

## The Ni‘matullāhī Order from Ma‘ṣūm ‘Alī Shāh to Muẓaffar ‘Alī Shāh

### Introduction

After a period of social turmoil in Persia under the Safavids during the 16th and 17th centuries, and the ensuing religious inquisition against Sufis, Sufism was almost completely suppressed; only a few Nūrbakhshī masters in Mashhad and Dhahabīs in Shiraz remained. In the 16th century the Ni‘matullāhī masters of Persia had immigrated to the Deccan plateau in India. As Amanat states, ‘By the end of the seventeenth century the Ni‘matullāhīs, Nuqṭavīs, Ḥurūfīs, and Sufi ghulāt had been systemically persecuted and removed from the political scene.’<sup>1</sup> As a result, and as noted above, there was an intermission in Sufi activity in Persia that lasted until the Zand era.<sup>2</sup> As Mast ‘Alī Shāh stated, ‘From the middle of Shāh Sulṭān Ḥusayn’s era to the end of Karīm Khān’s, the tradition of Sufism was abolished in Iran.’<sup>3</sup> He continued, ‘For approximately sixty years, Iran was devoid of Sufi doctrines and the subtleties of certitude and no one’s ear heard the name of the spiritual path (*ṭarīqat*) and no one’s eye saw a person of the spiritual path (*ahl-i ṭarīqat*).’<sup>4</sup>

The religious system of society during the Zand and Qājār periods was inherited from the Safavids and was based exclusively on the exoteric aspects of religion. This belief system gave all power to Shi‘ite Uṣūlī scholars. For this reason, only conservative Sufi orders that simultaneously addressed both the exoteric religious and the esoteric spiritual needs of the people could play any open role in Persian society. The Ni‘matullāhīs and Dhahabīs were the two major Sufi orders involved in the intellectual and spiritual revival of Sufism during this period. The instability of the political leadership also opened up the opportunity for charismatic Sufi masters to enter Persia and propagate their beliefs. As Foltz observes, ‘With the weakening and instability of government, however, came a resurgence of

charismatic leadership from among the Sufi brotherhoods, particularly the Ni'matollahis and the Nurbakhshis whose esoteric teachings held sway over a large number of the general population.<sup>5</sup>

All the three main Sufi orders (Ni'matullāhī, Dhahabī and Nūrbakhshī) already had their followers scattered around Persia, and indeed Sufism, contrary to Mast 'Alī Shāh's assertion above, had not been completely eradicated. However, the Sufis had remained dormant underground until the advent of the revival movement. Amanat points out that '[t]he most outstanding example of this revival can be seen in the activities of the Ni'matullāhī emissaries, who by the second half of the eighteenth century had attracted a large audience in the southern and central provinces.<sup>6</sup> One of the most crucial acts in the Ni'matullāhīs' revival movement was the centralisation of the leadership around a few of the charismatic Ni'matullāhī masters. Of necessity, these charismatic leaders were aware of the persecution of Sufis by their clerical foes.

Riḍā 'Alī Shāh (d. 1214/1799) was the last known master of the Ni'matullāhī order in India. Some of the hagiographers of the order believe that he was of Persian descent, but his ancestors had lived long enough in India to be called Deccani.<sup>7</sup> He had not attended any religious seminary schools. He was an ardent Shī'ite and had good relationships with both Muslims and non-Muslims.<sup>8</sup> Living in Indian society during a relatively calm period made him more tolerant towards other religious groups. He felt the need to dispatch some of his disciples to Persia to provide guidance to the remnants of the Ni'matullāhī order there,<sup>9</sup> especially after he received complaints from those who sought guidance on the Sufi path but could not find any Ni'matullāhī masters. It has been said that, once in Persia, a sayyid kept seeking to enter the Ni'matullāhī path but, after searching far and wide, could not find a master and therefore went to the Deccan. In the Deccan, he complained to Riḍā 'Alī Shāh which resulted in him deciding to send a deputy to Iran.<sup>10</sup> It was in 1184/1770 that Riḍā 'Alī Shāh Deccanī appointed Mīr 'Abd al-Ḥamīd with the spiritual title of Ma'sūm 'Alī Shāh to propagate the spiritual teachings of the Ni'matullāhī order in Persia.<sup>11</sup> Mast 'Alī Shāh claims that Riḍā 'Alī Shāh was the main reason the people of Persia heard about Sufism and were able to meet people of the spiritual path.<sup>12</sup> To a certain extent this statement is accurate, yet Ma'sūm 'Alī Shāh himself played the main role in the return to Persia of the Ni'matullāhī order, which soon became one of the most important Sufi orders there. Ma'sūm 'Alī Shāh (Riḍā 'Alī Shāh's spiritual deputy) played the crucial role in the revival of the order and trained all the influential masters on whom the continuance of

this movement heavily relied. Numerous scholars and poets belonging to the Ni‘matullāhī order were originally initiated under his guidance.<sup>13</sup>

### The Ni‘matullāhī Persian Sufi Order and Ma‘šūm ‘Alī Shāh

Ma‘šūm ‘Alī Shāh was born in Ḥaydarābād (modern-day Hyderabad) in the Deccan.<sup>14</sup> Īzadgushasb’s *Shams al-tawārīkh* is one of the few texts in which Ma‘šūm’s birth date is mentioned, and in it the author gives it as being the year 1147/1734.<sup>15</sup> Ma‘šūm ‘Alī Shāh had come from a noble Muslim family who were sayyids.<sup>16</sup> Mast ‘Alī Shāh said, ‘He was from a family of wealth and honorable lineage.’<sup>17</sup> It is narrated that he rode a horse, moving through the streets like a prince, and 80 people used to accompany him holding gold and silver staves, as was the tradition in wealthy Indian families.<sup>18</sup> Despite all this wealth, he was not satisfied and his inner desire for spiritual truth led him to seek a spiritual guide. Eventually, he met Riḏā ‘Alī Shāh and became his disciple. A day after his initiation he gave up all his wealth to the poor and needy.<sup>19</sup> The account of Ma‘šūm’s admission to the *khānaqāh* of Riḏā ‘Alī Shāh gives a good picture of the dominant culture of asceticism among the Ni‘matullāhīs. Ma‘šūm, being among those Sufis who reached the highest state of spirituality in the order, is a guiding model for other wayfarers on this path, as is narrated in *Janāt al-Wiṣāl* (a compendium written by Nūr ‘Alī Shāh (d. 1212/1797) and completed by two other Ni‘matullāhī masters):

He said to himself, ‘The king has told me  
If you want admission you must come alone;  
Truly, I am accompanied by much worldly wealth-  
How can I be alone with all these possessions?’...  
So all that our hero owned  
He gave away amongst his friends  
And of all his wealth kept not even enough  
To carry a gift to his sovereign lord...  
Along the road, on his way to the khānaqāh,  
He found some camel dung,<sup>20</sup>  
And, having nothing else, took it with him  
As an offering to that incomparable one.<sup>21</sup>

Under Riḏā ‘Alī Shāh’s guidance, Ma‘šūm became qualified to be a spiritual guide (*murshid*), resulting in Riḏā ‘Alī Shāh bestowing the Sufi cloak

