

AN IMAGINARY ASSEMBLY OF SUFI SAINTS: NOTES ON SOME DEVOTIONAL PICTURES FROM INDOPAKISTAN

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Introduction

Among contemporary devotional colour prints venerating Muslim saints in Indo-Pakistan we find a particular composition showing an integrated group of mystics who sit on a low platform or terrace. Whereas many other popular religious posters dating from the twentieth century depicting saints and shrines are distinctly modern in their form and content, the subject in question, an assembly of Sufi saints, has its direct antecedents in Mughal miniature painting. Painters at the royal courts of the Mughals continued the rich iconographic tradition of Iran where illustrations of biographies of the Prophet Muḥammad, hagiographies and works of poetry were common from the fifteenth century onwards. In addition, Islamic painting on the Indo-Pakistani subcontinent received further stimulation from the well-established Hindu tradition of depicting deities, saints and sages.

The idiom of an imaginary scene showing a genealogical table represents a subject of Mughal miniature painting since the time of the emperor Akbar (1556-1605). In the context of their rule, the Mughals developed a special interest in depicting their ancestors to prove the continuity and pride of their dynasty. The devotional paintings, dating from the seventeenth century onwards, with whom we are concerned here, take up this genealogical principle in their composition of an assembly of saints. Generally, in seventeenth century Mughal painting it was popular to depict mystics, sages and religious scholars in a learned discourse.

The essential feature of the eight devotional pictures under discussion here is the depiction of an assembly of Sufi saints (*auliya' Allah*), called in Urdu *mehfil-i auliya'* (assembly of saints) or sometimes also *darbar-i auliya'* (royal court of saints). It bears the character of a *sacra conversazione*, a subject very common in Italian painting at the end of the fifteenth and beginning of the sixteenth centuries. Because the depicted holy men lived between the eleventh and the fourteenth centuries, being therefore only partly contemporaries, this formal assembly is an imaginary one, termed in Urdu a *khayali mehfil*. This type of composition could also be characterized as a “timeless conclave”. It goes without saying that none of the pictures under consideration in the present article reflects any realistic portrait of the depicted saints. The features of the personages are idealized, although individual differentiations are visible and suggest an interest in portraying types.

The integrated group of six Sufis consists of the great mystic Abdul Qadir Gilani, the founder of the Qadiriyya dervish fraternity, who is depicted as the central figure, and of five Chishti saints. The Chishtiyya was the first mystic order on the subcontinent and is the most widely dispersed.

Adherents to South Asian folk Islam explain that our imaginary assembly is ideal in the sense that it is considered to be presided over by God himself. Furthermore the Prophet is thought to be present, too. According to Sufi thinking, the saints who are assembled in the presence of God reflect an aspect of unity (*tauhid*): they are united in the reality of God and point to their existence in the absolute “ocean of unity”.

In its visualized form, the assembly is clearly structured by the saintly hierarchy: Abdul Qadir Gilani, the great saint of Baghdad, stands out on account of his spiritual position. As the *qutb* (lit. axis) he embodies the highest spiritual authority. One particular aspect associated with the *qutb* in Islamic mysticism is the idea that he presides over an imaginary

assembly of saints, called *diwan batini* in Sufi terminology, who resolve all visible and unvisible affairs of the world. Finally, the five Chishti saints are grouped according to the genealogical relationship within their order beginning with the founder Mu'in ud-Din Chishti (12th/13th c.) and ending with one of his later successors Nizam ud-Din Auliya' (13th/14th c.), thereby representing a *silsila* (chain of succession). In Punjab and North India these Sufi saints are sometimes also venerated as the panch pir (lit. five saints), a common term for a group of five holy men whose composition varies from region to region.¹

Sufi saints in a “timeless conclave”

Before briefly introducing the six Sufi saints with their names, titles and scraps of biography, it has to be emphasized that the same pattern of composition has been used in each of the devotional pictures under consideration (figs. 1-8). The figures, seated on a platform (*takht*, *chauki*) opposite each other in pairs, are placed on the right and left of an imaginary middle axis. In addition, they are oriented to the centre. The middle axis and the centre are further marked by a candle, an incense-burner, or books piled up on a low table or pedestal. With two divergences out of eight paintings, the saints are sitting, three together, in an almost vertical or sometimes diagonal row on each side of the central axis. Without exception, the painters used a nearly parallel perspective with a slightly elevated viewpoint in which they determined the proportions of the figures according to their respective rank. Through this “perspective of meaning” the artist created an inversion: both the figures who appear to sit above the others and are seated furthest from the viewer are the most prominent, whereas the figures placed in the lower part of the composition, closer to the viewer, are smaller in size. The symmetrical seating arrangement creates an atmosphere of harmony and tranquillity. It follows the courtly model of a *darbar* (audience, reception) where the nobles are placed according to their respective rank. The concept of personages sitting face-to-face is not only found in classical miniature painting depicting scenes of the Mughal court,² but also characterizes formal seating positions of devotees at shrines today.

As already mentioned above, the saintly hierarchy starts with Abdul Qadir Gilani who is seated prominently in the highest position on the right side (comp. fig. 1). His full title is *Hazrat Sayyidna Ghauth ul-Azam Abdul Qadir Gilani (Jilani)*, his *laqab* meaning “the greatest help”. Other popular *laqab* which are attributed to him are *Muhyi ud-Din* (the one who revives religion), *Hazrat Ghauth Pak* (the saint of pure help), *Pir piran Badshah* (the king of all spiritual guides), and *Pir-i Dastgir* (the spiritual guide who takes you by the hand)³ – to name only the most popular names and titles. The saint was born in 1077 in Niff which is situated in the fertile plain of Gilan between the Caspian Sea and the province of Mazanderan in Iran; in 1166 he died in Baghdad. This ascetic preacher and scholar of Hanbalite religious law founded the Qadiriyya, the biggest and most important order of dervishes existing between West Africa and Indonesia. On the subcontinent many renowned disciples came from Punjab and Sindh; also the Mughal prince Dara Shikoh (1615-1659) and later Mohammad Iqbal (1877-1938), Pakistan's venerated poet and philosopher, belonged to

¹ Another fairly common composition consists, for example, of Mu'in ud-Din Chishti, Qutb ud-Din Bakhtiyar Kaki, Farid ud-Din Ganj-i Shakar, Nizam ud-Din Auliya', and Nasir ud- Din Chiragh-i Delhi.

