khwaja Moinuddin Hasan Chishti (1142-1234)¹⁴, Qutubuddin Bakhtiyar Kaki (d.1235)¹⁵, Nizamuddin Auliya (d.1325AD)¹⁶, Shaiakh Sharfuddin Panipati¹⁷. A painting of Khwaja Moinuddin Chishti by Bichtr, in white shawl around his shoulders stand, holding a large glob in both hands. Above the globe which has a large keyhole is suspended a rare cape like crown with jewels topped by a feather. The halo of saint emits gold rays on to black ground.¹⁸

Besides the portraits of saints of the pre-Mughal period as well as the saints of the Mughal period form favorite subjects of Mughal artists. Sheikh Salim Chishti was the most venerated of sixteenth century saints of India. He was greatly esteemed by Akbar who built a mausoleum at Fatehpur Sikri to keep his memory green.¹⁹ Portraits of Jahangir sitting with this holy man²⁰ have also been identified.

Portraits of Mian Mir and Mulla-Shah sitting together are frequently seen in Mughal paintings²¹. Shaikh Mir Mohammad or Mian Mir (1555-1635) was born in Sistan. He came to Lahore where he had large number of disciples. He belonged to the quadrangle order of Dervishes²². Mulla-Shah (1584-1661), a native from Badakhshan, was a disciple of Mian Mir²³. He had earned great fame. He lived through the reigns of Akbar, Jahangir, Shahjahan and Aurangzeb. By his

¹³ Abul Fazl: *Ain I -Akbari*, Trns by Jarret, H.S. Calcutta, 1938, 48, vol ii, p 398.

¹⁴ Ibid, pp 401-402.; Skelton; *Fact of Indian Art* (A symposium held at the Victoria & Albert museum) London, 1987 p 154, plate i

¹⁵ *Ain I Akbari* vol. iii p 401. Op.cit.

¹⁶ Ibid vol iii p 404.

¹⁷ Ibid 410.

¹⁸ Leach, L Y; *Mughal and Other Indian Paintings from Cheater Beatty Library*, vol. I London, 1995, Pl. 2.22 p 386.

¹⁹ Abul Fazl: *Akbarnama*, Trans. By H. Beveridge, Calcutta, 1872 reprint 1972, vol. ii p 503; Jahangirs: *Memoir of Jahangir* (Tuzuk I Jahangiri) Trans. By A. Rogers, ed., H. Beveridge, London, 1904-1914, vol. I p 159.

²⁰ Kuhnle, E. & Goetz, H.; *Indian Book Painting (From Jahangir Album in State Library in Berlin)*, London, 1926, page 229 plate 14.

²¹ Platexxiii, binyon, L., op.ci

²² Qanungo, k.r.: *Dara Shikoh*, vol. I p 98.

²³ Ibid, vol. i pp 99 348.



personal magnetic charms; he attracted many disciples (including Dara Shikoh) who were intensely devoted to him²⁴.

Besides, these famous saints, the Mughal artists frequently painted *faqirs* gathering under trees²⁵, dervishes' congregations²⁶, their mystic's performances²⁷, Princes visits or offerings to teachers and holy men²⁸.

In a painting, a prince is shown visiting a Mullah along with a companion. They are seated on a carpet outside the wall of a shrine with a book, a Quran stand, *Rahl* and pen box before them.²⁹ An elderly Mullah with a book³⁰, a Muslim holy man stand with his hands extended as if performing teaching. He is wearing a cap, a traditional patched shawl and pale turquoise clock but his feet are bare³¹.

The Mughal miniature paintings represent ecstatic singing of Sufis. *Sama* literally (vocal music) is a Sufi term for the frenzied music and dancing. Through ecstatic dancing inspired by music and recitation of religious and non-religious poetry, Sufi achieved *wajd*, (ecstasy, lit., finding God). A painting represents the *Sama* and *Wajd* dance of Sheikh Husain Sirhindi and Sheikh Mustafa³². Another painting of sufi dancing by Farrukh Chela, large number sufi's in a courtyard watching as musicians play enthusiastically for two of their followers, who are exhausted by ecstatic dancing. One is attempting to continue assisted by his disciple as the other sits dazed on the ground³³.

Muslim women saints are not frequently met in Mughal paintings, Foster describes, "*They report this pagan deity to have beene a women (if a holy virgin may have that name); Yea, that shee*

²⁴ Ibid, vol.i p348.

²⁵ Brown, P.: *Indian Painting under the Mughal AD. 1556 TO AD. 1750*, Oxford, 1924, Plate LII.

²⁶ Ibid, plate LI.

²⁷ Binyon, L.; plate xviii.op.cit.

²⁸ Khandelavala, K.; *Indian Sculpture and Painting : A Introductory Study*, Bombay, 1938, plate, XVIII

²⁹ Leach, L Y; *Mughal and other Indian Painting from the Chester Betty Library*, London, 1995 Vol.I plate 3.87 page 474

³⁰ Ibid plate.3074 page 463.

³¹ Ibid plate 3.56 page 445.

³² Das, AK: *The Mughal Painting during the Jahangir's Times*, Culcutta, 1978, p 145 fig 66b.

³³ Leach Y, op cit. plate 3.24 pages 386.



still lives (the divell shee doth) but will not shew her selfe. Divers Moores also resort to this peer [Pers. Pir, a Saint]”³⁴.

The above discussion leads us to conclude that Mughal paintings substantiate information pertaining to the lives of the Sufis, *faqirs*, ascetics, their spiritual attainment, their area of influence and the diverse groups of people who came to receive their blessings or to attend their sermons or lectures on the most important subject of universal love, peace and harmony. The different colours of the lives of Sufis, ascetics, *faqirs* etc. cannot be better understood without the study of paintings.

³⁴ Foster, W.: *Early Travels in Mughal India* (1583-1619 AD), London, 1968. p 180.