(*khirqa*) on him, qualifying him to tread the Sufi Path and initiate others into its mysteries.<sup>22</sup> Riḍā 'Alī Shāh then appointed Ma'sūm to go to Persia and guide the seekers of spiritual truth on to the path of Imām Riḍā.<sup>23</sup>

During Ma'sūm's life in Persia the masters of the Ni'matullāhī order adopted the life of wandering Qalandars. They wandered around and did not have any profession or work. As Pourjavady mentioned, they were supported by the endowments of their wealthy disciples. They did not deny the fact that they had no income or jobs. As Riḍā 'Alī Harātī (d. 1211/1796), one of Ma'sūm's disciples, said:

My idleness is busyness and all my business is idle;  
I have no job — I am unemployed — and I dance.<sup>24</sup>

The path of Sufism as propagated by Ma'sūm was an ecstatic path oriented towards intoxication (*sukr*) rather than Sufism of the school of sobriety (*ṣaḥw*). Ma'sūm and his disciples conducted themselves with enthusiasm and fervour.<sup>25</sup>

Mast 'Alī Shāh says that around the year 1190/1776, Ma'sūm and his wife went to Shiraz via the sea route,<sup>26</sup> although 'Abd al-Rafī' Ḥaḳīqat relates that a different route by way of Afghanistan was taken for Ma'sūm's entrance to Persia. From Afghanistan he went to Mashhad in Khurāsān, and from there he went to the holy shrines of the Shi'ite Imāms in Iraq. Finally, he went to Shiraz where he took up his Sufi teaching work.<sup>27</sup>

### *Shiraz and Karīm Khān Zand*

Shiraz, which was ruled by Karīm Khān (r. 1164-1193/1751-1779), was known to be more socially and politically stable than many other areas of Persia. Karīm Khān was able to improve the trade routes, as a result of which communication with other trading cities became easier. This brought relative prosperity to Shiraz. Therefore, lots of wandering Indian dervishes started to migrate to the prosperous cities of Persia.<sup>28</sup> Some scholars believe that Karīm Khān's system of governing people was based on a tribal and fatherly manner.<sup>29</sup> He was not particularly religious and was known for his tolerance and forbearance. Malcolm indicated that during Karīm Khān's reign Ma'sūm arrived in Shiraz, where he soon gained fame by having more than 30,000 followers.<sup>30</sup> Most probably Malcolm overestimated the number of initiates, though the figure does represent the popularity of Ma'sūm among the people of Shiraz.<sup>31</sup> Abbas Amanat believes that Ma'sūm gathered round him a small number of disci-

ples who were very active in propagating Ni'matullāhī beliefs.<sup>32</sup> Ma'sūm's charisma attracted a growing number of disciples in Shiraz, among whom were Mullā 'Abd al-Ḥusayn Ṭabasī Fayḍ 'Alī Shāh (d. 1200/1786),<sup>33</sup> his son Mullā Muḥammad 'Alī Nūr 'Alī Shāh (d. 1212/1797),<sup>34</sup> and Mullā Mahdī Mushtāq 'Alī Shāh (d. 1206/1792) who were initiated into the order during this period.<sup>35</sup>

Nūr 'Alī Shāh's description of his first encounter with Ma'sūm 'Alī Shāh is a good depiction of the Sufi path of love. Whether or not it is a true story, it represents the beliefs and the mentality of the Ni'matullāhī masters during that era. While Nūr 'Alī Shāh was wandering around the city of Shiraz, he met a sayyid (Ma'sūm) at whom children were throwing stones at the instigation of some Shi'ite scholars. In response, Ma'sūm 'Alī Shāh did not lament, but sang a poem:

Children's stones have turned  
My head into a tulip bed  
Ah, it's springtime  
And madness reblossoms.<sup>36</sup>

He viewed this attack in a poetic manner. The stones were viewed as rain, which is a blessing that ends in the blossoming of flowers, and so he did not exhibit any protest.

The majority of Persians viewed Sufis as libertine dervishes who smoked hashish and did not bother seriously to follow shariah. For instance, Rustam al-Ḥukamā', a well-known historian of the time, talked about Dervish Bayraki (*Darwīsh Bayrākī*) and mentioned that dervishes smoked opium and received offerings from people.<sup>37</sup> On some occasions dervishes were very arrogant regarding warning the rulers and kings and were known to take the side of the people in their opposition to the king. A good example is the account of Aḥmad Shāh Durrānī (1134-1186/1722-1773) who lived during the era of Nādir Shāh's and ruled Afghanistan. Once when he decided to attack Khurāsān, a dervish came to him and started to insult the king in order to dissuade him since his decision would end in the massacre of people.<sup>38</sup>

Another challenge to the state was the quasi-Mahdist beliefs of the Sufis and their masters.<sup>39</sup> These beliefs of certain masters had a very strong influence and authority over their disciples. The ultimate spiritual authority of a master could sometimes present a challenge to the authority of a sovereign. As a result, they were not always favoured by the kings.

The ethical uprightness, courtesy, friendliness and humility of the Sufis towards the common people greatly facilitated their public fame. Ma'sūm

became popular among the masses and Ni'matullāhī doctrines, which were steeped in the Shi'ite spiritual tradition, became popular, while emphasising spiritual matters of religion. They focused on the interior contemplative disciplines of Sufism but, unlike Qalandars, they did not reject the exoteric rituals and laws of Islam. Consequently, the Sufis came to represent a middle path between the extremes of antinomian libertinism and philistine religious formalism. It has been said that once one of Shāh Ni'matullāh's disciples asked him whether an authority was needed for his disciples to administer their following of exoteric Islamic laws (*shar'ā*). Shāh Ni'matullāh replied, 'The Ni'matullāhī libertines (*rindān-i Ni'matullāhī*) do not need a magistrate (*dārūgha*).'<sup>40</sup> In another incident, a person taunted Shāh Ni'matullāh, stating that those who committed sins were not worthy of being his disciples. Ni'matullāh replied, 'How can they be worthy enough to be a slave of God and the people of the Prophet Muḥammad, but not a disciple of poor Ni'matullāh?'<sup>41</sup> Basically, the spiritual doctrines of the Ni'matullāhī order were based on a moderate way of following the exoteric aspects of Islam while focusing on the esoteric aspects, which made this order quite popular, being suitable for the modest needs of the common people.