² Regina Hickmann, “Analysen zur Komposition des Gruppenbildes in der Moghulmalerei des 17. Jahrhunderts”, *Forschungen und Berichte. Staatliche Museen zu Berlin*, 17, 1976, 95-111 (cf. esp. 100, 105-106, 110).

³ In scholarly works the saint is sometimes not properly identified and instead only mentioned with one of his *laqab* like, for example, in the article of Hermann Goetz, “Indische historische Portraits. Die Miniaturen-Alben des Berliner Völkerkunde-Museums”, *Asia Major*, 2/2, 1925, 227-250 (see esp. P1. XI + 245; cf. Hans-Caspar Graf von Bothmer, *Die islamischen Miniaturen der Sammlung Preetorius*, Munich, 1982, 138).

his followers. As the most popular saint of the Muslim world, Abdul Qadir Gilani is often depicted on devotional poster-portraits, particularly in Indo-Pakistan.

Anti-clockwise from the great saint of Baghdad, *Hazrat Khwaja Mu'in ud-Din Hasan Chishti* of Ajmer (1142-1236) is seated in the highest position on the left side, facing his master as a disciple. The founder of the Chishtiyya is popularly known as *Gharib Nawaz* (lit. who cares for the poor), his other *laqab* are *Ashraf ul-auliya'* (noble of the saints), *Sultan ul-Hind* (ruler of India), and *Khwaja-i Khwajgan* (lord of the lords). Originally coming from Sistan, in around 1219 he settled in the city of Ajmer in Rajasthan which finally became an analogon to Mecca and the spiritual centre of the Mughal empire. Preaching love of God, practicing tolerance towards other creeds, and using ecstatic music and dance in order to achieve mystical experiences, the Chishtis were extremely successful in the conversion of people to Islam on the subcontinent.

Seated just below Mu'in ud-Din Chishti on our paintings is his first *khalifa* (successor), *Hazrat Khwaja Qutb ud-Din Bakhtiyar Kaki*, who was born in Osh in the Ferghana valley. It is said that he died in 1235 in Delhi during a state of ecstasy while listening to the musical rendering (*sama'*) of the famous mystic verse written by the Persian Sufi poet Sheikh Ahmad Jam: "The martyrs of the dagger of surrender, each moment get a new life from the Unseen World".⁴ The saint is popularly called *Hazrat Qutb Saheb*; his *laqab*—"man of bread"—refers to his ascetic way of life.

Qutb ud-Din Bakhtiyar Kaki's *khalifa* is seated anti-clockwise in the left corner of the platform. He is the third saint in the spiritual genealogy of the Chishtis, *Hazrat Khwaja Farid ud-Din Mas 'ud Ganj-i Shakar*, also called *Sheikh Farid Bukhari*, who was born about 1175 in Kothewal, near Multan. Later Baba Farid, as he is commonly known, travelled to Delhi where he became a disciple of Qutb Saheb. The famous Sufi and poet died in 1265 and was buried in Pakpattan (former Ajodhan), a small town in Punjab (present-day Pakistan). His *laqab* *Ganj-i Shakar* or *Shakar-ganj*, meaning "treasure of sugar", refers to a miracle evoked in the course of his complete asceticism: in his hagiography it is told that through intense fasting even pebbles turned into sugar. Sheikh Farid is one of the very popular Sufis who allegedly converted many groups of Punjabis to Islam.

Similarly successful in guiding people on the Sufi path was his disciple and *khalifa Hazrat Khwaja Nizam ud-Din Auliya'* of Delhi (1236-1325). In our devotional paintings he is facing his master sitting at the right corner of the platform. Already in his lifetime he was affectionately called *Mahbub-i Ilahi* - "the beloved of God". Furthermore, the respectful epithet *Sultan ul-Masheikh* (ruler of the Sheikhs) is attributed to him. Sheikh Nizam ud-Din Auliya's original name (*ism*) was *Mohammad*, but apparently *Nizam ud-Din* had been adopted very early as his *kunya* supplemented by the plural suffix *auliya'*—"saints".⁵ It was not least thanks to this saint, who strictly followed the tradition of the Prophet, but also loved poetry and music, that Sufism became a kind of mass movement in Northwest India.⁶

The last of the six saints to be introduced here is *Hazrat Sheikh Sharaf ud-Din Bu 'Ali Qalandar*, also known as *Shah Bu 'Ali Qalandar* or *Bu 'Ali Shah Sharaf*, of Panipat (northwest India) where he spent most of his lifetime and finally died in 1324. He followed the heterodox *bi-shar*-'order of Qalandar dervishes, but it is also said that he had relations to Qutb ud-Din Bakhtiyar Kaki, who is sitting opposite him on the platform, or that he was even initiated into the Chishtiyya.⁷ Besides being a scholar and poet, Bu 'Ali Qalandar had first of

⁴ Saiyid Athar Abbas Rizvi, *A History of Sufism in India*, Vol. I, New Delhi, 1975, 137.

⁵ Khaliq Ahmad Nizami, *The Life and Times of Sheikh Nizam-ud-Din Auliya*, Delhi, 1991, 183-184.

⁶ Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystische Dimensionen des Islam. Die Geschichte des Sufismus*, Cologne, 1985, 490-491.

⁷ Saiyid Athar Abbas Rizvi, *A History*, New Delhi, 1975, 305; Khaliq Ahmad Nizami, "Abu 'Ali Qalandar", in: E. Yarshater (ed.). *Encyclopaedia Iranica*, Vol. 1/Fasc. 3, London, 1983, 258. In the Berlin miniature (fig.

all renounced the world and was known to be fully absorbed in the contemplation of God. As he used to remain for long periods in communion with God, it was often impossible to address him. This detachment from life in this world is reflected in the special position which he occupies in the composition of our devotional pictures. His posture deviates from those of the others because he is usually shown either turning his face away, as in the miniature paintings of the seventeenth century, or directly facing the viewer, as in the contemporary twentieth-century poster-portraits. Furthermore, his bare head and long hair make him stand out.

