

**Old Wine in a New Chalice:
A Case Study of Gender in a Living Sufi Tradition**



By

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**Taxila Institute of Asian Civilization
Quaid-i-Azam University
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**Old Wine in a New Chalice:
A Case Study of Gender in a Living Sufi
Tradition**

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In the field of

Asian Studies

By

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**Taxila Institute of Asian Civilization
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Islamabad**

2017

Certificate of Approval


This is to certify that the research work presented in this thesis titled “*Old Wine in a New Chalice: A Case Study of Gender in a Living Sufi Tradition*” was conducted by Ms. Mussarrat Bashir Youssuf under the supervision of Prof. Dr. Tanvir Anjum. No part of this thesis has been submitted anywhere else for any other Degree. This thesis is submitted to Taxila Institute of Asian Civilizations, Quaid-i-Azam University, Islamabad in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy in the field of Asian Studies.

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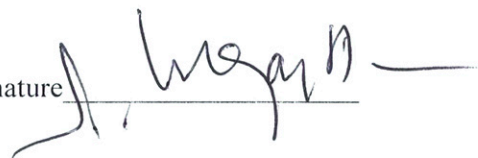
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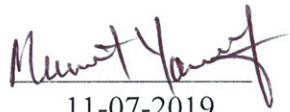
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بِسْمِ اللَّهِ الرَّحْمَنِ الرَّحِيمِ
الحمد لله
والصلاة والسلام على سيدنا محمد وآله
والسلام على من اتبع الهدى
أجمعين
اللهم صل على محمد
وآله الطيبين الطاهرين
الذين هم الصالحين
الجميعين
اللهم صل على محمد
وآله الطيبين الطاهرين
الذين هم الصالحين
الجميعين
اللهم صل على محمد
وآله الطيبين الطاهرين
الذين هم الصالحين
الجميعين

Ba-naam-e aan keh ou naam-e na darad

Ba-har naam-e keh khwani, sar bar aarad

Keh zaat-e oust dar har zaat saari

Keh naam-e oust dar har ism jaari

To the One, Who has no name

Yet, whatever name is called, He responds

For His Essence flows in all essences

His Name echoes in all names

Translation: Author

Abstract

From the medieval era to modern times, a vast body of knowledge and scholarly work has been produced on various aspects of Sufism. However, an overwhelming focus on medieval and classical Sufi texts has left a huge gap for studying Sufism in the contemporary era. Moreover, where some studies focused on Sufi women, they suggested lack of a strong or leadership role of women in current times' Sufi traditions outside the Western world – a misconception that merits attention. The study, therefore, investigates women's active role in Sufism in current times by studying a living Sufi tradition in Jhang, Punjab (Pakistan), selected purposively to understand the current roles and trends for women's participation in the Sufi world. The study also explores in depth the role of the head and spiritual leader of the tradition and traces historical influences of key Sufi personalities to understand the worldview of the tradition. Alongside an analysis of factors behind women's role and status in Sufi circles, a discussion of the universal feminine principle discoursed by eminent Sufis and the gender definition provided by the Holy Prophet Muhammadﷺ, the study also explores how the latter were adopted by a current Sufi tradition of the 21st century.

The study describes the experiential side of women's role in the select *silsilah* by using narrative inquiry to collect insiders' views and anecdotal accounts of select women. It provides case studies of unique journeys of prominent Sufi women in the *Silsilah*. The study adds to the Sufi *malfuzat* (discourses) literature and historical research on Sufi *silsilahs* in the contemporary world by bringing to light to date unpublished events and teachings of contemporary Sufi personalities of Pakistan. The research also contributes to Sufi and gender literature by elucidating a new perspective about gender and contributing a new term, i.e. supra-gender that has never been used in Sufi or gender literature so far. The gender definitions, roles, perceptions and transformations, alongside the personal and experiential aspects of women's spiritual journeys in a living Sufi tradition are the focus of this research, whereby it tries to fill the scholarship gap on this important subject.

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How can a few words be enough to express the surge of gratitude gushing out of a grateful heart? While confessing inability, I still embark on doing so, as gratefulness, in the humblest manner, is the uncontainable spring flowing out of my heart.

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¹ Urdu long vowels such as in Jaan or Paak are written with a single vowel in this study to follow the prescribed trend in academic writings.

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I joyfully acknowledge the love and support provided by my family. Muhammad Abdullah Youssuf, my brother, son and buddy, provided constant reassurance, inputs and invaluable feedback. My lovely sister ‘Fairy’, brother-in-law Jahangeer helped in numerous ways and their three little angels, Gul-e-Fatimah, Ali Jebraan and Ali Shahaan assisted in all the cute ways possible, while my wonderful support Sidra Malik, helped tirelessly with references.