This popularity led to the jealousy and opposition of Shi'ite Uṣūlī scholars, who were always looking to undermine the position of the Sufis.<sup>42</sup> These clerics were cognizant of the fact that Karīm Khān was suspicious of any quasi-Mahdist beliefs and that he had his own peculiar understanding of the anti-Christ (*dajjāl*). Karīm Khān had stated that he did not believe in the traditions (*akhbār*) about the anti-Christ narrated by the ulama but had his own belief that the anti-Christ would be a person who claimed to be the divine manifestation and would be accompanied by many magicians and hashish smokers.<sup>43</sup> Basing themselves on the vulgar social parody of Sufis as all being hashish-smoking wandering vagabonds, it proved easy to manipulate Karīm Khān's mind and persuade him that Ma'sūm 'Alī Shāh and his disciples really espoused corrupt, deviant and dangerous beliefs that were a serious threat to the religious standards of Persian society. Besides the Sufis' 'heretical' beliefs, the clerics added that they also claimed kingship by adding the title of shāh to their spiritual titles, which was also a threat to Karīm Khān.<sup>44</sup> These insinuations offended Karīm Khān enough to cause his relationship with the Ni'matullāhīs to deteriorate<sup>45</sup> and ultimately caused him to banish Ma'sūm and his disciples from Shiraz.<sup>46</sup>

The fact that previously dispersed and fragmented Sufis were now cohesively reuniting and effectively reconstituting their orders after several centuries of exile and suppression (the foremost example of which was the

Ni'matullāhī revival movement) came to be viewed as a real threat to both the Shi'ite clerical establishment and the state. As mentioned earlier, Sufi orders were scarce in Persia and only a few Sufi masters had been living in Mashhad and Shiraz. However, the population of wandering dervishes was considerable, and their revival and unification under the banner of the Ni'matullāhī order presented a real challenge to the state and also to the authority of the ulama.

Mast 'Alī Shāh believed that it was not Shi'ite scholars who persuaded Karīm Khān to banish Ma'sūm, but Jānī Hindūzādih, to whom Ma'sūm refused to teach the knowledge of alchemy.<sup>47</sup> Jānī is known to have been a Sufi: a wandering dervish with strong ties to Khān's court. A number of hagiographical biographies of Ma'sūm 'Alī Shāh state that six months after this banishment Karīm Khān died, suggesting that this was divine punishment for his persecution of the mystics.<sup>48</sup>

### *Isfahan and 'Alī Murād Khān*

Due to Karīm Khān's decision, Ma'sūm relocated to Isfahan where Fayḍ 'Alī Shāh became one of his most important disciples. Fayḍ was appointed the spiritual guide of seekers.<sup>49</sup> At the time 'Alī Murād Khān was the ruler of Isfahan. He favoured Sufis and built a tekke<sup>50</sup> for the Ni'matullāhīs called *takīyya-i Fayḍ*, named after Fayḍ 'Alī Shāh. Nūr 'Alī Shāh succeeded his father (Fayḍ 'Alī Shāh) after his death, and became famous among the



Shrine of Fayḍ 'Alī Shāh in Takht fūlād of Isfahan. (Photo by Ḥasan Roholamīn)

people of his time.<sup>51</sup> The number of Ma'sūm's disciples had increased in Isfahan, a fact which in turn increased the suspicion of the Shi'ite scholars and they consequently warned 'Alī Murād Khān that the heretical beliefs of Sufis could bring about the end of his reign.<sup>52</sup> Another account indicates that while 'Alī Murād Khān escaped Isfahan because of the Qājār threats to capture the city, some of the wandering dervishes (*darwīshān-i kuchih gard-i jalālī*) blew their trumpets, which was indicative of their rejoicing at his troubles.<sup>53</sup> This event of rejoicing led to 'Alī Murād Khān harbouring feelings of hatred towards the Ni'matullāhīs.<sup>54</sup> Javād Nūrbakhsh states that 'Alī Murād Khān felt offended by Fayḍ's behaviour, which led to his hatred of Sufis.<sup>55</sup> Abbas Amanat's view is that the Ni'matullāhīs had a secret relationship with Āqā Muḥammad Qājār, and when 'Alī Murād Khān left the city he found out about this relationship and subsequently banished them from the city.<sup>56</sup>

Eventually, as Aḥmad Dīwānbaygī notes, the Shi'ite scholars of Isfahan motivated Rustam Khān ('Alī Murād Khān's commander) to plunder and demolish the Fayḍ tekke and banish Sufis from there. Rustam Khān and Aṣlān Khān ('Alī Murād Khān's second-in-command for this mission) were sent to cut off the ears of Ma'sūm 'Alī Shāh and Nūr 'Alī Shāh in Mūrchiḥ Khurt near Isfahan as they fled the city. They also shaved the beards off these Sufi masters, which was a great insult and meant to deprive them of any spiritual legitimacy in the eyes of the populace.<sup>57</sup>

### *Tehran, Kirmān, Mashhad and Hirāt*

Some scholars state that Āqā Muḥammad Khān Qājār either had previously met Ma'sūm 'Alī Shāh or was familiar with the basic tenets of the Sufi doctrine from the time of his incarceration in Shiraz.<sup>58</sup> Ma'sūm 'Alī Shāh and Nūr 'Alī Shāh travelled to Tehran where Āqā Muḥammad Khān welcomed them and paid their travelling expenses to Mashhad.<sup>59</sup> According to Malcolm, Ma'sūm 'Alī Shāh and Nūr 'Alī Shāh fled to Kirmān, where a Shi'ite scholar issued religious verdicts against them. Thus, Ma'sūm was forced to flee to Mashhad, but was refused admission.<sup>60</sup> Other traditions, though, indicate that they arrived in Mashhad but were expelled after a short time.<sup>61</sup> Mast 'Alī Shāh also stated that Ma'sūm headed directly for Mashhad after his banishment from Isfahan. There, he was able to visit the shrine of the eighth Imām of the Shi'ites. From Mashhad he dismissed Nūr 'Alī Shāh, Mushtāq 'Alī Shāh, Rawnaq 'Alī Shāh, and Ḥusayn 'Alī Shāh and commanded them to return to their cities or anywhere else they were appointed to.<sup>62</sup>

After leaving Mashhad, his next destination was Hirāt. There are two accounts of Ma'sūm's journey after entering Hirāt. Malcolm said that Ma'sūm went to Hirāt, desiring to go to Kabul and then India; however, the King of the Afghans compelled him to return to Persia.<sup>63</sup> Another source suggests that Ma'sūm had a dream about Riḍā 'Alī Shāh and, because at the time Ma'sūm 'Alī was so close to the city of his master, Riḍā 'Alī Shāh proposed that Ma'sūm 'Alī Shāh should return to Persia, perhaps knowing that he was destined to martyr there.<sup>64</sup>

### *Najaf, Karbalā and Kirmānshāh*

During Ma'sūm's time, the Shi'ite holy cities of Najaf and Karbalā were places of refuge for Sufis. On his return from Afghanistan, Ma'sūm first stayed in Najaf briefly and then headed for Karbalā, where he was reunited with Nūr 'Alī Shāh, staying there for the next five years.<sup>65</sup> It was during this period that Majdhūb 'Alī Shāh initiated the following persons to the brotherhood: Mullā 'Abd al-Ṣamad Hamadānī (d. 1216/1802), Mullā Muḥammad Naṣīr Dārābī (d. 1226/1811) and Shaykh Zāhid Gilānī (d. 1222/1807). These persons were influential scholars in Shi'ite seminaries and but became a group of Sufi scholars who started the transformation of the Ni'matullāhī order and its doctrines into an intellectually solid and theosophically sophisticated movement, elaborating its philosophical beliefs based on seminary teachings.<sup>66</sup>

Ma'sūm 'Alī Shāh decided to go on another pilgrimage to Mashhad. But due to numerous invitations from his disciples from Kirmānshāh, he stayed in Kirmānshāh before travelling to Mashhad. In Kirmānshāh, Āqā Muḥammad 'Alī Bihbahānī, a staunch follower of the Uṣūlī school and an active anti-Sufi scholar, became suspicious of Ma'sūm's presence in Kirmānshāh and arrested him.<sup>67</sup> Bihbahānī was supported by Ibrāhīm Khān I'timād al-Dawla, a minister, who was a strong supporter of Shi'ite jurists, to the extent that he defended the view that the Shi'ite jurists should act independently of the state when issuing jurisprudential verdicts, including verdicts of religious excommunication.<sup>68</sup> Aḥmad Dīwānbaygī states that Majdhūb 'Alī Shāh and his uncle Muḥammad Khān paid a considerable amount of money to a person to help Ma'sūm to escape, but Ma'sūm refused, claiming he was not guilty and therefore had no need to flee.<sup>69</sup>

There are different accounts about Ma'sūm's martyrdom. One tradition narrates that he was murdered while performing a congressional prayer with his disciples. It is also reported that he was murdered in Bāgh-i 'Arsh in Kirmānshāh by Āqā Muḥammad 'Alī Bihbahānī himself and buried there.