Devotional Pictures from Indo-Pakistan

The St. Petersburg miniature

To discuss the style and iconography of the devotional pictures, we should first turn our attention to the chronologically earliest examples of imaginary assembly of saints' scenes from the Mughal period. A seventeenth century miniature in vertical format, kept in the Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg (fig. 1),⁸ provides not only a clue for understanding later works, but also represents a virtual model for modern religious prints. Of course we have to keep in mind that there must have been different versions of the subject already in the time of the Mughals, and that copies (often painted with the use of stencils) were made as well. It means that these pictures got slurrings, alterations and additions, and that details were lost in the process of copies being made. Although in this article I concentrate on the composition depicting our particular six saints, it has to be added that there are also other compositions with groups of four, six, eight, twenty, or even more than fifty holy men. Elements of our paradigmatic St. Petersburg painting can be found in these compositions as well.⁹ Generally the depiction of court assemblies of various sizes, often arranged along an imaginary central vertical axis, represents a common subject in Mughal painting.

Concerning the St. Petersburg miniature, Stuart Cary Welch first informs us about a particular detail in the history of this painting: "... the presentation of these Mughal sages seems to challenge both space and time. This effect has been created by the magic of two artists, one a Mughal of circa 1635, the other an 18th-century Iranian inspired by a Netherlandish print"¹⁰. The saints (painted by the Mughal artist) contemplatively sit on a

2), the saint is identified as *Shah Sharaf* (Hermann Goetz, "Indische historische Portraits", *Asia Major*, 2/2, 1925, PL XI).

⁸ The miniature is part of the famous *muraqqa'-album* (The St. Petersburg *Muraqqa'*. *Album of Indian and Persian Miniatures from the 16th through the 18th Century and Specimens of Persian Calligraphy by 'Imad al-Hasani*, Milan, 1996, PI. 71/Folio 48 recto + p. 74-75 in the accompanying text volume; text written by Stuart Cary Welch): Mughal school, Isfahan, circa 1635 & eighteenth century after a print by R. Sadeler of a work by Paul Brill: watercolour, gouache, silver on paper, H 18, 9 cm, W 24,3 cm. Earlier printed in A. A. Ivanow, T. V. Grek, O. F. Akimushkin, *Album Indiiskikh i Persidskikh Miniatjur XVI-XVIII vv.*, Moscow, 1962, Pl. 39; also reproduced in Saiyid Athar Abbas Rizvi, *A History*, New Delhi, 1975, opp. 277.

⁹ These compositions are generally oriented along a vertical axis, usually a landscape (sometimes a mountain and a waterfall) is depicted in the background. The personages are sitting in pairs opposite each other, comparable to our St. Petersburg miniature. Only a few representative examples will be mentioned here and I do not claim to offer an exhaustive discussion of the subject here; space does not permit a more detailed analysis of these paintings, see B. N. Goswamy, Eberhard Fischer, *Wunder einer Goldenen Zeit. Malerei am Hof der Moghul-Kaiser. Indische Kunst des 16. und 17. Jahrhunderts aus Schweizer Sammlungen*, Zürich, 1987, No. 93, 189-190 (group of eight Sufis and Mullas); Linda Leach, "Painting in Kashmir from 1600-1650", in: R. Skelton (ed.), *Facets of Indian Art*, London, 1986, 124-131 (see esp. No. 6, 128: group of six holy men); *The St. Petersburg Muraqqa'*, Milan, 1996, PI. 74/Folio 49 recto, Pl. 75/Folio 51 recto (groups of six mystics); Stuart Cary Welch, *The Art of Mughal India. Painting & Precious Objects*, New York, 1964, Pl. 46, 102-103 (group of four Mullahs); Thomas W. Arnold, *Painting in Islam*, Oxford, 1928, p. XVI + Pl. XLI, opp. 117 (group of twenty holy men); W.H. McLeod, *Popular Sikh Art*, Delhi, 1991, fig. 3 + 6 (similar compositions on popular woodcuts).

¹⁰ *The St. Petersburg Muraqqa'*, Milan, 1996, 74.

decorated stage-like platform with a low balustrade at the back. The surrounding of an idealized European landscape, which is depicted as a back-cloth, was created by the Iranian painter. This background with its lakes and mountains intensifies the tranquillity of the whole scene.

The most venerated personages, Abdul Qadir Gilani and Mu'in ud-Din Chishti, are placed in the middle of the painting, sitting on a floral carpet flooded with light, each supported by a traditional cushion (*takia*) and two rose-buds lying between them. The *takia* as well as the *takht* represent both royal and spiritual authority. In addition, Abdul Qadir Gilani's superior status is indicated by a tree behind him with overspreading branches high above his head symbolizing a version of the royal umbrella. Furthermore, he stands out by his slightly bigger proportions and by being depicted in three-quarter profile. With the exception of Abdul Qadir Gilani and Bu 'Ali Qalandar, the other saints are represented in full profile. The four holy men placed in the foreground frame the view which is directed to the saints sitting on the carpet. In this way the assembled figures form a kind of cupola which is taken up again in the trees and clouds of the landscape in the background.

All the six bearded mystics are depicted in the characteristic Sufi kneeling posture called *namaz ki tarha* (like during prayer) or *do zanu* (two knees) in which the body rests on the shins placed parallel on the ground. With the exception of Bu 'Ali Qalandar, the saints wear turbans as the appropriate and dignified headdress of the mystics and long Sufi robes in different colours which are draped with shawls in the case of Abdul Qadir Gilani, Mu'in ud-Din Chishti, and Qutb ud-Din Bakhtiyar Kaki. Both the eminent saints of the carpet as well as Farid ud-Din Ganj-i Shakar hold a set of prayer beads (*tasbih*) in their hands as a symbol of piety, devotion and constant remembrance of God. A further conspicuous detail and symbol of learning are the books lying next to four of the holy men.¹¹ As a mark of distinction, a small vessel, which appears to be an inkpot, is placed beside the book of Abdul Qadir Gilani. There is a relationship between these books, which may be either copies of the Holy Quran or mystical treatises, and the pedestal (placed right in the middle between the four personages sitting in the foreground) where three more books are piled up. In the realm of Sufism the latter represent a central fountain of divine wisdom and learning referring to the spiritual authority of the depicted mystics. Farid ud-Din Ganj-i Shakar's personal attribute, however, is a small flat bowl placed in front of him. It signals to the strict diet he used to keep during his ascetic life.

