

Conclusion:

Ni‘matullahī Shi‘ite Sufism in Qājār Persia

Between the years 1433 and 1435 Shāh Khalilullāh (d. 1455) (Shāh Ni‘matullāh’s only son and successor) left Persia for India. He left his son, Mīr Shams al-Dīn Muḥammad, in charge of the order in Persia.¹ By the end of the 16th century, after decades of oppression by the Safavids, the appearance of the Ni‘matullāhī order waned and it became gradually removed from the Persian socio-religious scene.² Around the year 1776 Ma‘šūm ‘Alī Shāh came to Persia for the revival of Ni‘matullāhī Sufism.³ For a couple of centuries there had been no Ni‘matullāhī masters among the Persians to guide the people, and consequently Persian society had become estranged from the Ni‘matullāhī Sufi tradition and its beliefs.⁴ The Ni‘matullāhī masters had resided in India where they themselves had also become estranged from the Persian religious and social milieu for many centuries. Although the Ni‘matullāhī order had strong ties to the Shi‘ite Imāms and Shi‘ite mysticism,⁵ Ni‘matullāhī masters in India were not familiar with the seminary system of Shi‘ism, for it was before the formation and importation of Shi‘ite clerics from Lebanon⁶ into Persia that the Ni‘matullāhī masters had migrated to India.⁷ Whilst in India, although they kept their contact with Ni‘matullāhī initiates in Persia, they did not maintain any relations with the Shi‘ite seminary schools. During this period the Shi‘ite clerics did not feel threatened by the Ni‘matullāhī masters in India, as there was no growth in the number of Ni‘matullāhī initiates in Persia. This all changed when Riḍā ‘Alī Shāh decided to send his deputies to Persia for the revival of the order and to look after the spiritual needs of the initiates.⁸ The most important and crucial of Riḍā ‘Alī Shāh’s deputies was Ma‘šūm ‘Alī Shāh, who entered Persia looking like a wandering dervish⁹ to begin the movement for the revival of the Ni‘matullāhī order in Persia.

The animosity between the ‘people of the exoteric Law’ (*ahl-i sharī‘a*) and the Sufis (*ahl-i ṭarīqa*) was not a sudden incident in the intellectual

history of Islam. From the very first generations of Sufism Sufis faced criticism and persecution by sharia-minded scholars of Islam, whether Sunni or Shi'ite. Therefore, Ma'sūm 'Alī Shāh was aware of possible opposition to Sufism from the exoteric clerics in Persia. However, as stated above, although Ma'sūm 'Alī Shāh was familiar with Persian culture, he was not familiar with the Shi'ite seminary schools of Persia. When he appeared in Persia, these schools had suffered a great decline in power as a consequence of the fall of the Safavid dynasty in the early 18th century. After a long intermission, Shi'ite clerics were now regaining their power,¹⁰ becoming influential figures in Persian society, and they were therefore tremendously protective of their status. The revival movement of Ni'matullāhīs in Persia, the burgeoning of Dhahabī Sufi activities, and the presence of wandering dervishes constituted a challenge for Shi'ite ulama with their legalistic preoccupations.

Shi'ite clerics were well aware of the chaotic and unstable political situation in Persia, which was due to the constant battles between the Afshār, Zand and Qājār tribal leaders. The Afshār and Zand kings (1148-1209/1750-1794) ruled for but a short period of time in comparison with the reign of the Qājār dynasty (1209-1304/1795-1925). Each king and ruler had his own distinctive relationship with the Shi'ite clerics. Nādir Shāh (r. 1736-1747) was known to be more compassionate towards the Sunni Muslims,¹¹ and yet he revered the Shi'ite Imāms and rebuilt the Shrine of Imām 'Alī in Najaf.¹² Karīm Khān Zand (r. 1751-1779) viewed the religious scholars who received financial support from the state as parasites on society.¹³ Therefore, the position of the office of religious ministry (*mullā bāshī*) was unstable during his reign and Shi'ite seminary scholars did not have a secure position as a bureaucratic class within the state. Accordingly, Shi'ite clerics spent a great deal of effort on forming a hierarchical clerical system independent of the state.

The Shi'ite clerics developed their own independent financial system, which was supported by religious taxes, offerings and revenues received from religious endowments (*awqāf*). Their financial independence made them intolerant of any challenges, so their religious opponents or rivals were freely persecuted. The reliance of the Qājār king, Fath 'Alī Shāh, on foreign countries limited his reaction to Christian missionaries entering Persia. Due to the close relationship between Fath 'Alī Shāh and the Shi'ite seminary scholars, the king moderated the Shi'ite clerics' reaction to Christian missionaries. Were it not for his restraint, the Shi'ite clergy would have reacted much more harshly to the Christian missionaries than simply writing refutations of them. The clerics encouraged people to avoid contacting the Christian missionaries so as to be safe from Satanic temptations. How-

ever, in certain cases the Shī'ite ulama's behaviour towards rank-and-file Muslims, who did not believe in the Shī'ite Uṣūlī system of thought, was much harsher than that towards non-Muslims. These Muslim minorities were viewed as both apostates and rivals of Shī'ite Uṣūlism. The Akhbārī scholars, whose theological beliefs led them to be far less domineering over the religious lives of the Shī'ites, were severely persecuted by Uṣūlī scholars. As a consequence, the Uṣūlī clerics were able to chase the Akhbārīs altogether out of the Shī'ite seminary system in Persia.

They had similar harsh confrontations with the Sufis as well. Āqā Muḥammad 'Alī Bihbahānī, the son of Muḥammad Bāqir Bihbahānī (known as 'reviver of Uṣūlism' for his persecution of and quarrels with the Akhbārīs), championed the persecution of Sufis by Uṣūlī scholars. The Shī'ite clerics diligently campaigned against Sufis and did not let the state intervene in these matters. Āqā Muḥammad 'Alī Bihbahānī self-righteously believed it was his religious obligation to chastise the Sufis, and his bias resulted in his murdering a number of Sufi masters without any consultation with the state authorities. There were also many influential figures from the royal court, like Ibrāhīm Khān, who supported scholars like Bihbahānī.

Thus, when Ma'sūm 'Alī Shāh came to Persia with the mission to revive the Ni'matullāhī order, the Shī'ite clerics, despite their relative decline, still held vast influence within Persian society. Ma'sūm sought meritorious people to train for the spiritual guidance of Persians. Most of the Ni'matullāhī masters who were initiated and spiritually guided by Ma'sūm were of Persian descent. Nūr 'Alī Shāh was originally from Khurāsān and grew up in Isfahan. Muẓaffar 'Alī Shāh and Mushtāq 'Alī Shāh were from Kirmān. Ḥusayn 'Alī Shāh was from Isfahan, Majdhūb 'Alī Shāh from Hamadān, and Mast 'Alī Shāh from Shirwān. In this manner, most of the disciples whom he spiritually trained for the revival of the Ni'matullāhī order were Persian. The fact that the future masters of the Ni'matullāhī order were Persian and thus more familiar with the social, political and religious milieu of Persia provided great benefits for the revival of the order there. Most of the future leaders of the order also belonged to families of Shī'ite clerics. Nūr 'Alī Shāh, Ḥusayn 'Alī Shāh and Majdhūb 'Alī Shāh were Shī'ite clerics who had studied in seminary schools.