Yet another account suggests that Ma'ṣūm was drowned in the Qarasū river in 1212/1797.<sup>70</sup> Likewise, Nūr 'Alī Shāh, who was appointed the successor to Ma'ṣūm 'Alī, was not immune from religious persecution; he was banished and so departed for Karbalā and Mūsīl.<sup>71</sup>

Ma'ṣūm was said to have lived for about 60 years and reputed to be a charming man with brown skin and hair, who wore the garment of the Qalandar Sufis and kept his hair long.<sup>72</sup> On his first encounter with him, Nūr 'Alī Shāh said he saw a sayyid clothed in rags (*jhindih pūsh*). He was known for being a quiet person who paid no attention to worldly matters,<sup>73</sup> which connected him to the Qalandari'ite way of life. When he received a gift it would immediately be distributed among the needy and his disciples.

### *From Popular Mysticism to Elitist Sufism*

There are numerous sayings and traditions about Ma'ṣūm's life which confirm the view that he had adopted the Qalandari'ite way of life. Abbas Amanat calls Ma'ṣūm 'Alī Shāh 'an Indian wandering dervish'.<sup>74</sup> As a result of several centuries of persecution of Sufism by the fundamentalist Shi'ite clerics, the people of Persia had become strangers to their own traditional mystical culture. Mystical philosophy had ceased to be popular among the general population or among the merchants and craftsmen of the bazaar, and there were very few seminary schools where one could find theosophers teaching mystical *ḥikmat*, much less anything related to *taṣawwuf*. The only way to meet Sufis was by meeting wandering dervishes who would beg for food or money as payment for a prayer or blessing. It was a popular way of being a dervish and attracted initiates and disciples who were more familiar with this type of Sufism than with its more sophisticated forms.

These wandering dervishes initially came from India. They were called *Qalandars* among the common people, although their beliefs may have differed from the classical Qalandari'ite beliefs. They were known for the performance of extraordinary acts such as fire eating. People had respect for them and would bring votive offerings to them. They were known as lone Sufis (*munfarid*) because they did not belong to any Sufi order. Most of these wandering dervishes were known as *darwīshān-i bī shar'* because they did not follow Islamic laws.<sup>75</sup> This type of dervishhood was culturally popular in all Persianate societies, including that of India. Their beliefs were not accepted by Shi'ite scholars in India, but they were not systematically persecuted by scholars or rulers, and it was problem free for a wandering dervish to enter Persia.



certain extent, to reconstruct the exoteric framework of Ni'matullāhī beliefs in Persia by strongly advocating the necessity of following the *sharī'a*.<sup>84</sup>

Ḥusayn 'Alī Shāh (d.1234/1818),<sup>85</sup> the sole master of the Ni'matullāhī order after Ma'ṣūm 'Alī Shāh and Nūr 'Alī Shāh, came from a family of Shi'ite seminary scholars. He travelled throughout Islamic countries in search of spiritual truth. Finally, he met Ma'ṣūm 'Alī Shāh and Fayḍ 'Alī Shāh, and the former directed him to follow the spiritual guidance of Nūr 'Alī Shāh.<sup>86</sup> Mullā 'Abd al-Ṣamad Hamadānī was among the scholars converted to Sufism by Ḥusayn 'Alī Shāh during Ma'ṣūm's life.<sup>87</sup> Ma'ṣūm's charisma also thus attracted some of the shariah-minded seminary scholars whose spiritual quest led them to enter the Sufi path.<sup>88</sup>

Another important decision of Ma'ṣūm's was that the majority of the disciples he spiritually trained for Persia would be Persian, though he himself was from India. It was highly likely that he was aware that in order to revive the Ni'matullāhī order in Persia he needed to train some Persian Sufis and gain followers who had a seminary background.

### The Anti-Sufi Movement of the Shi'ite Uṣūlī Scholars

As mentioned in the last chapter, this was a period of consolidation for the Uṣūlī Shi'ite scholars. Their triumph over the Akhbārī school of Shi'ism increased their centralised power. As Joanna De Groot states, 'By the end of the century [thirteenth century A.H./eighteenth century C.E.] twelve *'ulama* were consolidating an "orthodoxy" that buttressed the arguments for the authority of *mujtaheds* with . . . opposition to rival tendencies; this did not preclude the pragmatic pursuit of alliances in particular local settings, as when the *'ulama* of Kirmān, who attacked the popular Sufi missionaries . . . also acquiesced in the rule of a local governor, whose wealth came from the leadership of dissident Ismā'īlī, as a guarantor of law and order.'<sup>89</sup> Shi'ite scholars claimed to be the religious authority drawing the boundaries between orthodoxy and heterodoxy. This allowed them to monopolise religious matters from within the seminaries.

The religious practice of *takfīr* was used by seminary scholars as a means of suppressing their religious rivals, and in this respect the Uṣūlī scholars practised *takfīr* against their rivals, the Akhbārīs. With the start of Ni'matullāhī revivalism in Persia, these Shi'ite scholars practised *takfīr* against Sufis in the 1790s, in cities such as Kirmān, leading to the death of Mushtāq 'Alī Shāh, and Ma'ṣūm 'Alī Shāh.