Let me also offer my heartfelt thanks to all the rest of the universe that helped and comforted me during this most daunting and vital task of my life. How many times I cried and laughed during this work is known only to my loyal friends – silence and solitude. Forever, I offer my most precious and profound gratitude to my Beloved, *Dhat-i-Pak*, the Source of Limitless Love and Countless Blessings – the Only Worthy Aim of all my love.

Mussarrat Bashir Youssuf

Contents

Introduction	1
Chapter 1	
Feminine in Sufism: The Pearl in the Shell	36
Chapter 2	
Historical Context of the Spiritual Tradition: A Bird's Eye-View	78
Chapter 3	
Woman, Man, None or Both: The Supra-Gender Spiritual Realm	127
Chapter 4	
The Sober Drunk: Women, Love and Discipline	169
Conclusion	219
Appendices	231
I. <i>Shajra i Tariqat</i> (Spiritual Pedigree) of Baba Jan Sarkar Dr Muhammad Youssuf Shaheen Shah	
II. Stories told by Baba Ji Ghauth Ali Shah Qadir Qalandar – An Excerpt	
Select Bibliography	236

Introduction

“That which we call a rose; by any other word would smell as sweet.”¹ Shakespeare could not have been more accurate in validating Sufism, a phenomenon that took birth in the bosom of Islam in the sixth century, cradled in Arabia, gained youthfulness and strength in Persia and spread in the rest of the world for the next few hundred years, when renamed by a Christian priest in the nineteenth century, became a curious case for many. Sufism² is the anglicised version of the Arabic word ‘*al-tasawwuf*’, to describe the spiritual realm and practices within the universe of Islam. It entails the overall esoteric aspects of life and the quest for spiritual development by exploring the inner, deeper, subtler, yet the strongest currents of spiritual life. A deep study of Sufism³, as explained by the Sufis⁴ themselves, reveals that it is the way toward direct realisation of God and

¹ A famous line from Shakespeare’s world-famous play ‘Romeo and Juliet’ where Juliet says this to challenge and negate the importance of a name for the reality itself.

² The term Sufism was first used by a German Evangelist preacher and church leader Friedrich August Gottreu Tholuck (1799-1877), in 1821 in a paper titled ‘*Sufismus sive Theosophia Persarum pantheistica* (meaning ‘Sufism or the Persian Pantheistic Theosophy), which gained gradual popularity among subsequent Western writers. He also paralleled Muhammadan mystical doctrines as pantheistic asserting their extra-Islamic roots, another trend that persisted among some writers since then. He had a keen interest in the orient and later also published “*Blütensammlung aus der morgenländischen Mystik*” (*A Collection of Flowers from Eastern Mystics*). For some excellent details on the evolution of the term Sufism as well as the Sufi ideas among Western scholars, see foreword by Seyyed Hossein Nasr in *Sufism: Love and Wisdom*, eds. Jean- Louis Michon & Roger Gaetani (Lahore: Suhail Academy, 2007).

³ The assertions made about Sufism and what it tries to achieve are mainly based on the discussions held with the head and leader of the living Sufi *silsilah*, Baba Jan Sarkar, Dr Muhammad Youssuf Shaheen Shah Qadir Qalandar, the focus of this research. Also, the research tries to capture the essence gained through the readings of classical texts by the Sufis such as Ibn Arabi (various texts including *Futuhāt-e-Makkiyya*, *Fusus al-Hikam*), Ali bin Usman al-Hujwiri (*Kashf-ul-Mahjub*), Khawaja Nizam-al-Din Awliya (*Fawa'id-al-Fuad*), Farid al-Din Attar (*Tadhkirat-ul-Awliya*), Ghauth Ali Shah Qadir Qalandar (*Tadhkira-i-Ghauthiya*), Jalal ud Din Rumi (*Mathnavi-i-Ma'anawi*) and others, which have been cited accordingly. Moreover, to capture reflections of contemporary writers, the same have been cited too.