Ma'sūm 'Alī Shāh appeared as a wandering dervish propagating 'intoxicated Sufism' for the revival of the Ni'matullāhī Sufi order. His disciples, Nūr 'Alī Shāh and Mushtāq 'Alī Shāh, also wandered and wore dervishes' garments. They propagated the Ni'matullāhī order by singing mystical poetry while giving voice to ecstatic utterances (*shaṭḥīyāt*). Because this

movement was based on intoxication and a loving relationship with God, it attracted numerous Persians of a mystical bent who were dissatisfied with Uṣūlī rigidity in terms of following sharia. Seminary Shi'ite scholars grew anxious about the increasing number of Ni'matullāhī converts.

Of course, the writings of Ni'matullāhī masters of that era ridiculed, to some extent, the orthodox Shi'ite scholars. Some of the poetry written by Nūr 'Alī Shāh made sarcastic comments about the exoteric scholars. The scholarly writings of Majdhūb 'Alī Shāh criticised hardline Shi'ite seminary scholars who did not pay attention to the inner meanings of religion. He put strong emphasis on the correct inner character of the scholars because he believed it was this that alone qualified them as religious scholars. However, Ni'matullāhī masters did not denounce Islamic law but focused on the need to combine following the *sharī'a* with inner practices of religion (*ṭarīqa*). The role of Ni'matullāhī masters as spiritual guides to the inner aspect of religion was a direct challenge to the authority of Shi'ite clerics. As a result, the Shi'ite clerics were intolerant of the Ni'matullāhī Sufis and confronted them with harsh criticism and opposition and instigated anti-Sufi campaigns against them.

Among them was Āqā Muḥammad 'Alī Bihbahānī, who was the most influential figure in these movements and whose staunch support of the anti-Sufis campaign resulted in the murder of Sufis like Ma'ṣūm 'Alī Shāh and Mushtāq 'Alī Shāh. In the beginning, Ni'matullāhī masters resisted the persecution of Shi'ite clerics. However, as the clerics' persecution became much harsher, the Ni'matullāhī masters became aware that the Shi'ite clerics' opposition could prevent the revival movement from spreading and could, in fact, destroy the entire order. Therefore, they introduced reforms during the time of Ma'ṣūm 'Alī Shāh which reached their peak during the time of Ḥusayn 'Alī Shāh, Majdhūb 'Alī Shāh and Mast 'Alī Shāh. Ma'ṣūm 'Alī Shāh and Nūr 'Alī Shāh commanded Ḥusayn 'Alī Shāh to continue wearing his traditional garments of the Shi'ite clerics and to continue teaching and preaching in seminary schools and mosques. In this manner, Ni'matullāhī masters actively propagated the Ni'matullāhī beliefs within the seminary school system. In so doing, they were able to attract some of the Shi'ite clerics to enter the order. All of these changes represented necessary evolutionary reforms of the Ni'matullāh order in order to bring it into conformity with Shi'ite seminary beliefs.

These superficial reforms were necessary for the survival of the Ni'matullāhī order in Persia but did not change the foundational philosophy of the order; rather, its theological and philosophical beliefs conformed to

Shi'ite theology without affecting the substance of its mystical doctrines. Although the reforms reduced the differences and moderated the theological disagreements to a certain extent, theological differences continued to exist. During the spiritual leadership of Ḥusayn 'Alī Shāh, Majdhūb 'Alī Shāh and Mast 'Alī Shāh there was opposition from Shi'ite clerics, but this opposition was much reduced from that which existed during the time of Ma'sūm 'Alī Shāh. From the time of Ḥusayn 'Alī Shāh down to the period when the order's leadership in Persia was transferred to Mast 'Alī Shāh, no one was murdered for being a Sufi. Although there was some humiliation of the Sufis committed by Shi'ite ulama, members of the royal court and the common people generally regarded Ni'matullāhīs positively and much more lenient in comparison to the earlier behaviour of Shi'ite scholars, who believed that Ni'matullāhīs deserved death. The actions of the three masters examined in Chapters Four, Five and Six above as regards Persian society and the Shi'ite clerics who surrounded them were completely in touch with the social, political and religious contexts of the time, which suggests that their seminary background played a crucial role in their apologetic defence of Sufism.

Ḥusayn 'Alī Shāh's Intellectual Contribution to the Ni'matullāhī Order

Ḥusayn 'Alī Shāh became the master of the Ni'matullāhī order after the persecution of Ni'matullāhīs. He was well aware that the order's outward practices and manners had to be reformed in order to moderate the harsh persecution suffered by Sufis from Shi'ite clerics, and that otherwise the Ni'matullāhīs would not survive in Persia.

During the era of Ḥusayn 'Alī Shāh's spiritual leadership, the Qājār king was in need of the Shi'ite clerics' support for his handling of different internal and external problems,¹⁴ and commissioned them into his service.¹⁵ As a result, Shi'ite clerics became increasingly powerful within the social and political milieu of Persia. The king also let the clerics interfere in political matters, which made the Shi'ite clerics more self-centred and ambitious. Their judicial power in social matters became so vast that in certain cases the state would not dare to interfere. The Shi'ite clerics were always quite cautious to ensure that there would be no sympathy felt towards Sufism in the royal court, for they were well aware that the Sufis' mystical beliefs potentially presented a challenge to their authority. It often happened that when the king harshly opposed the Sufis, he was praised by Shi'ite clerics.¹⁶

In this tense situation between Uṣūlī clerics and Sufi masters, when Ḥusayn 'Alī Shāh became the leader of the Ni'matullāhī order open conflict between the Shi'ite ulama and Sufi masters came to a head as the Ni'matullāhī masters openly presented their anti-clerical views through their polemical writings. The flame of this fiery campaign against Sufism needed first to subside so as to create an environment that would allow religious dialogue between Sufis and Shi'ite clerics. For the survival of the Ni'matullāhī order Ḥusayn 'Alī Shāh felt that Ni'matullāhīs needed to dissimulate their mystical beliefs for a while and thus let the virulent opposition of the Shi'ite clergy settle down.

Ḥusayn 'Alī Shāh did not propagate Sufism openly but only to his own circle of companions. Any practice that distinguished his disciples from mainstream Shi'ism was abandoned by Ḥusayn 'Alī Shāh. He never announced publicly that he was practising 'Sufi invocation' (*dhikr*), so no one ever became suspicious that he was a Sufi. He ordered his disciples not to close their eyes while practising their invocations as a way to disguise their Sufi practices.¹⁷ Even when he was asked about his litanies and extra religious duties, which were a part of his Sufi practices, he would reply that they were prayers he had received from Shi'ite scholars. He behaved in this manner to avoid controversies between Shi'ite seminaries and the Ni'matullāhīs, and practised all of the normal Shi'ite religious duties so that no one would think he was not one of the ordinary Shi'ite clerics.¹⁸

After the return of the order to Persia, Ḥusayn 'Alī Shāh was the first Ni'matullāhī master not to wear the dervish's garment. Instead, he wore the garment of Shi'ite clerics and he was very cautious in distinguishing his order from wandering dervishes, although he did not openly propagate Sufism and he did not let wandering Sufis participate in his sessions. He was against those Sufis who did not follow the exoteric laws of Islam (*shari'a*). He was the first Ni'matullāhī master in Persia to reject the libertinism of Sufis and the wandering dervishes, a custom which his successors, Majdhūb 'Alī Shāh and Mast 'Alī Shāh, continued to follow. He emphasised the prominence of the exoteric aspects of religion and society over the esoteric aspects.¹⁹ However, he emphasised following the exoteric and esoteric aspects together.

