

## ***The Shrine of Shah ‘Abdal Latif alias Barri Imam***

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Shah ‘Abd-al-Latif, was born in a religious family of *Sadaat* in a village Cholian Karsal, Tehsil Chakwal, in 1617. After studying the Qur’an, *hadith*, *fiqah*, logic and arithmetic he visited Najaf, Baghdad, Karbala, Makkah and Madinah not only to receive spiritual blessings but also to enhance his theological knowledge.

It is not very clear why the *imam* is known by the title ‘Barri’.<sup>1</sup> Some believe that it was given to him by his spiritual teacher Sakhi Hayat-al Mir after ordering him to come out of a cave known as ‘Jhandu Ki Kothi’.<sup>2</sup> It is also believed that in those days the local rulers were exacting feudal dues from the people illegally. This obviously upset the Imam. He waged a successful war against these rulers and emancipated the oppressed people from the tyranny of the rulers. Therefore he became popular as ‘Barri’ *Imam*. The term also refers to his life as a religious hermit (*qalandar*) in the forests around Noorpur. Various sites around his tomb today confirm this belief. A banyan tree and a fireplace, next to his tomb, also affirm the above view. He is believed to have meditated under this tree with burning fire that he used at night. The fire is still burnt to remember the fire used by the *imam*. A prominent cave in the Margalla hillside behind the shrine is remembered as a place where the saint performed acts of penance (*chilla*). A small shrine on the Northwest side of the village marks

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1. Barri has two meanings: ‘earth’ or ‘liberation’.
2. The cave was located on the ridges beside the river Haro that at time flowed through the valley, where he had confined himself praying.

the place where he received religious instruction and his title from his *pir* Hayat al-Mir popularly known as *zindah pir*.

### Genealogy of the Saint

His *shajrah-i nasab* is traced to *Imam* Musa Kazim. The sufi *silsilah* he associated himself with was 'Qadriyyah'. About his genealogy three points are significant to mention. First, his only popularly known ancestor is *Hazrat* Musa Kazim.<sup>3</sup> Though Barri Imam's father, Sayyid Mahmud Shah, is said to have been a *pir* himself, his *baraqah* is not known. It seems likely that the attribution of descent from Musa Kazim has been made to support Noorpur's Shi'ite community's affiliation with the shrine. Second, by becoming a *qalandar*, *Barri Imam* broke with his father's *baraqah* (whatever it might have been). Hence his biological genealogy never overlaps his spiritual genealogy, unlike other saints of institutionalized *baraqah*. Third, unlike other famous Sufi saints who produced no children (such as Nizamuddin *Awliya*) no genealogy has been traced through his brother or sister to support someone's claim to a blood tie with *Barri Imam*.<sup>4</sup> His entire family genealogy seems to terminate with him. Thus Barri Imam's life cuts across two styles of Sufism, which provide a conflicting legacy. As an orthodox Qadari, he left behind him a tomb, which could serve as a focus for devotion and four *Khulafa'* who's descendent could perpetrate his memory. As a *qalander* he left behind only a reputation for spiritual self-sufficiency and neither a *baraqah*, which could be taught, nor heirs who could inherit his *barakaat*.

### The Grave of the Saint

The saint's grave constitutes the central tomb of his shrine. It is contained inside a structure with a green dome and a bright facade of glass mosaics. A courtyard and a retaining wall, which encloses the banyan tree and the fireplace, surround the tomb. Outside his tomb are smaller covered tombs of three of the saint's

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3. The seventh of the twelve Imams. Musa Kazim founded his own hereditary *silsilah*.
  4. Patricia Jaffry, 'The wages of death' (unpublished paper delivered to pilgrimage in South Asia conference, school of oriental and African studies, September 2nd-4th 1978), p.6.

disciples (*Khulafa'*), Shah Husayn, Mithe Shah and Dabang Shah, along with two later followers, *Saeen* Allah Ditta and Shauq 'Ali alias Nanga Baba. These tombs are located in small graveyards of their own descendants. Also associated with the shrine of Barri Imam is the shrine of his family located near the Abpara Market. This shrine contains the graves of his father, Sayyid Mohammad Shah, his mother, brother and sister, surrounded by a retaining wall.