⁴ In Sufi literature produced in modern times, a seeker of the Divine truth and spiritual development under the ambit Islam is referred to as a Sufi, a term that has also been used to denote the same in this research. However, there are other titles used in classical texts based on the references in the Holy Quran and traditions of the Holy Prophet ﷺ such as *Wali* (pl. *Awliya* – Friends of Allah), *Faqir* (pl. *Fuqara* – those having nothing but God), *Dervish* (Persian for mendicant), *pashmina-posh* (Persian - wearing woollen/coarse clothes) *Majzub* (Arabic -absorbed in Reality), *Qalandar* (title for high ranking, charismatic Sufis) and many others are used for the same with subtle differences that only a practical follower of the Islamic spiritual path can understand. As P. M. Currie considers it "misleading for the terms *Sufi*, *dervish*, *faqir* to be translated as 'saint'. They are wide-ranging in their meaning, and it is difficult, therefore, to be specific in their definition", P. M. Currie, *The Shrine and Cult of Muin al-Din Chishti of Ajmer* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1992), 4.

pertains to an individual's personal and most intimate relationship with the Divine. A Sufi's main objective is to realise the true essence of his/her inner Reality, which is not restricted by any kind of worldly delimitations and divisions, including caste, creed or gender. Thus, for those who follow, it "is a way of life. It is neither a religion nor a philosophy,"⁵ as indicated by a woman Sufi of the twentieth century.

1. The Research Query

There has been extensive debate about the origin of Sufism⁶. The Sufis themselves consider *al-Tasawwuf*⁷ (also known as *al-Faqr*, *tariqa* (in Arabic) and *Sufigari* or *Dervershi* (in Persian) to be the true and real Islam which was conveyed and preached by the Holy Prophet Muhammad ﷺ from heart to heart. He is believed to have transmitted the Sufi teachings to his companions, particularly to the *Ahl al-suffah* (people of the bench), who used to live day and night in his company, inside the Mosque. His teachings were fully received and internalized by some of the companions particularly 'Ali (*Karam Allah-u wajhu*), Fatimah (daughter of the Holy Prophet ﷺ), Abu Bakr Siddique, Awais al-Qarani, Salman al-Farsi, Suhaib al-Rumi and Bilal (*Radhi Allahu anhum*), to mention some of the few Sufis of his time. Sufis assert that the essence, practices and the teachings of Sufism can be evidently found in the earliest history of Islam. The presence of the words *Faqr and Awliya Allah* and various other spiritual teachings in the holy Quran further validate its Islamic origin. Since the Holy Prophet's ﷺ pre-prophetic life was full of retreats deep in the hills of Makkah, where his first revelation came at Mount Hira, Sufis relate their spiritual practices and meditations

⁵ Irina Tweedie, *The Chasm of Fire, A Woman's Experience of Liberation through the Teachings of a Sufi Master* (California: Golden Sufi Centre, 1982), 13.

⁶ For details, see Annemarie Schimmel. *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*. (New Delhi: Yoda Press, 1975).

⁷ The oldest Persian treatise on Sufism written in the eleventh century by Ali Al-Hujwiri, titled *Kashf-al-Mahjub* states one of the traditions of the Holy Prophet showing the use of the word '*Ahl-al-Tasawwuf*'. Many debate the authenticity of the Hadith, however, al-Hujwiri clearly establishes that whether the terminology was not used during the time of the Holy Prophet (S.A.W), the essence, practices and the teachings of Sufism are found in the earliest history of Islam.

(such as *dhikr*, *muraqaba* or *tasawwur*) as taken from the Holy Prophet's ﷺ life itself. Sufi teachings and doctrines, essentially universal in nature, are built on the foundations provided by the Quran and the Sunnah (oral and written) of the Prophet ﷺ. His title and role as the '*Rahmat al-il-alimin*'⁸ (mercy for all the worlds) as decreed by the Quran is the essential foundation of the universal message of Sufism believing in the indispensable oneness of humanity. Another way of looking at it is that Sufism "derives its sanction from the inner urge of the soul to be reunited and not to live in exile. It seeks unification. It is, in fact, the mysticism of love,"⁹ as one modern writer on Sufism puts it.

The Sufis find unity in the diversity¹⁰ scattered around them. Common people look at things as they seem to be. "This is a man, that is a woman; this is me, that is you, type of thinking prevails among the majority, but the spiritual wisdom granted to Sufis looks at diversity only as a veil. They look at all things as One Reality showing itself through innumerable dimensions."¹¹ To reach that stage where the vantage point changes completely, indefatigable efforts are required to negate and nullify the ego under the guidance of an illumined teacher.

The concept of gender and consequent identification and discrimination caused due to it are the strongest traps of the ego that negatively affect the process of reaching to the greater Inner Reality which Sufis believe to be genderless and 'same', residing in men, women and transgenders with the equal potential to manifest 'Itself' beyond apparent identity. Hence, gender is one of the exhibits of ego that needs to be understood and nullified in order to walk successfully on the path

⁸ Quran 21:107

⁹ Zahur al-Hasan Sharib, *The Reflections of the Mystics of Islam* (Southampton: Sharib Press, 1995), 7.