Ḥusayn 'Alī Shāh was a member of the Shi'ite clerical class, and his ancestors had also been members of Shi'ite seminaries. His grandfather, Shaykh Zayn al-Dīn, was a well-known Shi'ite scholar in Isfahan. As already mentioned, being a member of a family of Shi'ite clerics as well as belonging to the class of seminary scholars gave his family a certain prestige within the religious milieu of Persia.

Ma'şūm 'Alī Shāh was well aware of being excluded from the class of Shi'ite clerics and there were no signs to indicate that he had any inclination to create a relationship with them. His exotic appearance as a wandering dervish from India did not in any way allow him the chance of creating a dialogue with the Shi'ite clergy of Persia. However, he did train Ḥusayn 'Alī Shāh to pursue a relationship with the clerics. Ḥusayn 'Alī Shāh always accompanied Ma'şūm 'Alī Shāh, who encouraged him to reside in Shi'ite seminary schools instead of Sufi lodges due to his noble religious background and his seminary education. Ma'şūm also encouraged Ḥusayn 'Alī Shāh to continue teaching in seminary schools and leading the communal prayers in mosques,²⁰ and in this fashion Ma'şūm prepared Ḥusayn 'Alī Shāh to establish good relations with the clerics.

Ḥusayn 'Alī Shāh was not completely immune from the harsh opposition of Shi'ite seminary scholars. Even though he dissimulated his Sufi beliefs, some of his disciples were philosophers and followers of Mullā 'Alī Nūrī, a Shi'ite philosopher who became jealous of Ḥusayn 'Alī Shāh. He wrote letters to well-known, high-ranking Shi'ite jurists and asked for their opinion on Sufism. He was successful in motivating Shi'ite jurists and influential figures to turn against Ḥusayn 'Alī Shāh. For example, Ḥāj Ḥusayn Khān Marwī, the protector of Shi'ite jurists (*fuqahā*), turned the king (Fath 'Alī Shāh) against Ḥusayn 'Alī Shāh by bringing his attention to the Sufi masters' so-called claim to kingship. The shah ordered him to the royal court in a most humiliating manner, but later regretted his anger and summoned him more politely.²¹ This conflict between Mullā 'Alī Nūrī and Ḥusayn 'Alī Shāh illustrates that this was not a good time to start a dialogue between Sufis and Shi'ite clerics, as it could result in the weakening of the order in Persia.

Ḥusayn 'Alī Shāh's intellectual contribution to Sufism was meagre. However, he trained a number of disciples from the ranks of Shi'ite ulama, including Majdhūb 'Alī Shāh and Mullā Muḥammad Riḍā Hamadānī, known as Kawthar 'Alī Shāh. Kawthar 'Alī Shāh was more of a seminary preacher and jurist than a defender of Sufism. His contribution to the intellectual and literary work of his period can be found in his 'Riposte to Padri', his essay in refutation of the Christian missionary, Henry Martyn, known as Paderi. The social and political crisis in Persia created many opportunities for Christian missionaries to enter the land and proselytise. Most of these missionaries were from England or France, countries to which the royal court was in debt, so the royal court avoided any direct interference.²² Christian missionaries became influential in certain areas of Persia, such as Azerbāijān.²³

Henry Martyn was the most well-known and influential Christian missionary who entered Persia during the Qājār era. He came to Persia as an energetic orientalist and wrote tracts in defence of Christianity and in refutation of Islam. He was a polemicist who challenged the Shi'ite scholars. Qājār Persia was a Muslim country, and it had been a long time since there had been any serious conflict between different religions. Religious minorities like Jews and Christians did not dare to get involved in any debates with the influential Shi'ite clerics. Theological differences between 'the people of the book' were not discussed in Shi'ite seminary schools, as these differences had crystallised during the Middle Ages with little new in Muslim-Christian relations. Thus, most of the debates between Martyn and Shi'ite clerics were unsophisticated.

Suddenly however, the danger of Muslims converting to Christianity became a serious matter for Shi'ite clerics, insofar as Martyn's Persian translation of the Gospels created an opportunity for Muslims to become more familiar with the Christian holy book, and some Persians became sympathetic to Christianity.

Henry Martyn's teachings became so well known in Persian society that the royal court even became concerned. Muḥammad Ma'ṣūm Shīrāzī deemed it a calamity (*fitna*) for the Muslim Persian society.²⁴

Refutations of Martyn became part of a literary genre that started as apologetic writings, mostly written by seminary scholars. Among these Ḥusayn ‘Alī Shāh’s is one of the most important and earliest treatises written in refutation of Martyn’s claims about Islam. Though this treatise is short, it was very influential on future writings and, as Shīrāzī has pointed out, became the basis for most of the treatises written later.²⁵

Ḥusayn 'Alī Shāh believed that if one refutes Islam one has refuted all other religions, because the essence of all religion is a light transferred through the prophets. This divine light was perfected through prophets and reached its ultimate perfection in the religion of Islam. Ḥusayn 'Alī Shāh was cautious not to relate himself to Sufism and so he explained the concept of 'Muhammadan Light' without using the term. Ḥusayn 'Alī Shāh's explanation of the 'inimitability of the Qur'ān' starts off in the style of a Shi'ite cleric, before cautiously, bringing in some mystical concepts. He emphasises his belief that Martyn does not understand the real meaning of the Qur'ān because he is not privy to its inner meaning. He uses the same terms used by mystics like Sanā'ī. He describes the Qur'ān as a bride wearing a veil, showing its beauty only to those who are privy to its secrets. Then he explains that only a saint (*walī*) would be able fully to understand

the Qur'ān. However, he does not go into detail about the explanation of sainthood and the secrets of the Qur'ān to avoid any suspicions from Shī'ite clerics.²⁶

In his treatise he clearly emphasises his Shī'ite beliefs. Although he does not condemn Sunnis, he clearly states that the heirs to the Prophet Muhammad are the Shī'ite Imāms. Therefore, his explanation of Shī'ism and Imamate is quite similar to the conventional beliefs prevalent in the contemporary Shī'ite seminary school milieu. He emphasises the importance of Islamic Laws, which the majority of Sufis were accused of disobeying. Contributing to the genre became an important obligation, and most seminary scholars wrote treatises on the 'Refutation of Henry Martyn' (*radd-i padrī*). Besides being one of the first examples of *radd-i padrī* literature, Ḥusayn 'Alī Shāh's treatise is his only surviving text; therefore, it is important for a better understanding of Ni'matullāhī beliefs.

By the end of his life he had established a relative truce between Shī'ite clerics and Ni'matullāhī masters, such that the Shī'ite clerics did not feel any challenge to their authority from Ni'matullāhīs. Since Ḥusayn 'Alī Shāh felt that Persian society was prepared to gain knowledge from and engage in dialogue with Sufism, he trained Shī'ite seminary scholars, among whom Majdhūb 'Alī Shāh became his most important and learned disciple. On his pilgrimage to Karbalā, he sensed that he had accomplished his spiritual mission; he gathered all his disciples and appointed Majdhūb 'Alī Shāh as his successor. About a year later he passed away, and Majdhūb 'Alī Shāh became the sole leader of the Ni'matullāhī order.

Majdhūb 'Alī Shāh's Intellectual Contribution to the Defence of Sufism

As we have seen, Ḥusayn 'Alī Shāh was able to establish a relatively peaceful relationship between Sufis and Shī'ite clerics. As Ḥusayn 'Alī Shāh dissimulated his Sufi beliefs, Shī'ite jurists were hard pressed to find fault with him and his followers. The harsh opposition from Shī'ite clerics to the Sufis now calmed down. Although they still did not accept Sufi beliefs, practices and philosophies, Shī'ite clerics did not vehemently call for public opposition to them either. Society was ready for the smooth re-emergence of Sufism.