The tomb is open to pilgrims every day of the week. However, the two most popular times to visit the tomb are before or after Thursday night, Friday morning prayers or Friday nights. The ritual devotions paid by pilgrims at the tomb include: praying before approaching the tomb; touching the entrance archway or the grave's base; laying a cloth called *chadar* or garlands on the grave; picking up stones which rest on it to rub over one's body; sitting beside the grave and reading the Qur'an beside the grave. In addition, many pilgrims attach threads or small padlocks to the screen around the grave of Shah Husayn, tie threads to the banyan tree and taste the ash from the fireplace. Before visiting the shrine pilgrims usually purchase *chadars* and garlands, available in the shops around the shrine. The *chadars* are for the grave whereas the sweets and amulets are for receiving the blessings of either its traditional custodians (the *matwali*) or representative of the Ministry of Religious Affairs. On their way out pilgrims usually make a cash donation to the charity boxes outside each tomb and sometimes contribute animals (usually lambs or goats) to the shrine.

### **Organization of the Shrine**

The traditional social organisation of Barri Imam's shrine is divided between two groups of the *matwalin*. The term usually refers to the administrator of a religious estate. It applies to sixty or seventy families who live around the shrine and claim to be the descendants of Barri Imam's four *Khulafa'*. Before the government intervened they performed many of the functions of a *sajjadah nashin*. They were the recipients of the cash, *chadars* and animals which pilgrims donated to the shrine. One third of the cash obtained were used and the remaining two thirds to run free kitchen for pilgrims and maintenance of the shrine buildings.

Members of *matwali* families also managed most of the stalls in the shopping area from where pilgrims buy *chadars* and garlands for the grave. The *matwali* also practised spiritual counselling on a rather smaller scale. Traditionally the *matwali* were organized by a council composed of sixteen men, equally divided between the Shi'ite and the Sunni families. The leadership of the council alternated between the members of either sect. In all these activities the *matwali* of the shrine clearly resembled the *Pirzadah* of Nizam-al-din. The crucial difference lay in their inability to establish a regular clientele of spiritual disciples (*murids*). Einzmann records only two rites in which the *matwali* could create *murids*. In the first case, if a son were born as a result of a prayer to the saint he would be brought to the shrine to have his hair cut on one side. A *matwali* would keep the hair and the boy would become his pupil. His parents would then make annual contributions to the shrine, which the son would continue when he came of age. In the second case, if a boy wished to become a servant *baalka* of the shrine, a *matwali* would shave all his facial hair, pierce his ear with a ring and give him a bowl with which to beg for forty days. The initiate would also take a vow to perform a daily program of prayer. In all these respects the servant comes to resemble a *qalandar*. In both these forms of initiation, the boy forms a bond with the *matwali* who performed the rite, but he is considered a *murid* of the shrine. Particularly striking is the right of a boy initiated as a servant to perform the same ceremony for others when he becomes a man. Hence the ability to create *murids* of the shrine in this fashion is not restricted to a hereditary class of *matwali*.<sup>5</sup>

In their descent from Barri Imam's four *Khulafa'*, the *matwali* have established a claim to perform many of the duties of a *sajjadah nashin* including the financial benefits. However, they lack the blood tie to the saint required to establish oneself as *pirzadah*. The *Khalifah* descent is insufficient to declare themselves as *pirs*. Furthermore, another traditional authority that contests their claim to the title of *sajjadah nashin* is the *pirs* of Peshawar. This family currently consists of three brothers, Pir

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5. Harold Einzmann, unpublished research report submitted to Deutsche Forschungsgemeinschaft, November 19, 1979.