¹⁰ The Sufi doctrine of *Wahdat-al-Wajud* (Oneness of Being/Existence) has the most profound impact on Sufi teachings and help lead human mind see the similar reality giving life and existence to all things beyond the apparent differences created on the bases of caste, creed, colour, status or gender – all distinctions created through physical, social, intellectual or dogmatic understanding of life. For further details see Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimension of Islam* (New Delhi: Yoda Press, 1975), 267.

¹¹ Personal conversation with Baba Jan Sarkar Dr Muhammad Youssuf Shaheen, June 22, 2008.

of spiritual development. Some Sufis and mystics use ascetic practices to conquer the ego, but the shortest route is *ishq*¹²— a deep and burning love of the Eternal Beauty, taken by others.¹³ When *ishq* overcomes common intellect, understanding of and response to worldly systems and their roles and relationships change completely. Hence, the definition of gender and its divisions based on worldly roles and status also change in the realm of *tasawwuf*. Indicating the irrelevance of gender differences in the spiritual realm, Baba Ji Nizam al-Din Awliya (d. 1325), a renowned Chishti Sufi of Delhi, stated that “when a lion comes out of a forest, no one asks whether it is a male or a female. The matter is that the progeny of Adam [*Alaih-i-Salam* – the first prophet], be a man or a woman, should be admired for submission and piety.”¹⁴ This also means that after spiritual accomplishments and transformation, a person is to be recognised and respected for his/her spiritual status regardless of gender differences. The poet al-Mutanabbi (915-965 CE), cited by many including Annemarie Schimmel and Carl W. Ernst, emphasised the irrelevance of gender differences in a verse using the similes of the sun and moon (which are regarded feminine and masculine, respectively, in the Arabic language):

“Were women as I have described; women would be superior to men.

Femininity is no defect in the sun; nor should the moon be proud of masculinity”¹⁵

¹² *Ishq*, from the root a, sh, q, in Arabic is the term for deepest, irresistible and insatiable, parching desire in a heart to be united with the object of desire. It is an all comprehensive term depicting highly intense and complex set of emotions. In Sufism, it has been used as a standard term for the purest, deepest and highest form of love for God, the Holy Prophet ﷺ or the Sufi masters. Although English has many beautiful phrases to depict love such as amor, affection, infatuation and ardour just to name a few, however, the general aphrodisiac contours of love depicted in English adjectives lack the sense that *Ishq* depicts for love beyond physical and sexual boundaries.

¹³ This section heavily draws on the explanations made by the Sufi Master Baba Jan Sarkar Dr Muhammad Youssuf Shaheen in one of his discourses on gender, June 22, 2008.

¹⁴ Amir Hasan Sijzi Dehlvi, *Fawaid-al-Fuad*, Urdu tr. Khwaja Hassan Thani Nizami Dehlvi (Delhi: Urdu Academy, first published in 1990, rpt. 1992), 257.

¹⁵ Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, 435. See also Carl W. Ernst, *Teachings of Sufism: Selection and Translation* (Boston and London: Shambhala, 1999), 180.

One no less eminent than Shaykh Bandanawaz Gesudaraz (d. 1422, a Sufi of Chishti *Silsilah*) explains the point further. Despite being known as an orthodox Muslim, he felt no bar to writing passionate love poems at the age of ninety to express his mystical ideas, saying, “You look at the stature and at the face and love a human being. I see nothing but the manifestation of God in beauty.”¹⁶ This is but one example how Sufis go beyond appearance by identifying, realising and communicating with the inner Reality, the Soul, which does not have a sexual or gendered identity.

2. Introduction to the Research Problem

The rocky land of *tasawwuf* has been producing innumerable precious, sparkling jewels since the time of the Holy Prophet Muhammad ﷺ.¹⁷ Women of the Holy Prophet’s ﷺ household, specifically his daughter Bibi Ji¹⁸ Fatima al-Zahra, is considered the first *faqir* or *qutb* by Sufis.¹⁹ Her resplendent face shone so much with heavenly light that her prayer niche used to be lit up. Also known as *Umm-i- Abi-ha* (mother of her father) due to her extreme love and care for her father, she has been accepted by Sufis as a role model along with her mother Bibi Ji Khadijah²⁰ and her husband Hazrat Ali (*Karram-Allah-u Wajhah-u*), the wholeheartedly accepted leader of Sufis. Later, Bibi Ji Rabiha Basri’s name (d. 801) surfaces in Sufi literature prominently, indicating that the Sufi world is not devoid of women’s dazzling examples. Thus, it is evident from history that both men and women were bequeathed with the spiritual inheritance of Islam. However, there is

¹⁶ Annemarie Schimmel, “Some Salient Features of Muslim Culture in the Deccan,” in *Sufi Traditions and New Departures: Recent Scholarship on Continuity & Change in South Asian Sufism*, eds. Sorren Lassen and Hugh Van Skyhawk (Islamabad: Taxila Institute of Asian Civilizations Quaid-i-Azam University, 2008), 15.