Majdhūb 'Alī Shāh wrote numerous books and treatises that illuminate the Ni'matullāhī philosophy and beliefs as befitted his time. His seminary status was different from Ḥusayn 'Alī Shāh's; the latter was more of a preacher, with the experience of preaching for the common people. He

was an ordinary scholar, whereas Majdhūb 'Alī Shāh was a well-versed, distinguished seminary scholar, with a more complete and rigorous seminary background in philosophy and Shi'ite mysticism. He was also the pupil of well-known Shi'ite clerics like Mahdī Narāqī and Mīrzā-yi Qumī, which gave him more prestige among the Shi'ite ulama. He was also well versed in the mystical philosophy of Shi'ism, being familiar with Shi'ite mystics like Mullā Ṣadrā, Fayḍ Kāshānī and Shaykh Bahā'ī.

His seminary background and relatively peaceful attitude to Sufis allowed the Ni'matullāhī order to take a defensive rather than a dissimulative stance. Majdhūb was well aware of the accusations from Shi'ite clerics against Sufism and the conservative beliefs of Persian society; therefore, he defended Ni'matullāhī Sufism in accordance with the social and religious context of the Persian society of his time. Majdhūb 'Alī Shāh was one of the greatest Ni'matullāhī masters during the Qājār era. The order had been in a period of intermission during the leadership of Ḥusayn 'Alī Shāh, as he did not openly have his community perform most Sufi practices. However, Majdhūb 'Alī Shāh took a different position, which revived the order. His conduct was quite different from that of Ma'ṣūm 'Alī Shāh, Nūr 'Alī Shāh, Fayḍ 'Alī Shāh and Mushtāq 'Alī Shāh. He did not base his Ni'matullāhī teachings on emotional considerations (ecstasy, enthusiasm, rapture) but founded an elitist intellectual movement, based on seminary sciences. At the end of his life he dedicated it to writing in defence of Sufism. Most of his writings referred to well-known Shi'ite seminary scholars, Shi'ite philosophers and mystics who were widely accepted in the Shi'ite seminary schools, or at least known as part of Shi'ite culture. Instead of wearing the garb of a wandering dervish, he always wore the traditional robes of other Shi'ite clerics; however, he did not conceal his Sufi tendencies and he propagated his mystical beliefs. Under his leadership, the Ni'matullāhī order flourished.²⁷ Mast 'Alī Shāh claims that he was similar to Ṣadr al-Dīn Qunawī and Shāh Ni'matullāh Walī in the development of Sufi doctrine. Though Mast 'Alī Shāh may have exaggerated, he was correct to a certain extent. Majdhūb 'Alī Shāh was like Ṣadr al-Dīn Qunawī in that he tried to revive Akbarian philosophy outside the seminary and within the Sufi orders, and like Shāh Ni'matullāh he tried to restore the Ni'matullāhī order in Persia.

Religious sciences are divided into two parts in the traditional seminary school curriculum: the rational and the traditional. Ḥusayn 'Alī Shāh's position leaned towards the traditional sciences; however, he used rational methods in his treatise and relied heavily on the Qur'ān and traditional nar-

rations about the life of the Prophet and the Imāms. Majdhūb 'Alī Shāh was more of a thinker who relied on the rational sciences. He wrote glosses on marginal interpretations of Bāghūnawī on the *Muḥkamāt* of Quṭb al-Dīn Rāzī, which was more of a philosophical than a Sufi work. Although he was known to be an Uṣūlī jurist, he made references to Akhbārī scholars on different jurisprudential issues, showing his vast knowledge of seminary Shī'ite jurisprudence and its historical background.²⁸ He was proud of his seminary qualifications, and frequently mentioned that he was permitted by Qumī to issue religious verdicts (*fatwā*).

Majdhūb 'Alī Shāh openly held his Sufi sessions, although they did not have any loud vocal remembrance accompanied by music. He had his own disciples who accompanied him, and he did not forbid them openly to practise Sufism contrary to Ḥusayn 'Alī Shāh's practice. His open practise and propagation of Sufism led to the harshly written treatises of opposition from seminary Shī'ite scholars. However, their opposition became more moderate for a few reasons. First, the Ni'matullāhīs had already adjusted their practices to fit in better with mainstream Shī'ism. Second, a period of time had elapsed under the mastership of Ḥusayn 'Alī Shāh, during which the Ni'matullāhīs had interrupted their public appearances to calm down their fundamentalist clerical opponents. Third, the seminary knowledge of Ḥusayn 'Alī Shāh and Majdhūb 'Alī Shāh brought their Sufi thinking more respect from among the religious elites.

Majdhūb's social status also helped him to propagate Sufism. He came from the nobles of his tribe, his ancestors being respected elders of the Qarāguzlūw tribe and, as they were chief commanders of their district, were well known in the area. It has been reported that as a result of his influence his grandfather became a trustee of Karīm Khān.²⁹

Majdhūb claims that he was the pupil of Muḥammad Bāqir Bihbahānī, who was known as the reviver of the Uṣūlī School. All of his seminary teachers were members of the Uṣūlī school of Shī'ism; however, one can find some similarities between his philosophical and seminary beliefs and those of the Akhbārī school. He also refers to Akhbārī scholars with mystical tendencies, for example, the first Majlisī, Fayḍ Kāshānī and Mullā Sālīḥ Māzandarānī. There are certain subjects which clearly distinguished Majdhūb from a mainstream Shī'ite thinker.

The subject of 'imitation' (*taqlīd*) was one of the major disagreements between the two schools of the Uṣūlīs and Akhbārīs. Akhbārīs are known for their rejection of *taqlīd*. The Akhbārīs hold the belief that Shī'ites must imitate their Imāms, and it is not permissible to imitate a mujtahid.

Therefore, the only use of Shiʿite seminary scholars in the Akhbārī school was their knowledge of narrating the traditions of Shiʿite Imāms.³⁰ They restricted the authority of scholars to the area of jurisprudence and Shiʿite tradition. As Arjomand had stated, this view clearly challenged the authority of the mujtahids.³¹ There were others in Persian society who challenged the authority of Uṣūlī scholars and they were vehemently persecuted.

The Akhbārī doctrine was adopted by some scholars who leaned towards Sufism and by Shiʿite Sufis like Muḥammad Taqī Majlisī and Mullā Muḥsin Fayḍ Kāshānī. These mystics became members of the Akhbārī school as well, as their books indicate how important the traditions narrated by Shiʿite Imāms were. They were against rational striving in terms of *ijtihād* and pure philosophical speculation, and instead emphasised a ‘non-rational’ approach to religion and developed an intuitive philosophy. This intuitive philosophy was based on contemplative intuition (*kashf*) and mystical sciences. Many Akhbārī scholars adopted a mystical lifestyle or they expressed interest in Sufi sciences, because such beliefs could be easily assimilated into Akhbārī beliefs. Certain Akhbārī scholars adopted Sufi philosophical beliefs and applied them to Akhbārī doctrines.³²

Majdhūb was well aware that if he opposed the Uṣūlī system and showed his sympathy towards the Akhbārī movement he would face harsh opposition; therefore, he avoided showing any opposition to the Uṣūlī school and took a middle-of-the-road position between the two schools. He relied heavily on Muḥammad Taqī Majlisī and Mullā Muḥsin Fayḍ Kāshānī, both of whom were well respected in Uṣūlī seminaries. He avoided explaining his belief about imitation and referred to Muḥammad Taqī Majlisī. Majlisī had taken the middle path; he was neither suspicious of ulama nor did he believe them to be the perfect leaders of the community; he also knew they could not be imitated.³³ By referring to Majlisī, Majdhūb limited the authority of Shiʿite clerics to the branches of religion (*furūʿ al-dīn*), such as the responsibility for the instruction of spiritual remembrance. He clearly stated that the imitation (*taqlīd*) of a mujtahid in matters of faith was not permitted.³⁴