As explained in the previous chapter, Āqā Muḥammad 'Alī Bihbahānī, known as the Sufi killer, was the leading figure in the suppression of Sufis in Persia, especially the Ni'matullāhīs. His father, Āqā Muḥammad Bāqir Bihbahānī (d. 1205/1790), known as Wahīd, is recognised as the founder of the modern Uṣūlī school.<sup>90</sup> The prestige of his father's acclaim as a famous theologian gave Āqā Muḥammad 'Alī more privilege and power among Shi'ite scholars. He also had some strong supporters among the ruling class of Persia. Ibrāhīm Khān was among those powerful ministers who supported him. When Āqā Muḥammad 'Alī Bihbahānī arrested Ma'sūm 'Alī Shāh, Ibrāhīm Khān told him, 'Put them to death, confine them, or punish them in the way you deem most proper and most consonant to the decrees of the holy religion.'<sup>91</sup> Āqā Muḥammad 'Alī also warned Mullā 'Abdullāh, a low-ranking cleric among the followers of Muḥammad 'Alī Bihbahānī, in Kirmān about Mushtāq, which led to Mushtāq's tragic martyrdom in 1206/1792.<sup>92</sup>

### The Ni'matullāhī Sufi Order and Nūr 'Alī Shāh

Nūr 'Alī Shāh (d. 1212/1797) is one of the most important figures in the history of the Ni'matullāhī revival of the 18th century.<sup>93</sup> He also played a significant role in the history of the revival of Persian Sufism after decades of oblivion. Nūr 'Alī Shāh's mystical way of life was close to that of the wandering dervishes. His appearance was more like that of a Qalandar than a scholar like Ma'sūm, although he belonged to a family of scholars and his grandfather led the congressional Friday prayers (*Imām jum'ih*) of Ṭabas.<sup>94</sup> There are two different stories about the birthplace of Nūr 'Alī Shāh's father, Mīrzā 'Abd al-Ḥusayn, who had the spiritual title of Fayḍ 'Alī Shāh. According to one account, he was born in Tūn (Ṭabas) in Khurāsān and later migrated to Isfahan to study seminary sciences.<sup>95</sup> Other scholars like Mast 'Alī Shāh recount that he was born in Isfahan some time around 1758.<sup>96</sup> It is also said that Mīrzā 'Abd al-Ḥusayn left everything behind in search of the truth, and went to Isfahan.<sup>97</sup> It was at the end of Nādir Shāh's reign that Mīrzā 'Abd al-Ḥusayn entered Isfahan and took up residence there,<sup>98</sup> where he became interested in the occult sciences, and practised numerical divination (*jafr*) and other occult sciences.<sup>99</sup>

Under the supervision of his father, Nūr 'Alī Shāh studied the common religious sciences of the day.<sup>100</sup> According to Muḥammad Taqī Khuyī, 'As the exterior sciences (*'ulūm ṣāhiri*) do not open the gate of inner



Portrait of Nūr 'Alī Shāh. (From Nūr 'Alī Shāh, *Janāt al-Wiṣāl*)

sciences (*'ulūm bāṭini*) and having the knowledge of exterior is a cause for the knowledge of inner, therefore, he entered the valley of seeking (*wādī ṭalab*).<sup>101</sup> Fayḍ 'Alī Shāh took Nūr 'Alī Shāh to Ma'şūm for initiation into the order and both father and son were initiated at about the same time, while Ma'şūm was in Shiraz.<sup>102</sup> As is written in *Janāt al-wiṣāl*, father and son became brothers on the spiritual path.<sup>103</sup> Later on, the young Nūr 'Alī Shāh reached the highest station of Sufism such that he even rose above the spiritual station of his father. Nonetheless both, after passing through certain spiritual states, reached the level of perfection to guide others. Ma'şūm gave them permission for the inculcation of *dhikr* and propagation of the spiritual path (*ṭarīqat*).<sup>104</sup> They were to become the two most important figures to be initiated into this order in the 18th century. Fayḍ passed away in 1199/1784.<sup>105</sup>

Nūr 'Alī Shāh was the closest and most important disciple of Ma'şūm 'Alī Shāh and accompanied Ma'şūm on all his travels. Even in Mürchih Khurt, when Ma'şūm dismissed everyone, warning his disciples that the commanders of 'Alī Murād were coming to torture them, Nūr 'Alī Shāh said, 'Where should I take a refuge, when I am from this refuge?'<sup>106</sup>

In Mashhad, Ma'şūm dismissed him and told him to stay in Persia, whilst Ma'şūm headed towards Hirāt.<sup>107</sup> Most probably, Ma'şūm felt that Persia and the Persian Sufis needed spiritually strong masters like Nūr 'Alī Shāh and Mushtāq 'Alī Shāh. Later on, Ma'şūm handed over the leadership of the Ni'matullāhī order to Nūr 'Alī Shāh who continued the revival movement.<sup>108</sup> Upon the spiritual confirmation of Riḍā 'Alī Shāh, Nūr 'Alī Shāh received permission to choose a successor for himself, hence the continuation of the movement.<sup>109</sup>

Nūr 'Alī Shāh and Mushtāq 'Alī Shāh went to Kirmān. Mushtāq was martyred in 1206/1792 and Nūr 'Alī moved on to Shiraz.<sup>110</sup> Luṭf 'Alī Khān was the ruler of Shiraz at the time, and tried hard to harm Nūr 'Alī, which eventually made him migrate to the 'Atabāt in 1207/1792.

In Iraq, he was favoured by Aḥmad Pāshā, the ruler of Baghdād and the surrounding area. Nūr 'Alī Shāh became a popular figure among the people of Persia too. His eagerness to broadcast the Ni'matullāhī doctrines led to the initiation of a large number of people into the brotherhood. Muḥammad 'Alī Mudarris notes how 'Nūr 'Alī Shāh became famous everywhere: when he would stay in a city for a while to guide, people would gather around him to an extent that rulers would become suspicious of his activities and order his banishment from that city.'<sup>111</sup> His popularity led to the jealousy of those who thought of Nūr 'Alī Shāh as a rival to their authority. His primary

opponents were Shi'ite scholars who accused him of claiming kingship and not following Islamic laws.<sup>112</sup>

Some of Nūr 'Alī Shāh's poetry directly challenged Shi'ite clerics. In one of his poems he says, 'And from the command of Mahdī, I will revive the universe with my breath.'<sup>113</sup> For Shi'ite clerics this was an outrageous claim and a direct challenge to their authority, as they considered themselves deputies of the hidden twelfth Imām. Claiming to have direct contact (spiritual or physical) with the twelfth Imām was much more dangerous than not following Islamic laws. In extreme cases, it could end in the execution of the claimant.

Nūr 'Alī Shāh's poems were full of ecstatic utterances (*shaṭḥiyyāt*). He says, 'If you seek the divine light, the search is a vain effort; I am the orient of lights.'<sup>114</sup> Or he goes further and directly addresses the Shi'ite scholars and says:

O pious clergyman,  
If by now  
You haven't known us  
In the truth of Absolute Unity:  
It's we in the Ka'aba,  
We in the idol-temple.  
The worlds are but attributes,  
We are the essence.<sup>115</sup>

He used to sing these poems in the street while he was wandering around the city as a water bearer wearing the garments of the wandering dervishes. People would be attracted to him and gather round him, and this became a successful way to broadcast the Ni'matullāhī doctrines. He also wrote poems in praise of the Shi'ite Imāms, which he used to sing in the streets. All of his poems were full of hidden mystical meanings, and many were 'ecstatic utterances' in a rhythmic format. Later Ni'matullāhī masters did not dare to make the claims Nūr 'Alī did in his poetry. For example, Majdhūb 'Alī Shāh stated that only the Prophet and Shi'ite Imāms are the manifestations of divine essence, a rank which Nūr 'Alī Shāh had claimed for himself.