¹⁷ For Muslims, offering *salawat* (ﷺ), the phrase of salutation generally uttered as ‘*Sal-Allah-o alaihi wasallam* (*Blessings of Allah on him, and His peace*) or its other similar forms, is most preferred while mentioning the name of the Holy Prophet Muhammad ﷺ. In this thesis, this salutation has been added as ﷺ at the mention of his holy name.

¹⁸ For women mystics, generally the prefix of Bibi Ji is used in Pakistan to exhibit one’s reverence and veneration for their piety and noble status. The same has been used with names of women mystics in this thesis.

¹⁹ Camille Adams Helminski, *Women of Sufism* (Boston and London: Shambhala, 2003) 11.

²⁰ For details see, Saadia Khawar Khan Chishti, “Female Spirituality in Islam,” in *Encyclopaedia of Islamic Spirituality*, ed. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Vol. I (Lahore: Suhail Academy, 2000), 199-219.

no or little information available on women Sufis compared to their male counterparts. Details about women are constantly missing in Sufi literature.²¹ This is due to various reasons such as difficulties in accessing information about women Sufis' lives because of the cultural tilt of Muslim societies towards the seclusion and concealment of women from public life, which may have prevented even interested authors from writing about them. The 'veiling'²² of women has been commonly practiced in Muslim societies across the world, which can pose challenges to women's mobility and access in many social settings.

However, the primary reason for missing Sufi women seems to be these potential challenges or even possible biases of men writers and hagiographers, which lead them to mention women partially or in appendices. While writing about men Sufis in detail, discussions of women appear to be more of token mentions – either because authors did not have enough information or because they considered women not as worthy of note as men.²³ One of the earliest writers on women Sufis is the Persian Sufi Abu Abd al-Rahman Muhammad ibn al-Husayn b. Muhammad as-Sulami (976-1021)²⁴, who wrote a special treatise on women Sufis capturing succinct portraits of eighty women Sufis from central Islamic lands who lived between eighth and eleventh centuries C. E. However, this has not received appropriate attention as these writings came to light very late. Furthermore, when some modern writers mention Sufi women, they grant them ranks and status per their own assessments, based on their personal judgments and misperceptions. Deep-rooted biases, misunderstandings about and mishandling of spiritual knowledge and doctrines regarding

²¹ Laury Silvers, "Early Pious, Mystic Sufi Women," in *The Cambridge Companion to Sufism*, ed. Lloyd Ridgeon (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 24.

²² *Purdah* (veiling and seclusion of women) is a social norm in majority of Muslim countries based on explanations provided by religious scholars of the Islamic injunctions on women's role in society.

²³ Rkia Elaroui Cornell, *Early Sufi Women* (Lahore: Suhail Academy, 2005), 19.

²⁴ As-Sulami's *Dhikr an-Niswa al-Muta 'abbidat as-Sufiyyat* (translated as *Early Sufi Women* by Rkia Elaroui Cornell), is a precious account of eighty Sufi women of medieval times.

women's spiritual accomplishments did not even leave Bibi Ji Rabiah Basri out of their foolhardiness.²⁵

Being the most famous, and sometimes the only woman Sufi accepted amongst long lists of Sufi men, Bibi Rabiah Basri has been the icon of spiritual mastery in her own right and thus has always won space in Sufi literature. Some writers, though compelled to mention her as a *qalandar* (a topic that we will revert to in detail in chapters 1 and 3), with their great magnanimity could only grant her the rank of 'a half *qalandar*' along with two other full *qalandars*.²⁶ The latter were given the same rank but with full stars for no other obvious reason but their male gender. The 'two and a half *qalandar*' myth has pervaded widely in South Asia and accepted even in popular Sufi circles.²⁷ It is considered to be a deliberate attempt at undermining Sufi women and their accomplishments, representing a lack of thorough analysis thereof and forming a huge gap in Sufi literature.

Furthermore, another major reason for fewer women being mentioned in Sufi literature is due to women's humility, general shyness and reluctance to claim fame. The same characteristics can also be present in women Sufis. This causes them not to say much about their spiritual states even when they are asked. This has been a challenge in this research too and a challenge for the broader historical study of Sufi women. As indicated in the literature review below, there has been a heartening trend of dealing with the aforementioned 'Missing Women'²⁸ phenomenon in Sufism. However, it has not yet been pursued sufficiently by researchers. The literature has sometimes

²⁵ A personal conversation with Baba Jan Sarkar, May 21, 2007.