Majdhūb also introduced the term ‘knowers of the narrated traditions’ from the Prophet and Shiʿite Imāms (*ʿarīfīn ḥadīth*).³⁵ There were some qualifications for these knowers, the most important being that they could not simply narrate the traditions but had to know the traditions by heart. The master who had received the Lights of the Prophet and Shiʿite Imāms became a knower of divinity, and it did not matter whether he was called Sufi or not. The definitions that he gave to the roles of these knowers were

the same definitions of Sufi masters,³⁶ who were immune from making mistakes and they were known for their intuitive knowledge.³⁷

Another qualification for Shī'ite clerics, as Majdhūb explains in detail, is possession of the 'divine faculty'. He divides Islamic scholars into three groups. The first group is those who had direct knowledge (gnosis, *ma'rifa*) of God but do not have any exterior knowledge of Islamic sciences. The second group is those who do have knowledge of exterior Islamic sciences but do not have any knowledge of God in their hearts. The third group is those who have both. Certainly, the third group is superior to the rest; however, when he compares the first and second groups, he clearly suggests that the first group is those Sufis who did not have knowledge of seminary sciences, while the third group is the spiritual pole (*quṭb*) of its time, which is a Sufi term.³⁸ Later on, he indirectly concludes that the real scholars are those in whom the Divine Light has extinguished their carnal passions, and as such these scholars cannot be corrupted.³⁹ He concludes that the true jurist must have spiritual insight.

Majdhūb's philosophy in this respect was highly influenced by Fayḍ Kāshānī and Majlisī, sharing with them his Sufi beliefs as interpreted through mystical Shī'ite philosophy, which he relates to the philosophical Shī'ite schools of thought. He also refers to traditions from Imām Ḥusayn and Imām Riḍā in order to legitimise his claims and to be immune from persecution by Shī'ite clerics. When he challenges the authority of Shī'ite clerics, he does so in sophisticated scholarly language, referring to Shī'ite traditions and well-respected scholars.

Ḥusayn 'Alī Shāh's manner towards practising 'Sufi invocation' (*dhikr*) was different from Majdhūb 'Alī Shāh's. During Majdhūb's leadership of the order, Sufi practices emerged from the closet. Majdhūb openly held Sufi invocation sessions and all of his disciples practised them. Sufi invocation was a practice foreign to the Shī'ite tradition; however, Majdhūb more or less introduced this practice to Shī'ism. He taught that the invocation and remembrance of God is the purpose of creation and that every human being is obliged to practise it.⁴⁰ Majdhūb was highly influenced by Sufi master Najm al-Dīn Rāzī's explanation of Sufi invocation, which he applied to the Shī'ite tradition. He legitimised Sufi invocation by referring to the Qur'ān and to Shī'ite traditions.⁴¹ Majdhūb refers to many Shī'ite traditions as a way to avoid opposition from Shī'ite clerics, since the Sufi way of practising invocation had become a subject of criticism among Shī'ite clerics.

However, Majdhūb condemned 'vocal invocation' (*dhikr-i jalī*) because it was known to be practised by Naqshbandī Sufis. The Naqshbandīs were

known as a staunch Sunni Sufi order at the time and, in certain cases, Majdhūb distanced himself from them. Majdhūb did not deny that some Sufis practised vocal invocation, but he did not believe that the Shi'ite Imāms did so; therefore, it was not part of the Shi'ite tradition, and thus implicitly he confirmed that the 'silent invocation' (*dhikr-i khafī*) was a part of Shi'ite culture and that Sufi invocation by extension was also part of authentic Shi'ite tradition. He believed that the fourth and sixth Imāms of Shi'ism praised the 'silent invocation' when referring to their traditions.⁴²

In Shi'ite-Sufi culture the masters were only appointed through spiritual permission. Although they were different in certain ways, the masters were important spiritual guides. Within the Shi'ite tradition many mystically-minded Shi'ite scholars and Sufi masters knew how important it was to have a spiritual guide.

Majdhūb understood that there were different types of Sufi invocations which were not in the books and that the invocations had been transmitted by oral means through the spiritual permission of the saints, saints who were the intermediaries between the human and divine worlds.⁴³ He explains that novices had to have complete reliance on their guides (*shaykh*), without using the term Imām. His explanation of the importance of spiritual guides was more of a Sufi than Shi'ite explanation. However, after this explanation he indicates that the *shaykh* was illuminated by the light of Shi'ite Imāms.⁴⁴ He believes that the saints must receive their spiritual initiation through Shi'ite Imāms. For Majdhūb, Sufi orders that are not derived from Shi'ite Imāms are not genuine. In his writings he draws on compilations of authentic Shi'ite traditions such as the *Biḥār al-anwār* and *Uṣūl al-Kāfī* to explain the importance of the spiritual guide,⁴⁵ explaining that there are different terms used for 'faithful': Sufi, Faqīr, Shi'ite and Darwīsh.⁴⁶ In doing so he does not distinguish between the Sufi and the Shi'ite.

Majdhūb condemned Shi'ite scholars for excommunicating Sufi masters, which he judged was done because of their lack of knowledge about Sufism and its masters. Those clerics who excommunicated Sufi masters acted contrary to both reason and tradition. Majdhūb did create conformity between some of the Sufi practices and Shi'ism, which was not accepted by Shi'ite clerics. The practice of Sufi invocation (*dhikr*), monasticism and contemplative vigilance (*murāqaba*) are examples of Sufi practices that Majdhūb considers to be part of the Shi'ite tradition.

Another great contribution that Majdhūb made to the intellectual and theological milieu of Persia was his elaboration of Akbarian philosophy. He followed the path of earlier Shi'ite Akbarian philosophers and elaborated

on the philosophy of the Unity of Being. From the time of Shāh Ni'matullāh the Ni'matullāhī Sufi order was known for propagating this doctrine. However, due to the harsh criticism of the Shi'ite clerics, Majdhūb was cautious when explaining this philosophy through the traditions of Shi'ite Imāms and famous Shi'ite scholars.

Majdhūb was well aware of the corrupt beliefs among some of the followers of this philosophy and kept himself aloof from the doctrines of union [of man and God] (*ittiḥād*) and incarnationism (*ḥulūl*). Majdhūb is among the very few scholars of his time who elaborated on the practical and theological aspects of Sufism, such as the Unity of Being doctrine that he both learned in the seminary school and inherited from the Ni'matullāhī tradition. There is no doubt that he was highly influenced by Shi'ite mystics like Fayḍ Kāshānī and Nūrullāh Shushtarī, who were well respected among the seminarians. However, he did not just focus on the theological aspects of this philosophy, he also elaborated on the importance of the masters. He tried to prove that this philosophy did not contradict Shi'ism but that it was, indeed, the reality of Shi'ism.