As already mentioned above, Bu 'Ali Qalandar occupies an individual position: wearing only a simple dark cloak, he is sitting somewhat detached from the others, looking out of the picture, his face depicted in three-quarter profile. The manner of depicting his head appears to be reminiscent of the *maniera greca* style of Italian painting in the sixteenth century and specifically resembles Joseph. Welch explains in this context: "The likeness of 'Abd 'Ali Qalandar of Panipat was copied or traced from an engraving by R. Sadeler after J. Rottenhammer"¹². As a reference to his state of rapture and proximity to God, requiring nothing else than Him, Bu 'Ali Qalandar is the only one among the saints depicted here without any material attribute.¹³

¹¹ Although the book to the left of Abdul Qadir Gilani is lying on his carpet, it is inscribed "Shah Sharaf" and apparently belongs to Bu 'Ali Qalandar. Likewise the book lying to the right of Mu'in ud-Din Chishti on the carpet has the name of Qutb ud-Din Bakhtiyar Kaki written on it. The book placed between Qutb ud-Din and Baba Farid bears the name of the later. In my opinion it is possible that, in these cases, the inscriptions were added later thereby changing the relations originally intended by the painter. As far as the book lying in front of Nizam ud-Din is concerned, the relation is clear.

¹² *The St. Petersburg Muraqqa'*, Milan, 1996, 74-75.

¹³ Cf. fn. 9.

Apart from the pedestal with the books, the space between the saints remains vacant. This emptiness again indicates the contemplative quiet of the whole scene.

The Berlin miniature

A very similar coloured miniature (probably also seventeenth century) now belongs to the Museum of Islamic Art in Berlin (fig. 2).¹⁴ The holy men are seated on a terrace which is bordered on the back by a low marble balustrade (*jali*). A peaceful landscape with a lake and a forested shore form the background whose horizontal line is shaped like an umbrella. The saints, who are identified by inscriptions, are depicted in the same postures as in the St. Petersburg miniature, but showing slight variations concerning their dress and in some cases appearing stiffer. Abdul Qadir Gilani and Mu'in ud-Din Chishti, both supported by a *takia*, are distinguished here by a nimbus (originally an element of Buddhist art). Alterations above all concern the items spread on the ground: an ornamented pedestal (*chauki*) with books is now standing closer to these prominent saints of the group; in addition, another book is lying right between them. Furthermore, a small bejewelled vessel on a tray (possibly a perfume container or a sweetmeat box) is placed beside each of them. In the space between the holy men seated in the lower part of the terrace we find a bejewelled incense-burner, two bejewelled bowls on matching stands either filled with flowers or with confectionery, and two trays of fruit.

The Munich drawing

A drawing (ink on paper) in oblong format, probably dating from the seventeenth or eighteenth centuries, is kept in the State Museum of Anthropology in Munich (fig. 3).¹⁵ It shows the same imaginary assembly of saints (identified by inscriptions of names) in a wrong-way-round version. Considering the original coloured miniature discussed above, this is very clear from the fact that here the unlabelled figure of the prominent saint, Abdul Qadir Gilani, is placed in the highest position on the left side, and not in his appropriate place on the right. To be placed on the right is always considered pure and superior according to Islamic tradition. Generally, paintings of this type have to be read like an Arabic text starting from the right. In consequence the labelled figure of the same saint, sketched in outlines standing under a tree, would also appear in the upper corner on the right side. The overspreading regal tree, which also appears in the St. Petersburg miniature, can again be interpreted as a manifestation of the highest spiritual authority. Other details in our drawing pointing to a wrong-way-round version are the shape of the pedestal's base and the prayer beads in the left hand of Mu'in ud-Din Chishti. A *tasbih* should be kept held in the right hand or in both hands, but never in the left.

Apart from the saints' figures, the drawing is by and large sketchy; also the books and the pedestal are only suggested by a few cursory strokes. In comparison to the St. Petersburg miniature, originally meaningful details are either omitted or carelessly executed.

An Indian folk painting and its photographic counterpart

A very interesting coloured folk painting (probably reverse-glass) in vertical format, dating from the second half of the nineteenth or early twentieth century, is printed in a biography of Mu'in ud-Din Chishti (fig. 4).¹⁶ In the foreground, the six bearded saints (which are numbered) are seated in a slightly different order on a carpeted platform. The background

¹⁴ Depicted in Hermann Goetz, "Indische historische Porträts", *Asia Major*, 2/2, 1925, Pl. XI, Inv.-No. IC 24344, fol. 30 a (this miniature was formerly kept in the Museum für Völkerkunde in Berlin).

¹⁵ This drawing was first published by Hans-Caspar Graf von Bothmer, *Die islamischen Miniaturen*, Munich, 1982, 138-139.

¹⁶ W. D. Begg, *The Holy Biography of Hazrat Khwaja Muinuddin Chishti*, Tucson, 1977, 8-9 (Unfortunately the author has not given any further information on the provenance or technique of this picture).

shows a landscape of the Indian plains with a river, a sailing boat and a green bank with a tree (framing the picture on the right). The regal tree's branches overspread Abdul Qadir Gilani who is again placed in the highest position on the right side. As a mark of distinction, he is the only one holding a *tasbih* in his hands. Both he and Mu'in ud-Din Chishti, who faces him, are nimbat and supported by a takia. The attention of Qutb ud-Din Bakhtiyar Kaki and Farid ud-Din Ganj-i Shakar, who are sitting in a close row with Khwaja Gharib Nawaz, as well as of Nizam ud-Din Auliya' (seated in the left corner), is entirely focused on the great saint of Baghdad. The long-haired Bu 'Ali Qalandar is sitting detached from the others in the right corner of the picture, this time his head turned towards the centre, but with his eyes closed in contemplation. A low table with two books is standing on a piece of cloth spread out in the centre of the flowered carpet. Another object, probably a book, and two inkpots are lying in front of the two most prominent Sufis. Although the present painting is much coarser, more schematic and slurred in comparison to the St. Petersburg and Berlin miniatures, essential details of the features, postures and dress are still preserved.