²⁶ Hazrat Bu Ali Qalandar (1209-1324) of Panipat, India and Hazrat Lal Shahbaz Qalandar (1177-1275) of Sehwan Sharif, Pakistan.

²⁷ Muhammad Ilyas Adil, *Shan-i-Qalandar* (Lahore: Mushtaq Ahmed, 2014), 14-15.

²⁸ Missing women has been a well-known thesis in contemporary development debate where the term has come to indicate thousands of deaths of girl-child due to son-preference in India. However, I just use this term for its idiomatic potential to indicate the 'men-preference' of writers and scholars who wrote about Sufis.

indicated women's roles as mothers, wives, sisters and daughters of Sufis, which has further blocked the possibility of seeing women independently, in their own right, as seekers of spiritual truth and examining their pathways to spiritual ascension. The great halos of sacredness and sainthood around the personalities of their husbands, sons or brothers are sometimes used to blur the light of Sufi women by showing them less in status against men Sufis of their family.

Finally, in the contemporary world, we see only men claiming leadership roles and space as '*gaddi nashin*' (hereditary custodians of the Sufi shrines) in Sufi circles as a hereditary practice created through social norms. This is not because the daughters, wives, sisters or women disciples of Sufi masters did not attain equal or higher spiritual status, but because existing social and cultural norms promote and sometimes compel the selection of male children or relatives as leaders or managers of Sufi *khaniqahs* and *astanas* (lodges) or shrines. Mainly, the hereditary custodians are required to deal with general public who visit shrines and take care of administrative tasks related to the management of everyday needs. Not all people who visit shrines are Sufis or necessarily practice Sufi values of oneness and equality. Majority of people visiting these lodges or shrines, do so mainly to receive *barakah* (grace or blessings) of the place or the person. Placing women Sufis as in charge or managers of such lodges, may neither be easily accepted by masses in general nor even by Sufis' descendants, who may not have inculcated a Sufi worldview just because of their biological relationship with a Sufi. Apparently, such factors promote following the norms of society and give male children or relatives a more prominent role in the hereditary succession. Conversely, the spiritual succession granted by the Sufi masters does not depend upon any social norms or physical relationships.²⁹ A true Sufi man or woman, even if having spiritual

²⁹ For details on succession issues with regard to women see Kelly Pemberton "Women *Pirs*, Sainly Succession, and Spiritual Guidance in South Asian Sufism," *The Muslim World*, Vol. 96, No. 1 (January 2006), 61-87.

succession, would not seek administrative authority or social prominence over others or fight power wars. They always focus on their inner, spiritual journey instead of outer ones. Putting women Sufis in a conflicting situation not only defeats the cause of spiritual development for them but also for common people visiting such places, who can easily fall prey to divisions and conflicts. Women's piety is more acceptable to common minds than their leadership and authority.

3. Statement of the Research Problem

Contemporary scholarship on Sufism exhibits ambivalent trends around the role of women in Sufism when on one hand it confirms their role and on the other, it acknowledges the lack of and resultant need for adequate and in-depth information about it. Most of the work on Sufi women have focused on role and works of women Sufis in medieval times. Although, such works, from great scholars like Annemarie Schimmel, Carl W. Ernst, and Rkia Cornell,³⁰ indicate the role of women in Sufism. However, they strongly produce a wonderment as to how great the medieval Sufi women were and how strange that they have become extinct in the contemporary era. As indicated by Liebeskind in her well-known work, "Because it [Sufism] is concerned with the perennial and the universal, Sufism remains as relevant today as in any past age."³¹ One would naturally think, if Sufism remains relevant today, it cannot be so only for men. How come that women's role in Sufism seems to have almost ended with the medieval era and the current times are devoid of the light and love and Sufi women. Further, it also raises questions as to how relevant it is for women of today and likewise how relevant women are for Sufism in the current times. However, there has not been any adequate answer to such questions for the lack of a comprehensive and in-depth analysis of women's roles and perspectives in the spiritual world of

³⁰ Details given in literature review section.

³¹ Claudia Liebeskind, *Piety on Its Knees: Three Sufi Traditions in South Asia in Modern Times* (London: Oxford University Press, 1998), 100.

Islam in the contemporary era. Thus, the current study tries to grapple with the problem of discovering women's role in a current Sufi tradition as well as to see how their gender roles helped or challenged their participation as well attempts to understand in which ways their spiritual training had any impact on their gender roles.

Furthermore, books talk about great Sufi masters, poets and mystics who changed millions of people's lives and still rule their hearts. One can see a suggestive lack of a Sufi master of the same calibre as of masters who lived during medieval times. One wonders if such Sufis and their traditions lived only in the books of history.