Sayyid Gouhar 'Ali Shah, Pir Sayyid Zulfikar 'Ali Shah and Pir Sayyid Iftikhar 'Ali Shah, in order of seniority. They trace their blood descent in Peshawar on both sides of their family. Each family has a shrine in its family graveyard that serves as a local place of worship. Each family of *pirs* has its own following of *murids*. The title of *sajjadah nashin* to each family shrine passes to every living brother in order of seniority and then to the eldest son of the eldest brother. Interestingly, Pir Gouhar 'Ali Shah is the *sajjadah nashin* for his maternal family shrine because his father was a younger brother in his family. Therefore, his mother, the only child in the family, inherited the title of *sajjadah nashin*. Their connection with Barri Imam is traced through their maternal great grandfather, or Sayyid Mir Jani Shah, whose shrine is itself the focus of worship in his family graveyard. [They tell the story that Mir Jani Shah felt a command to visit the shrine of Barri Imam and there met a woman, Baba Nawab Sahib, who was treated by Barri Imam as a sister. She informed Mir Jani Shah that Barri Imam had predicted his arrival and had designated him as the *sajjadah nashin* of Barri Imam's shrine. The saint also instructed the family of Mir Jani Shah to carry a particular offering (the *gharoli*) in the closing ceremonies of his 'urs every year. Thus began the participation of the *pirs* of Peshawar in the 'urs].

Clearly the claim of this family to the title of *sajjadah nashin* of the Barri Imam is based on a very tenuous tie of spiritual descent. The importance of the claim lies much more than the financial stake in the license it gives them and their *murids* to play an important role in a major 'urs. This entitlement is all the more valuable because no 'urs is celebrated at the shrine of Mir Jani Shah of which they are incontestably the *sajjadah nashin*.

The *matwali* of Noorpur and the *pirs* of Peshawar constitute the two traditional authorities connected with the shrine of Barri Imam. The *matwali* performed the daily tasks of a *sajjadah nashin* but lacked the spiritual descent to be *pirs*. The *pirs* of Peshawar base their own claims to barkat on their family shrine and gain further prestige by acting as *sajjadah nashin* for Barri Imam once a year during the 'urs. The *pirs* of Peshawar cannot compete with the *matwalin* as *sajjadah nashin* because they live three hundred miles away from the Noorpur and cannot be physically present on the

shrine. The *matwali* cannot compete with the Peshawari's as *pirs*, possibly because they are not Sayyids who can trace their descent to the Prophet. Though both of them do not co-ordinate their activities they clearly benefit from each other; the *matwali* by tending the shrine on which the *pirs* of Peshawar base their prestige; the *pirs* by promoting attendance at the 'urs which vastly increases the receipts of the *matwali*.

The majority of the residents of the village and the *matwali* claim to be the descendants of the four *Khulafa'*. They associate themselves with them either as their *baalkaas* (disciple) or as their *khidmetgaars* (servants). In fact, on the basis of the four *Khulafa'*, the population of the village was divided into four main groups, locally called *patti* (share). The term *patti* is, therefore, the unit of share which the *matwali* of the four *Khulafa'* held in the property and income of the shrine as shareholders. This system of sharing the income of the shrine continued through their descendants. The term *patti* thus came to be regarded as a group of persons who represent a specific number of families belonging to one of the four *Khulafa'*, and the village population was thus divided among the following four *pattis*: *Dewan Shah patti*, *Shah Hussain patti*, *Mithe Shah patti*, and *Inayat Shah patti*.

Out of the four *pattis* two belonged to the Shi'a (Dewan Shahi and Shah Hussain), while the other two were Sunni sects (Mithe Shah and Inayat Shah). The *matwali* in each *patti* were actively involved in increasing the strength of their followers to gain more power and respect in order to advance their sources of income. Therefore, each *patti* was given a specified sphere in which to carry on their activities and collect *nazranahs* (gifts). For example, the area of Azad Kashmir was given to Dewan Shah *patti* and Shah Hussain *patti*; the area of Potohar was reserved for Mithe Shah *patti*; and the Hazara Division was allocated to Inayat Shah *patti*. The *matwali* did not cross each other's boundaries.

The *matwalis* of each *patti* visited their respective areas twice a year, usually during the *haari* (Summer harvesting) and the *sawuni* (winter harvesting). During these visits their followers were supposed to give them donations both in kind and cash. An announcement was thus made that the *matwali* of Barri Imam had

arrived, and those who wish to see him and give donations might meet him. The followers therefore called on him for *du'a* (prayer/blessing) and offered him *nazranahs* (gifts) in cash and kind. In this way they travelled from one village to another, not only to collect *nazranahs*, but also to spread their social and political influence on the population. Following the example of the *matwalis*, the poor people of the village also visited the villages of the specified area in the garb of *baalkas* to collect alms.