As far as the seating arrangement of the composition is concerned, figure 5 represents an interesting counterpart to the above-mentioned folk painting. It is a black and white photograph of an apparently nineteenth- or early twentieth-century folk miniature painting. The framed photograph was used as a devotional picture in Kabul (Afghanistan). In the formal assembly four saints are seated on a floral carpet and the remaining two, Nizam ud-Din Auliya' and Bu 'Ali Qalandar, are placed next to them in the left and right corners. Like in the previously described miniatures (figs. 1-3), the Qalandar saint (here black-bearded) looks out of the picture, his eyes almost closed. As a particular detail, Abdul Qadir Gilani alone is depicted with a nimbus.

Modern devotional posters

Finally, we have to consider three modern devotional colour prints which were purchased in 1988 and 1989 in Lahore (figs. 6-8). Albeit the depicted scene (including the seating plan) is still the same as in the courtly model of the Mughal period represented by the St. Petersburg and Berlin miniatures, the composition has now become static and ornate. The figures are lined up diagonally on each side of the central vertical axis and are clearly differentiated in their proportions. By and large their features appear standardized, slurred and less portrait-like. Whereas the postures, gestures and dress are generally taken over from the earlier models, details of colour, position of hands and attributes have been changed. Instead of landscapes in the background, the peripheral space around the central platform is filled with pictures of the shrines of the respective saints and with pious inscriptions.

The first version (in oblong format) shows the six holy men seated on a carpeted platform with Abdul Qadir Gilani supported by a cushion (fig. 6).¹⁷ The latter and probably also Nizam ud-Din Auliya' are distinguished by holding a rosary in their hands.¹⁸ In comparison to the St. Petersburg and Berlin miniatures, Bu 'Ali Qalandar's face has been turned full-face and Mu'in ud-Din Chishti's beard has been painted black. The faces of the saints on the left are depicted in very slight three-quarter profile.

The viewer can easily identify the saints through inscriptions giving their names and titles. Captions are also given to the rectangular framed pictures of the shrines which are placed in the back of the figures. The central vertical axis is emphasized (in its uppermost part) by an elliptic picture of the tomb of the Prophet, framed by the *basmala* and the *kalima*. Beneath

¹⁷ State Museum of Anthropology, Munich (Inv.-No. 89-312 069).

¹⁸ Whereas Abdul Qadir Gilani is depicted holding the rosary in his right hand, Nizam ud-Din Auliya' has it in his left (!). The same gesture with the *tasbih* is shown in the second poster under consideration (Inv.-No. 88-310 808). Apparently the artist followed purely aesthetic reasons, thereby neglecting proper religious etiquette.

that, there are two inscriptions in Arabic: first, a part of verse 38 of *surat al-baqarah* introduced by the words “but the friends of God ...” and, second, *sura 2*, verse 154. The composition is rounded off by two floral designs in the upper right and left corners containing the names *Allah* and *Muhammad*. In the second poster, a kind of standard modern version in oblong format, the saints are seated on an exquisitely ornamented *takht* whose four corners are each emphasized by a protruding ornament (fig. 7).¹⁹ Again Abdul Qadir Gilani’s particular status is indicated by a nimbose gleam of light around his turban and by the customary *takia*. Proportions, profiles and, as far as the dress is concerned, even the fall of the folds are very similar to the print described above. In the case of Abdul Qadir Gilani and Bu ‘Ali Qalandar the painter has avoided the depiction of a pure full-face in favour of the approximation to a three-quarter profile. New additions are the prayer beads each holy man is holding in his hands and the two incense-burners with joss sticks placed along the central vertical axis in the upper and in the lower part of the platform.

The saints as well as their shrines (whose depictions are embedded in rose-buds) are identified by inscriptions giving personal names, titles and place-names. In the present case, the central vertical axis is emphasized (in its uppermost part) by the depiction of the Quran, with rays emanating from it, and beneath that by the already mentioned Quranic formula (2,38). The Quran is lying on a lectern and on the opened pages the beginning of the *sura al-satiha* can be read. Furthermore, on the right side of the Holy Book the Ka‘ba in Mecca (with the name *Allah* on it) is depicted and on the left side the dome and minaret of the Prophet’s mosque in Medina (with the name *Muhammad* on it). The dense representation is completed by the *kalima* written in its two parts in the upper right and left corners.

The third poster version (in vertical format) is even more ornate than the two previous ones (fig. 8).²⁰ There is no comparison to the contemplative quiet expressed in the St. Petersburg miniature. The picture can be divided in three zones with overlapping elements: in the middle we see the well-known composition with the saints, very similar to the first poster print (with Abdul Qadir Gilani supported by a cushion and holding prayer beads in his right hand). As far as the features of the figures are concerned, there are only minor variations. The head of Abdul Qadir Gilani is more bent to the side, the eyes of Bu ‘Ali Qalandar are blurred, and the face of Qutb ud-Din Bakhtiyar Kaki now appears in a faint three-quarter profile.

An oversized tray holding a candle is placed right between the figures. Rays emanating from the candle are received by the raised hands of a praying female figure standing in the left corner of the picture, thereby connecting the middle and the lower zones of the print. The pious woman is part of a scene which represents a miracle of Abdul Qadir Gilani who is seated in the diagonal extension of the candle’s rays. The tale is about the miraculous rescue of the mother’s only son who was shipwrecked. Elements of this miracle depicted here are, in addition to the mother, the boat overloaded with passengers, the saint’s hand which lifted the drowned boat, and the saint’s mausoleum in Baghdad.

The lower zone of the poster is completed by a scene alien to the present subject which was taken over from another devotional print. It shows two saints, on the left Shah Badi ud-Din Madar Shah (probably 1315-1434), the patron saint of the mendicant Madari dervishes, who is riding on a tiger and using a snake as his riding whip. He is going to visit the Chishti saint Shah Mina (ca. second half of the fourteenth century) of Lucknow who is sitting on a low wall and greeting him.