Majdhūb believed that there were certain groups among the scholars of Shi'ism whose beliefs and philosophies deviated from the reality of Shi'ism. He held that scholastic theologians (*mutakallimūn*) who tried to prove the existence of the Creator through the material world had gone astray. However, he did not refute any philosophers and theosophers, but used the term pseudo-philosophers (*mutifalsifa*) to refer to them.⁴⁷ He clearly indicated that philosophy was a path full of dangers, whereas the way of Sufism was more reliable since it was grounded in direct unification.⁴⁸

As well, Majdhūb acknowledged that there were heretical Shi'ite sects as well as heretical Sufis. He asserted that the Zaydiyya, Faṭḥiyya, Wāqifiyya, Kaysāniyya and Nāwūsiyya were among the non-Imamate Shi'ites and, since they rejected one of the necessities of Islam (the love of Imāms), they were infidels.⁴⁹ Majdhūb's definition of a real Shi'ite reads more like a definition of the true Sufi, a definition in which he uses Sufi terminology. Majdhūb argues that the Shi'ites must not be proud of their beliefs, that they must stay in between the two states of fear and hope (*khuwf wa rajā'*), which is the attribute of people of faith. According to him, if fear dominates a person it will cause hopelessness, and if hope prevails it will cause one to think one can avoid Divine punishment. In this ethical sense, he does not distinguish between the Sufi and the Shi'ite. His explanation of the real Shi'ite as being the real Sufi was highly influenced by Āmulī.⁵⁰ Majdhūb asserted that all of the Shi'ite Sufis were innocent of the erroneous beliefs of pseudo-Sufis,

and that the great Sufis masters like 'Aṭṭār, Rumi and Sanā'ī were part of an authentic Shi'ite culture.⁵¹

Majdhūb attributes all of the erroneous beliefs of the Sufis to the Sunni Sufis and rejects any Sufi order that claimed to be derived from the Sunni tradition of Islam. He uses different terms for heretical Sufis, such as 'Rejected Sufis' (*taṣawwuf-i radiyya*), 'the evil pseudo-Sufism' (*mutaṣawwifah khabītha*) and 'pseudo-Sufism' (*mutiṣawwifa*). These terms were used by other Shi'ite Sufi masters prior to Majdhūb to differentiate between real Sufism and pseudo-Sufism. Shi'ite mystics and philosophers during the Safavid era and afterwards who wanted to distinguish themselves from libertine Sufis always differentiated between the terms 'pseudo-Sufi' (*mutiṣawwif*) and Sufi in their treatises.

From the foregoing summary of his ideas it is evident, then, that Majdhūb 'Alī Shāh followed the path of Shi'ite philosophical Sufism. He had been influenced by the Shi'ite philosophers Maytham Baḥrānī and Sayyid Ḥaydar Āmulī before the formation of the school of Isfahan. His propagation of the Ni'matullāhī order, however, was much more systematic than that of Ma'sūm 'Alī Shāh and Ḥusayn 'Alī Shāh. To begin with, he established a philosophical written dialogue with the Shi'ite seminary schools, a dialogue without any prejudice, in which he discussed important theological, jurisprudential and philosophical aspects of Shi'ism. In so doing he revived the Shi'ite-Sufi philosophy of Āmulī and the later followers of the school of Isfahan who had tried to create a reconciliation between Shi'ite theology and Sufi mysticism.

As a thinker, seminary writer, Sufi master and philosopher, Majdhūb's contribution to the literary and intellectual milieu of Persia was vast. He wrote more than 24 treatises with intricately argued philosophical discussions. Some of his treatises (e.g. *Ḥāshīyih bar ḥāshīyih muḥkamāt-i bāghūnawī*) were philosophical ones that revealed his vast knowledge of Islamic theosophy (*ḥikmat*). Others were guides for his followers which promoted a better understanding of the theological beliefs and the esoteric philosophy of Shi'ite Sufism. He wrote numerous treatises in defence of Sufism and in defence of the Akbarian school of thought, writings that mixed practical Sufism with philosophical Sufism and promoted a greater understanding of Akbarian philosophical beliefs among the Shi'ite mystics. In following the more scholastic and philosophical path of Ḥusayn 'Alī Shāh he rejected Sufis who were not part of traditional Shi'ite culture, thus moderating the opposition of Shi'ite clerics to Ni'matullāhī Sufism.

Mast 'Alī Shāh's Intellectual Contribution to the Defence of Sufism

Mast 'Alī Shāh's contribution to the intellectual and literary milieu of Persia was not as vast as or far-reaching as Majdhūb 'Alī Shāh's. While most of his works incorporate the writings of Majdhūb 'Alī Shāh, he did not have the same well-respected seminary religious background. Since Mast 'Alī Shāh was not as knowledgeable as Majdhūb in the seminary sciences, he was subjected to far more pressure and opposition from the Shi'ite clerics. However, he did not adopt a stance of dissimulation in opposition to the Shi'ite clerics. Instead, he continued Majdhūb's apologetic tradition and condemned those scholars who excommunicated Sufis.⁵²

Mast 'Alī Shāh was much more frank and harsh in his apologetic writings compared to Majdhūb, who always tried to veil his philosophical beliefs about the Unity of Being. He asserts that at all times there must be a perfect man for the continuity of the world, who is the living deputy of God on earth, the true prophet, imām or saint. Sufis called this person the Supreme Deputy (*khalīfa-yi a'zam*), Pole of the Poles (*quṭb al-aqtāb*), the Real Human Being (*ādam-i ḥaqīqī*), the Perfect Man (*insān-i kāmīl*) and the First Intellect (*'aql-i awwal*).⁵³ Mast 'Alī clearly emphasised that the Perfect Man was the Shi'ite Imām, who is called the Pole of Poles and whose deputies will take his place during the time of occultation. These deputies are the Sufi saints. Therefore, the Sufis are presented as the true deputies of the Twelfth Imām during the time of occultation. He does not explain the role of Shi'ite clerics in this respect, but it is clear that the role of the saints is far greater in importance.

He divides religion into inner and outer aspects. The exterior part of religion belonged to the exoteric scholars (*'ulamā-yi zāhir*). Mast 'Alī Shāh believed that what the scholars of the exterior did for religion was of mere incidental importance and not a fundamental duty. Whatever explanations were written or given by them was unimportant because it did not culminate in the attainment of gnosis of the self (*ma'rīfat-i nafs*).

Not everyone possessed this esoteric knowledge. Only the Shi'ite Imāms and the gnostic scholars (*'ulamā-yi 'arīf*), who were the knowers of religious injunctions had this knowledge. These scholars were not just narrators of the traditions, but scholars with certitude (*mujtahidān-i ahl-i yaqīn*). He believes that the gnostics (*'urafā-yi muḥaqqiqīn*), with the blessing of Imāms, through their obedience receive the secrets of the religion, although one cannot explain their supreme state. However, the exoteric scholars were unaware of their state because of their deficient perception.⁵⁴ Referring to a

famous tradition that the 'scholars are the heirs of the prophets,' he clearly indicates that the Sufis or gnostics are those heirs and thus superior to the exoteric Shi'ite seminary scholars. This, of course, outraged the latter.