When the followers of the four *pattis* visited the shrine of Barri Imam at the time of the annual *urs*, or some other times, they would stay in the house or *sara'i* of their own *matwali*. They bring donations for them, and if some other *matwali* took them by chance or by mistake, these would be returned to the concerned *matwali*. This rule was strictly observed.

At the time of the annual *urs* the visitors stayed in the house or *sara'i* of the concerned *matwali* for 12 days, but they mostly eat their own food or bought it from the village market. At that time thousands of visitors came to the shrine, and the *urs* took the form of a big *mela* (festival/fair) of the Potohar area, as the people after harvesting usually want to enjoy cultural activities.

The District Gazetteer Rawalpindi 1893 described:

The principal religious gathering in this district takes place at Noorpur, a small village at the foot of the Margalla hills, nine miles northeast of Rawalpindi city. There is a shrine of a Mussalman saint, called Barri Imam Latif Shah, which is visited by large crowds at the time of the fair or *mela*. Latif Shah got the name of Barri from his constant wanderings in the forest. The Emperor Bahadur Shah of Delhi is said to have visited Noorpur in the saint's life-time, when some of the buildings were erected. The fair now takes place on each Thursday in the month of *Jeth* (May-June); originally in Latif Shah's time it was in December. Many persons come to it from Peshawar, and in *Phagan* (February-March) the *faqirs* of the shrine in their turn visit Peshawar, where they are much thought of. About 20,000 persons attend the fair annually, a large number of *natch* girls always attending. The last Thursday of the month of *Jeth* is the chief day of the fair, which is attended by many Hindus as well as Muhammadans.<sup>6</sup>

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6. *District Gazetteer, Rawalpindi, 1893, pp.80-81*

A local English Newspaper describes about the ‘*Urs* of Barri Imam as follow:

If one forgets for a moment the good man buried in the premises and ignores his tomb, the ambience around the place is the best example of rural-cum-urban *mela* that you can have in the country. The trinket shops, the innumerable eating marts, the wandering minstrels, the drug addicts posing as holy men in green, the incessant sound of *qawwali* music, the *dhamal* which makes you want to join in “all these are facets that pure entertainment is made of. Which goes to show that for the common man so-called indulgence in spirituality is boring and dry as dust without the lowbrow spice of patently unspiritual amusement.”<sup>7</sup>

The ownership and the proprietorship of a large estate and their political alliance with the neighbouring influential persons made these *matwalis* an important economic and political force in the area. The extended kinship and *baradari* system that characterizes social organization made their kin become beneficiaries of this economic and political status. Through inter-marriage and social alliance with other landlords of the area they came to constitute the core of a society, occupying a dominant position in its social structure. This structural position made them an important force wielding enormous political, economic and spiritual influence over large number of their disciple who resided primarily in the surrounding villages.

Such type of cultural and social influence that the shrine and the *matwalis* exerted on their disciples attracted the attention of the ruling class.

To undercut the political power of both the hereditary Pir families (the *sajjadah nashins*) and the ulema, Mohammad Ayub Khan the President of Pakistan initiated a new administrative policy in 1959, a policy that was continued and extended by Z.A. Bhutto and Zia-ul-Haq. The West Pakistan Waqf Properties Ordinance of 1959 (All Pakistan Legal Decision 1959) gave the government the power to take direct control over and to manage shrines, mosques, and other proprieties dedicated to religious purposes.

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7. *Frontier Post*, Peshawar, November 8, 1991.



### **State Administration of the Shrine:**

The Ministry of Religious Affairs and Minorities, Auqaf (Now the Administrator General Auqaf) Wing, assumed formal control of the shrine in 1976. Since then the Director of Endowments for the Federal Capital is directly administering the shrine. The traditional council of *matwali* has been abolished and their property in the bazaar expropriated by the Capital Development Authority without compensation. This action has been taken under the Auqaf (Federal Control) Act, 1976 which applies to religious endowments across the country, though it has only been applied selectively. The shrines of Barri Imam, his father and Sakhi Dervaish Badsha (in Miana Thumb near Sihala) are the only ones in the entire country, which are directly administered by the Federal Government (the rest are administered provincially). In effect, the Government of Pakistan is now the *sajjadah nashin* of these shrines.