¹⁹ State Museum of Anthropology, Munich (Inv.-No. 88-310 808). Published first in Jürgen Wasim Frembgen, *Dervische. Gelebter Sufismus. Wandernde Mystiker und Asketen im islamischen Orient*, Cologne, 1993, 140-141. The poster is further depicted in Pierre Centlivres, Micheline Centlivres-Demont, *Imageries populaires en Islam*, Genève, 1997, 50, fig. 41.

²⁰ State Museum of Anthropology, Munich (Inv.-No. 88-310 809).

The upper zone of our composite print is filled with rectangular and round framed pictures of the respective shrines. These are flanking the central vertical axis emphasized by a depiction of the *Ka'ba* with the formula *nigah-e karam* (the noble view) written in a crescent, the above mentioned Quranic formula (2,38), two rose-buds and a calligraphic *kalima* in a round medallion.

Meanings and uses of devotional pictures

After discussing the “language” of our particular conclave pictures, we should now turn to their meanings and uses (or to their function) in the particular cultural context of Indo-Pakistani popular Islam. In the case of the modern devotional prints, it is especially striking that they are not reflecting new aesthetics. They rather exemplify the continuity of a particular composition, namely the depiction of an imaginary assembly of saints, including their respective iconographic elements, symbolism and aesthetic expression. Aesthetics of Mughal art are preserved in various spheres of contemporary arts and crafts, albeit popularized and merged with different folk traditions.²¹ On the one hand, they can today be viewed as a fashion for the Mughal period; on the other hand they seriously convey inspiration, for instance, to a number of painters and musicians who keep alive the Mughal traditions of the past.

Despite this continuity of form and expression, it is nevertheless clear that miniatures kept in albums or displayed in the private rooms of Mughal rulers and noblemen were only intended to be admired by a courtly elite. We might assume that these miniatures depicting an assembled group of saints were considered to bestow blessings and good fortune and to provide spiritual inspiration.²² Maybe the devotional paintings discussed here also reflected the personal affiliation of the owner to the dervish brotherhood of the Chishtiyya. In any case, through ethnographic fieldwork, we can arrive at a better understanding of the meanings and uses of religious art in contemporary culture.

In Indo-Pakistan, the nineteenth century brought about important developments and the introduction of new media of artistic expression such as reverse-glass-, oil-, water colour-, and mica-paintings, woodcut posters, early lithographs and photographs.²³ The actual printing of posters started in the 1910s and 1920s. Since then, Islamic devotional pictures became mass products of the bazaar print industry, similarly to posters rooted in the Hindu and Sikh traditions. Until now, posters are widely distributed at shrines and in bazaars and have become a consumer item. Colour prints depicting saints and their shrines constitute a specific popular genre of religious folk art. They are first and foremost souvenirs of pilgrimages and through their distribution help to popularize the respective cult beyond the city, district or even province of origin.

Coming back to our modern devotional posters with the depiction of a *khayali mehfil*, we find them especially in the private homes and in the shops of people who are either initiated into the Chishtiyya or, as pious laymen, venerate a Chishti saint. Being an expression of the personal religiosity of the devotees, the popular poster-prints become the focus of authentic “lived” experiences. As I have argued elsewhere, in the realm of mystically inspired folk Islam, posters with the depiction of saints and shrines are generally considered as sacred objects containing *baraka* (blessing and healing powers).²⁴ As a respected *tabarruk* or amulet, they are also protective. Furthermore, our composition representing a *khayali mehfil*

²¹ Jürgen Wasim Frembgen, “Einführung”, in: J. W. Frembgen (ed.), *Rosenduft und Säbelglanz. Islamische Kunst und Kultur der Moghulzeit*, Munich, 1996, 13-14 (see esp. 14).

²² B. N. Goswamy, Eberhard Fischer, *Wunder einer Goldenen Zeit*, Zürich, 1987, 16, 189.

²³ Jürgen Wasim Frembgen, “Saints in Modern Devotional Poster-Portraits: Meanings and Uses of Popular Religious Folk Art in Pakistan”, *Res. Anthropology and Aesthetics*, 34, 1998, 185-191 (see esp. 186).

²⁴ Jürgen Wasim Frembgen, *ibid*, 187-188.

conveys a particular spiritual meaning in the sense that it brings home the religious universe of Indo-Pakistan's most important dervish fraternity and includes a reference to the most popular Muslim saint Abdul Qadir Gilani. Displaying such a poster which depicts a saintly hierarchy not only helps secure a general blessing but also legitimizes one's own devotional religiosity and manifests one's confidence in the saints. Embedded in a dynamic subject-object relationship characteristic of popular Islam, the devotional pictures can also reflect the personal religious identity of the devotees who brought them home from a pilgrimage.