Mast 'Alī Shāh also elaborated on the importance of a spiritual guide during the time of occultation, stating that the common people were not aware of the spiritual guide and so merely followed the path of their ancestors. He declared that one must pray and ask for aid from the blessing of the Prophet and the Imāms to be guided along the path. He also stated that the gnostics (*'arīfān*) and the tried and tested faithful believers (*mu'min mumtaḥan*) were the real guides after the Imāms.⁵⁵

Mast 'Alī Shāh asserts that sainthood is the most important aspect of the Islamic faith and the fruit of the tree of religion. One has to take the oath of allegiance (*bay'at*) to the Imāms because they did so with the Prophet through the medium of Imām 'Alī.⁵⁶ He emphasises that the Twelfth Imām, who is in occultation, appointed some scholars to address the exterior matters of religion, arguing that there had to be also a deputy of the Imām to address the inner part of the religion. This person is a tried and tested faithful believer (*mu'min mumtaḥan*). It is important to note how Uṣūlī scholars asserted their authoritative position over all matters of religion, while Akhbārī scholars did not wish to dominate every small matter in believers' lives. Mast 'Alī Shāh, like Majdhūb 'Alī Shāh, made references to Akhbārī scholars. However, his belief about Uṣūlīs and Akhbārīs was slightly different from Majdhūb's. Mast 'Alī Shāh frankly refuted both schools, referring to traditions that stated that the scholars are heirs of the Prophet. Then he stated that there were three major groups of believers among Shi'ites: the first were *mujtahidīn* (Uṣūlīs), the second were *Akhbārīs*, and third were Sufis, and that the Sufis are superior to the first two groups.⁵⁷

Uṣūlīs believe that the heirs of the Prophet are scholars of high rank with all the conditions needed to be qualified (*mujtahid jāmi' al-sharāyit*). This means that they are well versed in seminary sciences such as jurisprudence, theology and Arabic literature, and that they believe there is no way to salvation other than by following such a scholar. They claim that 'striving' (*ijtihād*) brings a believer religious rewards, even if the mujtahid's striving is wrong.⁵⁸ Akhbārīs believe that the only authentic source of faith is the traditions of the Prophet and that the Shi'ite Imām would guide the people to salvation, while mujtahids only caused confusion within the Muslim community. Mast 'Alī refutes both groups and says that Akhbārīs did not have the power to discern the Divine Reality (*ḥaqīqat ilāhīyya*).⁵⁹ Sufis claim that they follow a master who was the heir of the Prophet through a chain

of spiritual initiation passed through the Imāms. However, it is clear that Mast 'Alī Shāh viewed all the other Sufi orders, Shi'ite or Sunni, as inferior to his own, and in this sense his religious exclusivism appears bigoted to the modern eye.

While most of Mast 'Alī Shāh's treatises are apologetic, they are not heavily laden with references to seminary sciences. Mast 'Alī Shāh was not a mystical philosopher like Majdhūb, but rather he was a Sufi who had inherited some of the seminary sciences from Majdhūb 'Alī Shāh. He was, however, a very frank person and in certain cases far bolder than Majdhūb 'Alī Shāh.

Among the many books he wrote was the *Kashf al-ma'ārif*, a short apologetic treatise. Mast 'Alī Shāh's greatest contributions to the Persian literary milieu are his travelogues in which he explains the cultural, religious, political and social situations of important cities in the Muslim world. These travel diaries are crucial to providing a better understanding of the Persian society of the time. He travelled to many neighbouring countries where he had an opportunity to talk to influential people in religious and political circles. In total, he wrote three itineraries (*Sīyāhat-nāma*): 'The Meadows of Travel' (*Riyāḍ al-Sīyāha*), 'The Walled Gardens of Travel' (*Ḥadā'iq al-Sīyāha*) and 'The Gardens of Travel' (*Bustān al-Sīyāha*).

Mast 'Alī Shāh continued the mission of reviving the Ni'matullāhī order, but due to his frank personality he faced much greater opposition from Shi'ite clerics than did Majdhūb. Nonetheless, he gained fame among some of the influential political people, and the Ni'matullāhī order did flourish during his leadership as a result of his extensive travels to different cities. However, he was not as successful as Majdhūb in attracting seminary scholars to the order in creating a religious dialogue with them.

Ḥusayn 'Alī Shāh, Majdhūb 'Alī Shāh and Mast 'Alī Shāh and Their Battle with Islamic Fundamentalists

Each of the leaders of the Ni'matullāhī Order discussed in this book had different reactions to the Islamic fundamentalists of their era. During the Safavid era Shi'ism became the dominant religion within Persia, but there remained an ongoing struggle between Shi'ite clerics, Sufis and the ruling elites over power and the direction Persian society was to move in in response to foreign pressures and threats. Nādir Shāh and Karīm Khān did not favour Shi'ite clerics, who were less influential in state matters during

their reigns. During the reign of Karīm Khān Zand (1163-1192/1750-1779) wandering Indian dervishes started to migrate to Persia, and organised Sufi orders began to flourish and increase. During this period Riḍā 'Alī Shāh sent his deputies to revive the Ni'matullāhī order. Religious missionaries of different sects became more active, and even Christian missionaries arrived to promote their faith.

It was during this time that the Shi'ite clerics began to regain their diminished social power. Although they had been members of the most influential class of society during the Safavid era, their political power had been challenged during the transfer of power through different dynasties after the fall of the Safavids. Some of the rulers were known for their negative views of Shi'ite clerics. Nonetheless, they were able to create an organised hierarchical office, independent of the state but powerful among the people, and establish an influential system that allowed them to challenge the state—so much so that the state sometimes offered them money for their silence. Because they could not tolerate any challenges to their authority, they became quite exclusivist and intolerant of any religious opinions or sects other than those of their own school.

When Riḍā 'Alī Shāh sent his deputy, Ma'sūm 'Alī Shāh, to revive the Ni'matullāhī order in Persia the only contact he had was with a few disciples living there, who were not deeply acquainted with the social, religious and political milieu of Persia. While they had their own 'Alid beliefs with strong ties to Shi'ite Imams, they were not familiar with the Shi'ite judiciary system. Riḍā 'Alī Shāh and Ma'sūm 'Alī Shāh had no seminary background, for the Shi'ite community in the Deccan was not strong enough to have a well-established Shi'ite clerical system. Ma'sūm 'Alī Shāh's enthusiastic presence in Persia attracted many Persians to the Ni'matullāhī order, among whom were important mystics such as Nūr 'Alī Shāh and Mushtāq 'Alī Shāh, Sufis whose charismatic personalities attracted many Persians. They became well known throughout the country but were not welcomed by the Iranian fundamentalist Uṣūlī Shi'ite clerics of the day.

The Shi'ite mujtahids, who ruled tyrannically over the religious lives of late 18th- and early 19th-century Persians, considered Ma'sūm 'Alī Shāh and his disciples a threat to religion and accused them of deviating from the straight path of Islam. Sufis also challenged the exoteric system of Shi'ite Islam by emphasising a direct experience of God and the futility of worldly matters and sciences. Whereas most of the seminary sciences dealt with religious laws, obligations, duties, transactions and relationships of Muslim daily life, the Sufis preached how individuals can forge a direct relation-

ship with the Divine, so as to bring divine knowledge into the heart of the believer and diminish all other material concerns. Such an individualistic mystical philosophy represented a powerful and direct challenge to the role and authority of the Shi'ite clerics.

Another anxiety felt by the Shi'ite clerics was the unquestioning devotion of Sufi novices and disciples to their masters. Novices and disciples believed that their masters held communion with and had knowledge of the Divine world and so viewed their masters' commandments as religious obligations. This posed another threat to the authority of the Shi'ite clerics, who had only recently re-established a firm foothold over Persian society.