The Ministry has undertaken a clear up campaign at the shrine. Financially this entails restricting most of the *matwali*'s traditional sources of profit. Thus the Ministry has set up collection boxes outside all the tombs of the shrine for the pilgrim's donations. It has also put up signs and broadcast announcements over loudspeakers discouraging the pilgrims from giving money to the *matwali*, *malangs* (religious mendicants) and beggars. The main source of income of the shrine is the *nazarannah* (donations), which the visitors give in cash and kind. There are nine charity boxes placed by the Auqaf Department on the premises. They are locked and sealed by the management. The locks have a set of three separate keys, which are kept one each by the Duty Magistrate, the Bank Manager, and the Manager of the Auqaf Department. The purpose of involving these three officials is to ensure that the donations are properly recorded and maintained.

The boxes are opened weekly from June 1993, one by one, under the supervision of the shrine's Finance Committee and other officials, the cash is counted carefully, and the empty cash boxes are again locked and sealed in their presence. It takes about five to six hours to complete this task. Deposit slips are then prepared and signed by the members, and the amount is deposited in the Muslim Commercial Bank of the Noorpur Shahan, the nearby village.

The purpose of involving different officials in the finance committee of the shrine is to avoid any sort of malpractice. In 1976, a joint secretary in the Ministry of Religious Affairs, who was the overall incharge of the shrine of Barri Imam, describes his experience as follow:

The sealed collection boxes of *nazarana*hs were opened as usual by the Auqaf staff and officials of Habib Bank and the money counted and attested by both. It was about a lakh and twenty thousand. On the way from Noorpur Shahan to the Aabpara branch of Habib Bank the party was waylaid by dacoits who decamped with the money. A police report was immediately made. Fortunately for the department, and unfortunately for the counting people, the dacoits were caught within a couple of hours and the moneybags recovered intact. The amount turned out to be a lac and eighty thousand! It transpired that less counting was the normal thing and the extra amount was shared by the two parties.<sup>8</sup>

There are two other sources of income, the contracts that which are given for the safe custody of the footwear of the visitors and the animals offered at the shrine. The overall income from these two sources during the year 1992-93 was above rupees seven lacs. The devotees, as stated above, also offer *chadars* on the shrine and, according to the manager of the Auqaf Department, they get 600-700 *chadars* every month.

In regard to the annual expenditure at the shrine, the Auqaf staff spends about 27 % of the total income of the shrine on the *Langar*, the salaries of the staff, and the maintenance of the shrine. The remaining income goes to the fund of the Auqaf Department. The official record of the Auqaf Department indicates that during the last decade (1983 to 1993) the income of the shrine increased more than three times. In 1983, it was Rs.20,50,000/- while in 1993 it increased to Rs.6,37,402/-.

It also rents out stall space in the bazaar. The *matwali* continue to secure most of these contracts but they have faced steep price increases due to outside bids and the periodical increases in rent by the Ministry. The religious aspect of the Ministry's clean up campaign entails restricting practices, which it considers un-Islamic. Thus they have evicted the *malangs* and beggars from the

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8. *Ibid.*

main shrine. They have also cracked down on the prostitution for which Barri Imam used to be famous. Women dancers have also been banned. Einzman notes, in the number of male transvestite dancers around the shrine.

To eulogies the services rendered by the saint the President of Pakistan appointed a nine-member advisory committee in 1985. It also includes the Administrator Islamabad and the Chairman Capital Development Authority. In 1990 the Prime Minister appointed an advisory committee headed by a Federal Minister to look after the development program of the shrine. To pay befitting tributes to the saint, the Federal Government has given approval to the 10-year development plan of the shrine. The idea of the building has been derived from the famous saying of "Barri Imam" that a large city of Islam will emerge near his shrine, which will prove a citadel of Islam.