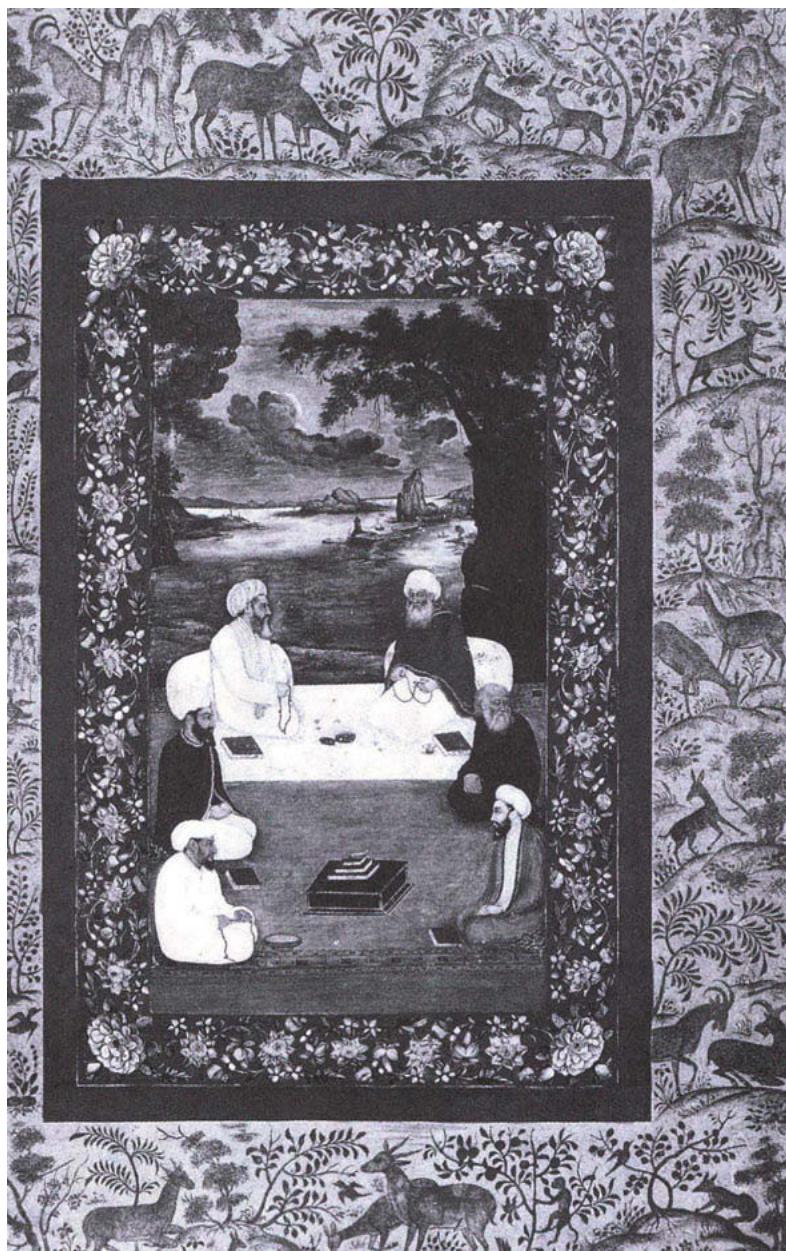


Fig. 1: *The St. Petersburg miniature (17th c.)*

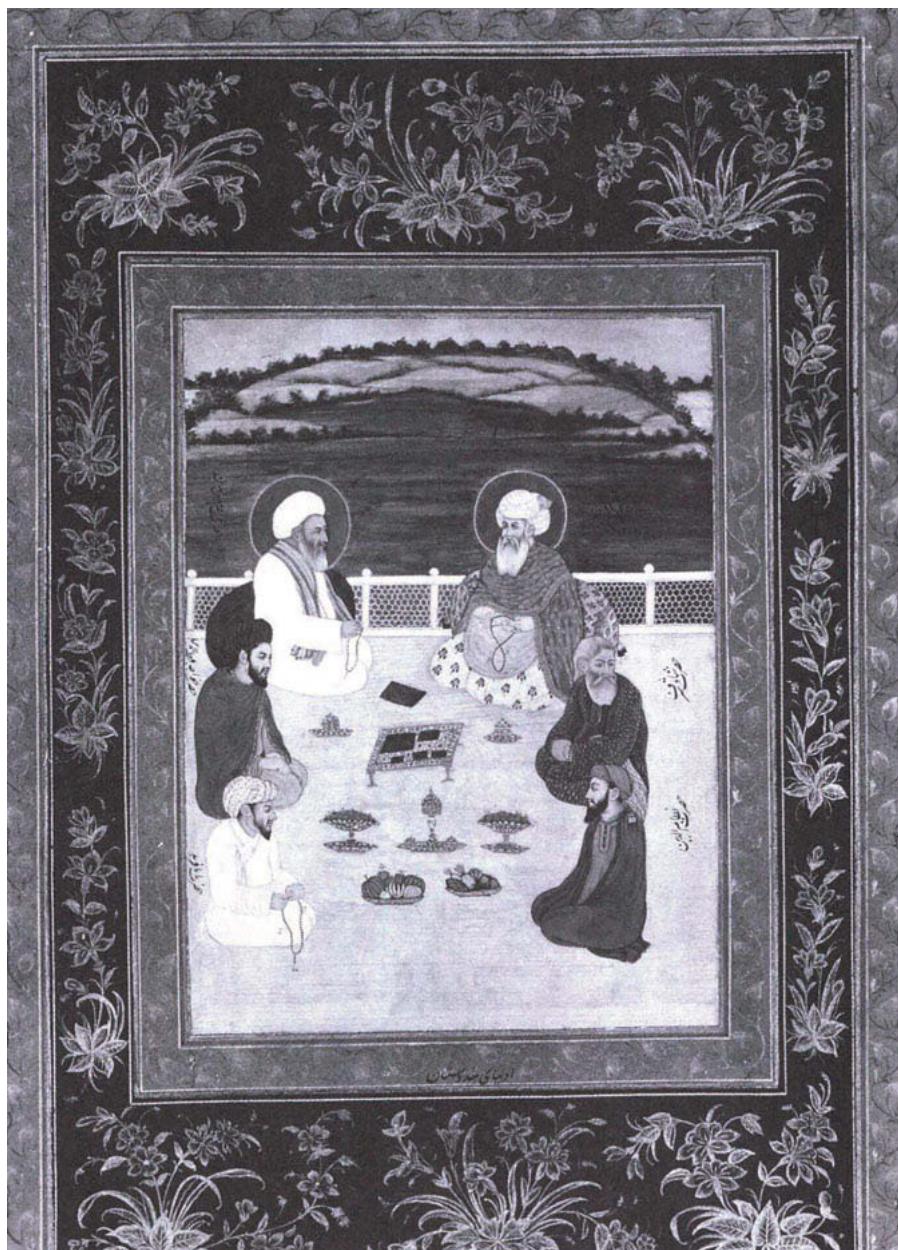


Fig. 2: *The Berlin miniature (17th c.)*

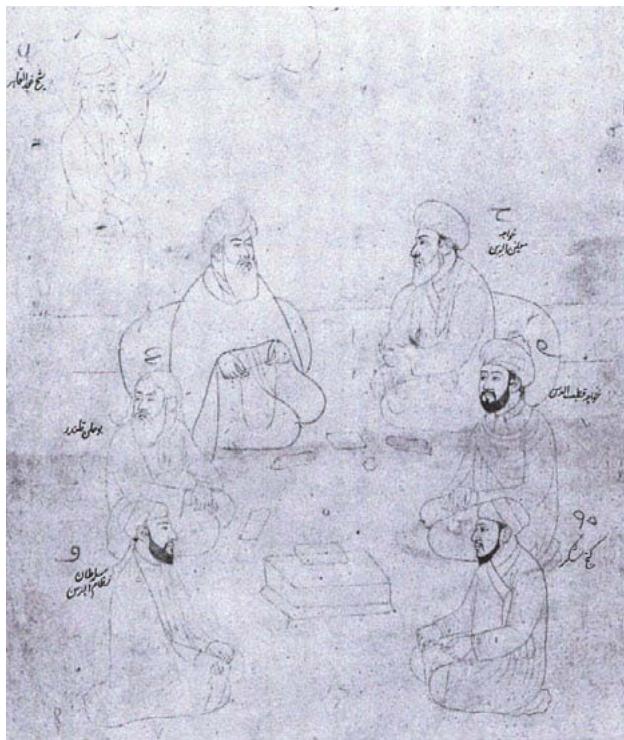


Fig. 3.: *The Munich drawing (17th/18th c.)*



Fig. 4: *Indian folk painting (18th/19th c.)*