In the shrine cities of the 'Atabāt many Shi'ite scholars were outraged by Nūr 'Alī Shāh's successful propagation of Sufism.<sup>116</sup> On the other hand, despite all the animosity, many well-known Shi'ite scholars were secretly initiated into the order or felt sympathy for Nūr 'Alī Shāh.<sup>117</sup>

Two perfect examples of this are Mullā 'Abd al-Ṣamad Hamadānī and Āqā Sayyid Mahdī Ṭabāṭabā'ī, known as the 'Sea of the sciences' (*Baḥr al-'ulūm*) (d. 1212/ 1797).<sup>112</sup> It is recounted that some of the Shi'ite seminary scholars went to Sayyid Mahdī Ṭabāṭabā'ī and asked him to issue an order for the excommunication of Nūr 'Alī Shāh. Sayyid Mahdī refused to do so without meeting Nūr 'Alī Shāh first. He asked Mullā 'Abd al-Ṣamad for a secret meeting with Nūr 'Alī Shāh. When they met, Sayyid Mahdī began by denying Sufism. However, it is said that, by the end of the meeting and due to the spiritual influence of Nūr 'Alī Shāh, Sayyid Mahdī felt extreme sympathy for Sufism and, according to some Ni'matullāhīs, it is believed that he was eventually initiated into Sufism.<sup>118</sup> However, scholars like Abbas Amanat believe that Baḥr al-'Ulūm's sympathetic attitude has been exaggerated.<sup>119</sup> Zarrīnkūb goes even further, saying that Baḥr al-'Ulūm did not issue any religious verdicts because, while he was cautious with regard to the Sufis, he did not have any genuine sympathy for them.<sup>120</sup> Some Sufi masters from other orders, such as Ḥājī 'Abd al-Wahāb Nā'inī (a Nūrbakhshī master), were initiated into the order and became disciples of Nūr 'Alī Shāh because of his charisma.<sup>121</sup>

Nūr 'Alī Shāh resided for about five years in the 'Atabāt, where he was poisoned twice. In 1212/1797, he passed away in Mūsīl and was buried beside Jonah's tomb.<sup>122</sup> He wrote numerous treatises and books of poetry, including *Risāla Jāmi' al-asrār*, where the style of his writing is similar to that of the *Gulistān* of Sa'dī.<sup>123</sup> Zarrīnkūb, though, has asserted that his writing is not comparable with Sa'dī's *Gulistān*. However, his prose style represents a combination of the styles of two great Persian writers, Sa'dī and Khāwja 'Abdullāh Anṣārī (d. 481/1088).<sup>124</sup> His *Risāla uṣūl wa furū'* discusses theological matters and is written in rhymed prose form, which is similar to the writings of Khāja 'Abdullāh Anṣārī.<sup>125</sup> In this treatise he also refers to mystical poetry and explains the exoteric religious duties, before indicating that there are some esoteric duties which are crucial to practice in order for one perfectly to accomplish the exoteric religious duties. He wrote about the spiritual path and the necessity of having a master to guide one on the path.<sup>126</sup> He also wrote a poetic interpretation of the Chapter of the Cow (*Sūrat al-Baqara*) and translated the *Khutbat al-bayān* into a poetic form consisting of 152 verses.<sup>127</sup> Amongst his other writings is a *Dīwān* of *ghazals* and *Qaṣāyid* and a *Mathnawī* called *Janāt al-wiṣāl* (only two volumes of this compendium were written by Nūr 'Alī Shāh).<sup>128</sup> This *Mathnawī* was written at the end of his life in the city of Dhahāb. His aim was to write eight books alluding to the symbolic number of the eight heavens (*janāt*). However, he passed away before he could finish it, so he asked his disciples to finish the

rest of that compendium.<sup>129</sup> Michel de Miras believes that Nūr 'Alī Shāh's purpose in writing this treatise was to enable wayfarers to obtain gnosis.<sup>130</sup> Nūr 'Alī also wrote a book of poetry about Imām Ḥusayn called *Rawḍat al-Shuhadā'*,<sup>131</sup> which was one of the first books written about the story of 'Āshūrā, after Mullā Ḥusayn Wā'iz Kāshifī's *Rawḍat al-shuhadā'*.

Nūr 'Alī Shāh was known to have a charming face and to wear his hair long, and his personality attracted many people.<sup>132</sup> However, he did not have much contact with Shi'ite scholars, nor did he write any treatises in response to their accusations. Although he was propagating Ni'matullāhī doctrines among the masses, some scholars were attracted by his beliefs and personality; yet he did not have any desire to meet scholars. When Baḥr al-'Ulūm asked 'Abd al-Ṣamad Hamadānī to meet Nūr 'Alī Shāh for the second time, Nūr 'Alī Shāh's response was, 'It is not me who wants to see him, but if he wishes to see me, he can come over.'<sup>133</sup> Once, when he was passing a village near Mashhad, his dignity and his beauty led the people of that village to think erroneously that he was their missing prince. Nūr 'Alī Shāh tried to convince them that he was not the prince they had been waiting for, but they would not accept it. It was during this period that Mirzā Mahdī Mujtahid ordered him to cut his hair.<sup>134</sup> He was also a singer who sang his own poetry which, along with his charisma and charming face, led to his vast popularity but frightened the Shi'ite scholars and even the rulers.

As Mast 'Alī Shāh said, 'He suffered oppression from the scholars of the time (*'ulamā-yi zamān*) and rulers of the period (*ḥukām aṣr*).'<sup>135</sup> He was persecuted almost everywhere he went: Iraq, Fars, Kirmān and Khurāsān, etc. In his poetry he lamented being misunderstood by common people and the literal-minded:

First, I sold my donkey's ears  
and acquired other, more human organs  
so that every moment now I hear  
from doors, from walls, the voice of Surūsh (angelic inspiration)  
and as his songs ring in my ears  
so secrets sing in my heart.  
Where is your heart? Where is your ear  
that I may sing these secret songs to you?  
Secrets boil in my heart but to whom  
can I reveal them, since there is not man of heart?  
I used to speak in parables of these things  
but now, O artful one, I have unveiled them for you.<sup>136</sup>

These lines were written in the *Janāt al-wiṣāl* at the end of his life in Irāq, where he was put under pressure by exoteric Shi'ite scholars for his mystical views about religion. He was tired of his opponents not hearing his message, which was a message of love. Unlike his opponents he did not threaten them with death or persecution; he just complained about their foolishness.

Nūr 'Alī Shāh played a crucial role in the history of the Ni'matullāhī revival in Persia. Indeed, without his efforts it would not have been achieved. According to Zarrīnkūb, his form of Sufism represented a union of Shi'ite Sufism with Ḥallāj's and Shibli's intoxicated mysticism.<sup>137</sup> Nūr 'Alī Shāh's revival of the Sufi tradition in Persia was also a reformation of it, an attempt to purify it of ossified traditionalism while at the same time affirming the necessity of following the shariah, and for this reason Nūr 'Alī Shāh appointed some of his disciples like Muẓaffar 'Alī Shāh, Majdhūb 'Alī Shāh, Mullā 'Abd al-Ṣamad Hamadānī and Ḥusayn 'Alī Shāh to propagate exoteric Islamic laws as well as Ni'matullāhī beliefs.<sup>138</sup> Some of Nūr 'Alī Shāh's beliefs, however, were close to those of the Shi'ite extremists (*ghulāt*).