Moreover, if Bibi Ji Rabiah Basri was a role model for women, whether or not there are any likes of her live in the current world. As explained above, to know women's role and participation in the Sufi world, it was essential to see them operating in today's world. Is the world now devoid of those Sufi men or women who could cultivate trees of spiritual love that gave fruit, shade and comfort to millions over the years? A suggestive lacuna of a role-model in current times who is an example of the great luminaries of medieval Sufi masters calls one's attention to seek answers from the research perspective. Therefore, to get a closer look and seek detailed and specific answers about the puzzle mentioned above to see the role of women, a living Sufi *silsilah*/tradition was needed where women had a role to play in order to investigate the research problem. As explained in detail in the methodology section given in chapter one, a Sufi tradition (Qadiri Qalandari *silsilah*) of current times was selected purposively that was headed and led by a living Sufi, who involved and integrated women in his spiritual teachings and training.

Thus, the current study attempts to explore if and how women were integrated, treated and trained under his spiritual leadership. Thus, the research problem also includes queries to address some of the unanswered questions and gaps in Sufi scholarship related to the role of women in a

current Sufi tradition. It also attempts to provide an in-depth view and analysis of the role played the head and leader of the living Sufi tradition to see his role and teachings in the light of the historical teachings of Sufis leaders of his *silsilah* on various aspects of Sufism, mainly focusing on women and gender issues. To refine the research problem, a further set of sub-questions have been given due attention, which are given below:

4. Major Research Questions

- If and how, in a select modern-day Sufi tradition/*silsilah*, women have been received, perceived, integrated and trained along with men?
- What is the historical context and linkage of the living Sufi tradition/*silsilah* with its predecessor Sufi masters and whether or not their teachings and doctrinal expositions affected women's role in the tradition/*silsilah*?
- What are the major teachings, doctrines and methods used by the head/leader (*murshid*) of the *silsilah* regarding women (both general and his devotees) and issues related to gender?
- How women were trained in comparison to men and whether they were treated differently in spiritual methodologies as well as in achievement of spiritual heights? Whether women were considered eligible to become a spiritual teacher (*murshid*) like their men counterparts?
- Why do women join the *silsilah*? What motivates them to continue? What do they feel, experience, learn and face during their spiritual training period? How do they manage their other worldly roles along with their spiritual ones? How their social gender roles interact with their spiritual goals?

- In their own understanding, what is their major learning and spiritual achievement? In what ways that learning or spiritual attainment changed them and impacted their life?
- What is their role as a woman Sufi or dervish for the society, in their opinion?

5. Aims and Objectives of the Study

In the light of the above backdrop, the current study has attempted to explore the role and issues of women's participation in Sufism and investigate whether women's role and participation in Sufi teachings and practices continue in the current era and how far and in what ways are women integrated into a current Sufi tradition. It also seeks to explain as to how in the selected Sufi tradition, women have been perceived, integrated and trained by their *Murshid-i-Pak*³² (spiritual master/teacher) and head of the tradition vis-à-vis men disciples. The study attempts at narrating and explaining the major teachings, doctrines and methods used by Baba Jan Sarkar, the head and leader of the selected Sufi tradition, focusing mainly on gender. The study particularly tries to seek detailed information with regard to gender roles within the tradition and see whether women were considered eligible for or could achieve the status of a *khalifah* (spiritual successor/leader) in order to address the perception that women (outside the Western world) are not given leadership roles in Sufi traditions.

No other research has been undertaken so far on the historical context and spiritual heritage of the living tradition. Therefore, the study attempts to narrate and brief the reader on the background and conceptual links of the tradition with its major influencers and spiritual

³² In Sufi diction, there are various titles for the spiritual master/teacher such as such as Baba (father), *Shaykh* (leader) *haadi* (guide), *Guru* (Hindi for trainer), *Huzur* (Arabic for the one always immersed in Presence) *Malik* (Lord), *Sayin* (Lord) and many others. However, Baba Jan Sarkar, head and leader of the selected Sufi tradition preferred to use *Murshid-i-Pak* due to its long ranging connotation of being a guide, trainer and a close friend. Therefore, the study uses the same term.

predecessors. The study thus provides detailed descriptive accounts of the key historical events related to the life and teachings of the leaders of the spiritual tradition, their spiritual riches and insights. Although descriptive and anecdotal, these accounts make a valuable part of this study since they are penned for the first time in the history of the tradition. A part of Sufi *tadhkirah* and *malfuzat* (Sufi conversations and discourses held in their assemblies recorded by their devotees) literature, the study aims to trigger further analysis and more research with regard to the history of the tradition.