For these and other reasons the Ni'matullāhī revivalist movement faced harsh opposition from many well-known Shi'ite clerics. Āqā Muḥammad 'Alī Bihbahānī spearheaded the campaign against the Sufis. He himself successfully persecuted many Sufis and happily encouraged other Shi'ite clerics and private Persian citizens to persecute them. Consequently, many Ni'matullāhī Sufi masters were forced to flee or lie low and, as detailed above, masters such as Ma'sūm 'Alī Shāh and Mushtāq 'Alī Shāh were murdered by the fundamentalist clerics. The Ni'matullāhī movement found it difficult to survive during these challenging times. As the number of Ni'matullāhī initiates increased in Persia, Riḍā 'Alī Shāh asked Nūr 'Alī Shāh to appoint the future leader of the Order for Persia, and he appointed Ḥusayn 'Alī Shāh, who became the first Persian-born Sufi to become leader of the order. As a preacher and teacher in a seminary school, Ḥusayn 'Alī Shāh was well aware that the Ni'matullāhī order needed to change its direction and find a way to exist within the dominant fundamentalist religious culture of Persian society. Ḥusayn 'Alī Shāh's solution was to practise pious dissimulation, so that the Order effectively went into hiding to escape the persecution and opposition of the Shi'ite clerics. Under his leadership most of the practices indicative of Sufi belief were abandoned. Sufi invocations (*dhikr*) were modified, and his disciples dressed to look like all other people. Ḥusayn 'Alī Shāh did not wear any distinctive Sufi garment and he participated in preaching in mosques and leading public congressional prayers. In this way he calmed Shi'ite opposition. Nonetheless, he was persecuted a few times; but compared to what his prior masters had suffered these were moderate outbreaks.

Majdhūb 'Alī Shāh's approach to the Shi'ite fundamentalists was substantially different. He was a profound thinker and a trained seminary scholar who had a vast knowledge of Shi'ite mystical philosophy and scholastic theology. Majdhūb's strategy for defending Sufism was different from

that of Ma'sūm 'Alī Shāh, Nūr 'Alī Shāh and even Ḥusayn 'Alī Shāh. His audiences came more from the élite part of society, which was well versed in Shi'ite seminary sciences. He was the pupil of several well-known Shi'ite clerics and had built up connections within the Shi'ite seminary school system. He wrote many books in defence of Sufism and about the significance of Sufi mystical philosophy within Shi'ite culture. He voiced many critical points about the qualifications and limitations of Shi'ite clerics. He always adopted the views and sayings of prior Shi'ite Sufis and mystics by emphasising that Sufism and Shi'ism were two different terms for the same belief. Whenever he mentioned Sufi doctrines such as the Unity of Being (*waḥdat al-wujūd*) or the 'Importance of having a spiritual guide (*shaykh*); he would refer to Shi'ite traditions to back up his arguments. Though he was not immune to persecution, he did gain relative respect among certain groups of Shi'ite seminary students and professors. Even some great Shi'ite clerics like Qumī, who were critical of Sufism and considered it 'error' and 'heresy', were not as harsh as Āqā Muḥammad 'Alī Bihbahānī had been. Therefore, Majdhūb was able to establish a relatively firm intellectual and theological framework for the future master of the Ni'matullāhī order, Mast 'Alī Shāh, to propagate his teachings.

Mast 'Alī Shāh suffered more oppression than either Ḥusayn 'Alī Shāh or Majdhūb 'Alī Shāh from the Qājār political establishment and the fundamentalist religious authorities. He wrote and spoke in a frank manner, sometimes openly criticising scholars of the exterior sciences of religion, which was one reason why he was constantly harassed, persecuted and subjected to excommunication judgements (*fatwās*) by his clerical opponents.⁶⁰ And yet he fearlessly mocked these scholars, calling them idiots (*kuwdan*).⁶¹ Mast 'Alī believed that the scholars were taking their vengeance on Sufis out of jealousy. He said, 'Whatever was built by the Safavid kings was destroyed, and dervishes were expelled. They took complete vengeance on Sufis.'⁶²

Mast 'Alī always complained about the oppression and persecution by the scholars in his writings. He sometimes criticised all Muslims. He used the story about a person of spiritual gnosis, a Christian, who built the first Sufi lodge (*khānaqāh*). Then he said, 'Well done, a compassionate Christian; and who are the wicked Muslims, that in the whole country of Īrān there is no place for Sufis and Dervishes?''⁶³ He continually complained about what the people had done to him and to Sufism: '[p]eople of all classes! People of the court! They all put all their powers into harming and persecuting the possessors of hearts [Sufis].'⁶⁴ Though he was summoned to the royal court

and persecuted more often than Ḥusayn 'Alī Shāh and Majdhūb 'Alī Shāh had been, his strong personality attracted influential members of the court. He also faced a schism within the Ni'matullāhī order, yet he attracted a majority of the followers to his side.

In a word, these three masters laid the foundations for the Ni'matullāhī order to flourish in Persian society, carrying forward the movement started by Riḍā 'Alī Shāh. Under their leadership the order evolved from a charismatic popular Sufi movement into a highly sophisticated mystical philosophy followed by élite members of the Persian intelligentsia. As Ata Anzali notes, 'After a couple of decades they gradually came to terms with this new cultural landscape as their masters transitioned the order towards a more conformist and orthodox-friendly one.'⁶⁵ Not only did an élite part of the society become Ni'matullāhīs, but there also emerged a genre of intricately argued Sufi apologies and theological responses to the criticism of the fundamentalist Shi'ite clerics. The efforts of Ni'matullāhī masters who belonged to the scholarly class of seminary scholars, with their knowledge of Shi'ite seminary sciences and wide reading of traditional Sufi classics, managed to turn the direction of the order and refine its teachings and mystical practices in an intellectually sophisticated manner. As Ata Anzali observes, 'Unlike early masters who were either illiterate or less educated, an advanced level of knowledge in exoteric matters through madrasa training was a routine part of later Ni'matullāhī masters' intellectual outlook.'⁶⁶ Since Ḥusayn 'Alī Shāh and Majdhūb 'Alī Shāh belonged to the élite class of Shi'ite seminary scholars, they were able to create a spiritually and intellectually refined mystical theosophy for their followers. Majdhūb's intellectual contribution to Sufism and his apologetic writings created opportunities for Shi'ite scholars to read and hear the intellectual and seminary response of the Sufis who led the initiation of some Shi'ite seminary scholars. These scholars were attracted through the philosophy elaborated by the Ni'matullāhī masters, which had been inherited from pro-Sufi Safavid Shi'ite philosophers such as Fayḍ Kāshānī, Mullā Ṣadrā and Shaykh Bahā'ī.

Today, the differences between the exoteric scholars of seminary sciences and Sufis appear as irreconcilable as ever. Since the arrival of Sayyid Ma'sūm in Persia almost two and a half centuries ago, the differences and disputes between the two camps have only worsened, at least on the public and political levels. The Ni'matullāhī masters' writings, like those of their predecessors of the Safavid period, argued that Shi'ism was the reality of Sufism and that Sufi and Shi'ite were two different names for the same reality. The Ni'matullāhīs were among the very few Sufis of their time who

openly propagated the philosophy of Ibn ‘Arabī within Shi‘ite culture. Their contribution to Persian Shi‘ite culture was vast; and through the reforms introduced by Ni‘matullāhī masters outlined above Sufis became better able to resist the opposition and harassment of the Shi‘ite clerics. By the time of Mast ‘Alī Shāh’s leadership the Ni‘matullāhī order was a very influential Sufi order in Persia and had established a firm foothold within Persian society, where its followers even included members of the royal court and the respected theologians of the seminary madrasa system. One can conclude that the revivalist movement founded by Riḍā ‘Alī Shāh and directed by Ma’sūm ‘Alī Shāh would not have reached its perfection and fruition without the leadership of these three figures, who were largely responsible for re-establishing the Ni‘matullāhī order within Persian society and for its endurance to the present day.