Nūr 'Alī Shāh's emphasis on the path and the wayfarer was also important for the revival of the order. His propagation of the spiritual path of Sufism and the wayfarers thereon gave great lustre to the order, but his persecution by the legalist clergy signalled the need for a change from a charismatic to a more rational approach.<sup>139</sup> The order's adherents needed to be more moderate in espousing their doctrines in accordance with Uṣūlī theology.

The first Persian Ni'matullāhī master to succeed Riḍā 'Alī Shāh was Ḥusayn 'Alī Shāh, a disciple of Nūr 'Alī Shāh.<sup>140</sup> Ḥusayn 'Alī Shāh was spiritually trained by Nūr 'Alī Shāh but belonged to the class of Shi'ite seminary scholars, and thus was among the first masters who started the transformation of the Ni'matullāhī order from a popular to an elitist movement. His contributions to the mystical and religious milieu of Persia will be discussed in Chapter Four.

### The Ni'matullāhī Sufi Order and Muẓaffar 'Alī Shāh

Muẓaffar 'Alī Shāh (d.1215/1800) is another influential master in the history of the Ni'matullāhī order. Although his role in the revival of the order was not as crucial as that of Ma'sūm 'Alī Shāh and Nūr 'Alī Shāh, he was one of the most active and knowledgeable masters of the Ni'matullāhīs during this era. He was the first master after the return of the order to Persia to write about its cosmological views. Owing to his knowledge of seminary

sciences, his works were highly respected by Ma'sūm 'Alī Shāh and Nūr 'Alī Shāh.

His full name was Mīrzā Muḥammad Taqī ibn Muḥammad Kāzīm and his ancestors were all traditional doctors who came from the upper class of society in Kirmān.<sup>141</sup> Aside from studying medicine, he began studying the rational and traditional seminary sciences (*'ulūm 'aqlī wa naqlī*) and became well-versed in these sciences. He had his own pupils studying these sciences, and it is said that every time he walked towards the mosque, as he was about to enter 12 professional readers of the Qur'ān would recite around him.<sup>142</sup>

He was more of a philosopher (*hakīm*) than a jurist (*faqīh*). He had studied natural philosophy (*hikmat ṭabī'ī*) and divine theosophy (*hikmat-i ilāhī*).<sup>143</sup> Like other Sufi masters, he was not satisfied with the seminary religious sciences and so started to search for a spiritual master. In Kirmān he met Nūr 'Alī Shāh, Mushtāq 'Alī Shāh and Rawnaq 'Alī Shāh, and became a disciple of Mushtāq 'Alī.<sup>144</sup>

Before his initiation Muẓaffar had a strong bias against Sufism and avoided being with Sufis. He first encountered Mushtāq when he was invited to a session of the *rawḍa khānī* (mourning of Imām Ḥusayn). Mushtāq attended the session without being invited, and at dinner he sat in front of Muẓaffar. Muẓaffar did not eat because of Mushtāq's presence and Mushtāq became offended and said, 'O you, if this is the table of the Lord (*muwla*) then it does not matter if friends or enemies are sitting around it. It does not matter if dervishes or non-dervishes are eating from it.' And he left the session. Muẓaffar went after him and from that incident his inner fire of spiritual love was kindled.<sup>145</sup>

Following that incident, Muẓaffar went to Nūr 'Alī Shāh, who directed him towards Rawnaq 'Alī Shāh for the inculcation of *dhikr* and initiation into Sufism.<sup>146</sup> However, it was Mushtāq 'Alī Shāh's spiritual charisma that had attracted Muẓaffar and caused him to be initiated into the order.<sup>147</sup> After the initiation, he accompanied Mushtāq 'Alī Shāh who became his spiritual guide on the path.<sup>148</sup> His attraction to Mushtāq might have been the reason Ma'sūm commanded Mushtāq to go to Kirmān and guide seekers.

Mast 'Alī Shāh, with typical hyperbole, compared Muẓaffar's importance in Sufism with that of Rūmī, for both had dedicated their works of poetry to men less literate than themselves but possessing a high degree in Sufism, and both recounted similar experiences of love of their master. Rūmī dedicated his *Dīwān-i Shams* to Shams-i Tabrīzī, while Muẓaffar 'Alī Shāh dedicated all his *Ghazaliyāt* and *Qasāyid* to Mushtāq 'Alī Shāh. Muẓaf-

far 'Alī Shāh, just like Rūmī, was well versed in the religious sciences of the day. However, Mast 'Alī Shāh believed that he was more knowledgeable in the philosophy of illumination (*falsafa-yi ishrāq*) and Peripatetic philosophy than Rūmī.<sup>149</sup>

Muẓaffar's pupils and those who would gather round him at the mosque were upset by his behaviour towards the illiterate Mushtāq. They begged him to return to seminary school, and some believed that he had become mentally unstable. Muẓaffar's response was, 'Your rational Mīrẓā (*mīrẓā-yi mantiqī*) [Muẓaffar] is dead. Leave and search for another Muḥammad Taqī [Muẓaffar].'<sup>150</sup> This response is similar to the one Rūmī's gave to those who came and begged him to his return to seminary school and abandon Shams-i Tabrizī.

Although the path of Sufism in Muẓaffar 'Alī Shāh's time was outwardly a path of calamity, as the majority of the masters were persecuted and killed by those who rejected their utterances, nevertheless Muẓaffar 'Alī Shāh entered into this path and diligently passed through the spiritual stations. After he had become spiritually qualified, Rawnaq 'Alī Shāh authorised him to be a guide for seekers.<sup>151</sup> Mast 'Alī Shāh believed that it had been centuries since there had been a well-versed Sufi master like Muẓaffar 'Alī Shāh, while Riḍā Qulī Khān Hidāyat noted that he was referred to as the 'Second Rūmī' (*Muwlawī thānī*).<sup>152</sup>

As mentioned earlier, Muẓaffar 'Alī Shāh's poetry had in-depth mystical meanings, and was very influential in the development of the Ni'matullāhī order. However, his knowledge of the seminary sciences did not protect him from persecution by fundamentalist Shi'ite scholars. Eventually, Mullā 'Abd Allāh Kirmānī issued a religious order for the murder of Mushtāq and wrote a letter to Āqā Muḥammad Khān Qājār proposing that he put Muẓaffar to death. However, owing to Āqā Muḥammad Khān's positive view about Sufism, especially the Ni'matullāhīs, he ignored Mullā 'Abd Allāh and invited Muẓaffar 'Alī Shāh to Tehran.<sup>153</sup>

After Āqā Muḥammad Khān Qājār passed away in 1797, Fath 'Alī Shāh became the king of the Qājārs. With the help of Ibrāhīm Khān-i Kalāntar, Āqā Muḥammad 'Alī Bihbahānī brought Muẓaffar 'Alī Shāh to Kirmānshāh. Āqā Muḥammad 'Alī tortured and persecuted Muẓaffar but he never invited him to a theological debate because he was aware of Muẓaffar's seminary knowledge.

Muẓaffar passed away in 1215/1800, three years after Nūr 'Alī Shāh. He wrote numerous books and literary papers which are highly valuable for a better understanding of Ni'matullāhī thought, although his role was not as

crucial to the success of the revival movement as that of his contemporaries, Ma'sūm 'Alī Shāh, Nūr 'Alī Shāh and Riḍā 'Alī Shāh.