Fig. 5: Photography of an Indian folk miniature (19th/20th c.)

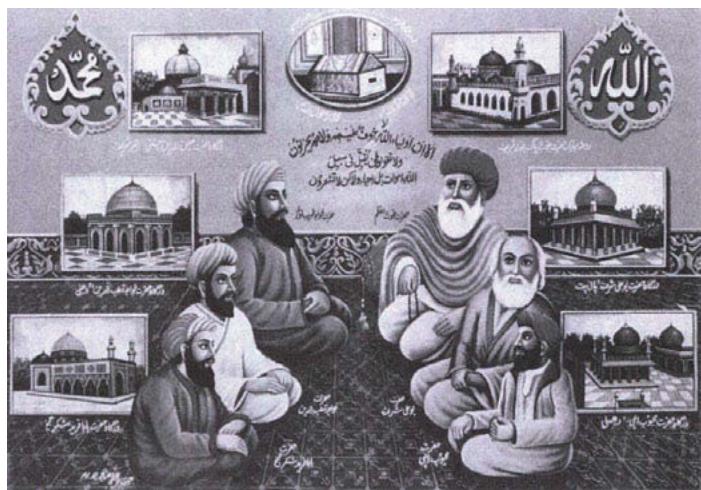


Fig. 6: Modern devotional poster (1980s), first version



Fig. 7: Modern devotional poster (1980s), second version

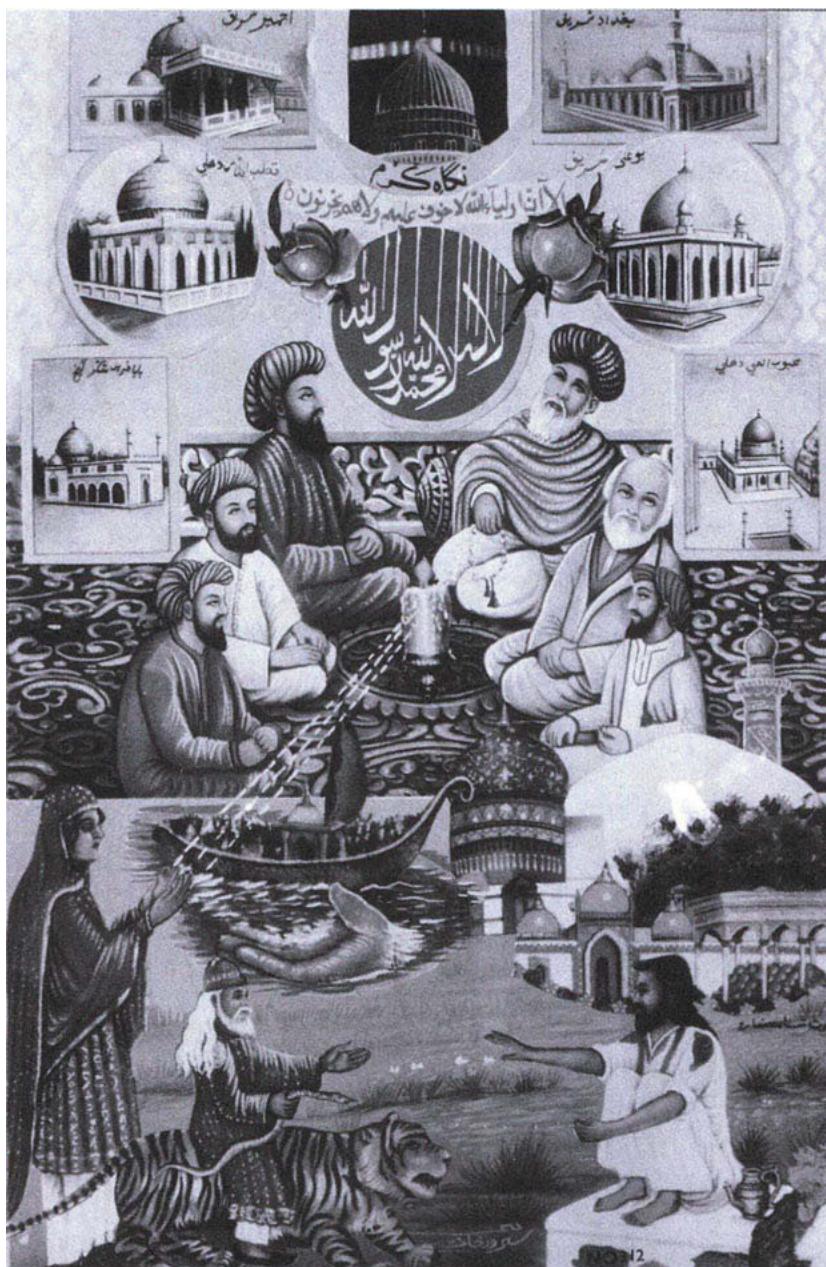


Fig. 8: *Modern devotional poster (1980s), third version*