Muẓaffar also wrote a book called *Summary of the Sciences* (*Khulāṣat al-ʿulūm*) each chapter of which explains a common science of the time.<sup>154</sup> His masterpiece was 'Red Sulphur' (*Kibrīt al-aḥmar*), a treatise devoted to the meaning of the invocation of God (*dhikr*) in the Ni'matullāhī Order.<sup>155</sup> However, this treatise has been attributed to some other Ni'matullāhī masters as well. Some scholars believe that it was written by Nūr 'Alī Shāh under the title of *ʿAwārif al-maʿārif*. Others attribute it to Majdhūb, who most probably copied it from Muẓaffar, which was common among Sufi masters of that era. In this treatise Muẓaffar explained Sufi litanies and the practice of *dhikr* and asserted that the continuous practice of litanies and *dhikr* would lead to a state of proximity to the divine, and to divine peace of heart (*sakīna-yi qalbīyya*), which is among the first stations on the path. After Mushtāq was martyred in Kirmān, Muẓaffar 'Alī Shāh started to write poetry lamenting his separation from Mushtāq, to whom he dedicated an anthology of his poetry, calling it *Diwān-i Mushtāqīyya*.<sup>156</sup> 'Compendium of the Seas' (*Jām-i al-biḥār*) and 'Sea of the Secrets' (*baḥr al-asrār*) are two other anthologies of poetry written by Muẓaffar 'Alī Shāh.<sup>157</sup>

Unlike the future Ni'matullāhī master, Muẓaffar did not dissimulate his opposition to the seminary scholars. Muẓaffar said, "Those scholars who are called the inheritors of the prophets are not the exoteric jurists, because the exoteric people confess that they are ignorant of the paths toward heaven."<sup>158</sup> Muẓaffar 'Alī Shāh stated that all this bitter opposition to the Sufis was due the jurists' lack of understanding. His beliefs about the perfect man (*insān-i kāmīl*) were highly influenced by Ibn 'Arabī's philosophy. He also believed that during the time of the occultation of the twelfth Imām, perfect Sufis could act as the manifestation of the Imām, stating, 'Ma'sūm 'Alī is the manifestation of the guiding Mahdī'.<sup>159</sup>

Therefore, like some of his predecessors, he believed in the Mahdī-like role of the Sufi master. However, he made it clear that when he mentioned the term Mahdī, he was referring only to the twelfth Imām of the Shi'ites, and never used the term Mahdī directly for a Sufi master. In praise of Mushtāq, he wrote:

I swear to God that in this cycle,  
I am the deputy to the Mahdī of the 'Askarī faith.  
I am the sun of truth, I am the one,  
who was taught the art of fostering inferiors.<sup>160</sup>

However, such beliefs constituted challenges to the authority of the Shi'ite seminary scholars. Muẓaffar indicated that their understanding of the traditions of the Shi'ite Imāms was limited and lacked true understanding of their in-depth meaning. However, the real Sufis, through the blessings of Shi'ite Imāms, had gained the gnosis that is the true understanding of religion.<sup>161</sup> Here he clearly indicated both his Sufi and Shi'ite beliefs, which were later adopted by Majdhūb 'Alī Shāh.<sup>162</sup> In this respect Muẓaffar 'Alī Shāh was an important influence on the mystical doctrine of Majdhūb 'Alī Shāh, who played an even more crucial role in the future formation of Persian Ni'matullāhī theosophy.

## Conclusion

As we have seen in this chapter, the period during which these masters led the Ni'matullāhī order was far from tranquil. The order faced a great deal of opposition alongside its growing fame. Even when for short periods they were favoured by the rulers of different cities, the Shi'ite ulama were usually successful in persuading those rulers against giving any support to Sufism with the accusation that the Sufi masters they favoured intended to make a claim on kingship.

However, despite these vicissitudes, the three masters discussed in this chapter were responsible not only for the revival of the Ni'matullāhī order in Persia but also for its reformation. Their aim was to revive an esoteric tradition in Persia that had been absent for a long time, and to redirect Sufism back in the right direction. These masters fought against two different classes of society and tried to purify both. On the one hand, they endured opposition from the exoteric religious class who were led by Shi'ite shariah-minded scholars and yet tried to introduce the inner meaning of religion to them. On the other hand, they struggled against the decadence of the wandering *qalandars* and libertine Sufis who were careless about observance of the exoteric laws of Islam.

One of the main reasons for the opposition of the Shi'ite scholars and rulers to the Sufis was the relationship between the masters of the Ni'matullāhī order and their disciples. The absolute submission of disciples to their masters implicitly challenged the authority of both the rulers and Shi'ite seminary scholars. Nūr 'Alī Shāh had clearly stated that the power of the *qutb* (sole master of the order) was greater than that of any ruler.<sup>163</sup> More essential was their emphasis on the relationship between the Mahdi

(Twelfth Imām) and the Sufi Master. In certain cases, as explained in the story of Riḍā 'Alī Shāh, one of the Imāms would command the Sufi master through dreams or visions. The Sufi belief that the seeker should choose his master based on spiritual attraction gave more freedom to the individual seeker than was allowed by the *mujtahids*.

As Zarrīnkūb notes, the enthusiastic popular reception of this movement was suppressed by the triumph of the Shi'ite fundamentalist scholars and, in particular, their main champion, Āqā Muḥammad 'Alī Bihbahānī.<sup>164</sup> The historical events would seem to indicate that Āqā Muḥammad 'Alī Bihbahānī and other anti-Sufi scholars were triumphant in suppressing Sufis, but in reality this was not the case. On the one hand, the enthusiastic preaching and propagation of the order by masters such as Ma'sūm 'Alī Shāh, Fayḍ 'Alī Shāh, Nūr 'Alī Shāh and Mushtāq 'Alī Shāh led to its popularity and revival; on the other, opposition to the order was harsh and there was a desperate need for consolidation for the order to survive the clerical persecution it was subjected to.<sup>165</sup> These masters gained fame among the people because they brought to Persian society a traditional yet new way of thinking that emphasised the inner meaning of religion. Although the people of Persia had become strangers to Sufism, during this historical period of political turmoil, an exoteric religious system could not respond to all the social and spiritual needs of the community.

During these masters' lives, the seat of the leadership of the Ni'matullāhī order was in the Deccan. Riḍā 'Alī Shāh was the *quṭb* (pole) of the order for about 60 years, and lived through the revival movement in Persia.<sup>166</sup> He trained those masters who dedicated themselves to its revival, and the historical record shows that the persecution of the Sufis by Shi'ite fundamentalist clerics more or less changed the direction of the order from an enthusiastic movement, which had been based on ecstatic poetry and a Qalandari'ite lifestyle, into an elitist movement providing a new, mystical interpretation of the Shi'ite seminary sciences. This evolution into a scholarly order even affected the outward appearance of its master, Ḥusayn 'Alī Shāh or Majdhūb 'Alī Shāh, who swapped the traditional dervish cloak and hat (*tāj*) for the cleric's gown and turban. As we shall see in the next chapter, Ḥusayn 'Alī Shāh even lived in a seminary school as a professor of religious studies for much of his life.