Last but not the least, the study aims to provide life sketches and short case studies of a few women devotees of Baba Jan Sarkar to provide real-time, fresh and insightful information about women Sufis and spiritual leaders of current times to address the dearth of such information in Sufi literature. Provision of information on processes, challenges and transformations women go through while being on a spiritual path in current times and how they use spiritual teachings for inner and spiritual as well as everyday life was another key objective that the study wants to fulfil. The reasons for *bayt* (spiritual initiation or oath of allegiance at the hands of a Sufi guide), the spiritual feelings or states and how differently men and women behaved with regard to their spiritual training and roles are discussed to fulfil the gap in Sufi literature of such analysis pertaining to current times.

6. Scope of the Study

The study focuses on role and participation of women in a current Sufi tradition, as adopted and transmitted by Dr Mohammad Youssuf Shaheen, leader and head of the Qadiri-Qalandari *Silsilah* mentioned above. In order to present a case study of the spiritual tradition, details are provided on teachings and methods used by the leader of the selected Sufi tradition. It is both an exploratory

and explanatory piece of research focusing on exploring and bringing out a deeper understanding of contemporary Sufi practices with regard to women's role and participation in a current Sufi tradition.

In terms of its chronological scope, the research looks at the last eight years of Baba Jan Sarkar's teachings, i.e. from 2008-2016, after he granted permission and allowed collection of information from his *Mehfil-i-Pak* and interviews with devotees. The research data collection was completed in 2015 with a few last queries needing further nuancing. However, that took a long time due to Baba Jan Sarkar's illness at the end of 2015 and his departure to the eternal realm on June 24, 2016. A preliminary analysis of this research was presented in November 2014 at a seminar organised by the Copenhagen University, Denmark. However, further analysis and writing were completed later.

It is pertinent to note here that in this study we are using the title 'Qadiri-Qalandari *Silsilah*', for the living Sufi tradition as used by Baba Jan Sarkar, head of the *silsilah*. Likewise, all the terms used by him and his devotees are kept in order to capture the originality and distinctiveness of the diction used by research participants. Also, the term 'spiritual tradition' is used in this thesis interchangeably with the term '*silsilah*', where a general reference is intended to the overall organisational system provided by Baba Jan Sarkar at his *Astana-i-Pak* (Sufi lodge).

To put the living Sufi tradition in a larger Sufi context, a historical view of the Sufi tradition and its linkages with the teachings of its predecessors have been provided. One must note here that, in essence, all Sufi traditions transcend the confines of time and space as they cut across centuries and are founded on the ideal of the Muhammadan spirituality directly emanating from the Holy Prophet ﷺ and his times. However, in terms of their expression, they adapt and adjust to the needs and cultures of specific time and place. The focus remains on the contemporary Sufi

tradition and the narration and practice of classical Sufi ideas in the twenty-first century, under the guidance and training provided directly by Baba Jan Sarkar during 2008-2016, the year when he passed away to his eternal abode. In order to further clarify the thematic and temporal scope, it needs to be mentioned that this study has benefited from memoirs and memories of Baba Jan's teachings since he initiated his *Mehfil-i-Pak* in Jhang in 1970s. However, mainly and foremost, the study has immensely benefited by direct conversations and discussions with him to clarify ideas and questions regarding his teachings from the time he arrived in Jhang to the time of the research.

7. Literature Review

Islam's world of *tasawwuf* is founded on the grounds of Quran and *Hadith* and their gnostic explanations. Therefore, a vast body of knowledge and scholarly works related to Sufism are available from the outset Islam. In the modern times as well, a wide range of research/academic works have come to fore and played a significant role in tracing the history of Sufism and its subsequent development. World renowned scholars have produced major works on theological, spiritual, religious, and historiographical aspects of Sufi tradition. Annemarie Schimmel, Carl Ernst, Frithjof Schoun, Khaliq Ahmed Nizami, Martin Lings, Reynold Nicholson, Syed Hossein Nasr, William Chittick and Titus Burckhardt are only a few names, who have written a range of books on multidimensional issues in the realm of Sufism. The current study has hugely benefited from their thoughts and has appropriately referred to them. Though, there are major scholarly contributions available in the study of Sufi origin and developments, however, an overwhelming focus has been on medieval times. Though it has played a crucial role in enriching the scholarship on Sufism, however, there are comparatively very few studies which address the living Sufism and even fewer that focus on women in Sufi tradition. Women have either been mentioned in

appendices, as a passing mention or at most placed in a chapter out of an entire book. Thus, one finds a huge gap on women's role in Sufism as compared to men - a gap that needs addressing. Moreover, where some studies have focused on medieval Sufi women, they have portrayed the picture as if in living Sufi traditions women exist only on margins - a huge misperception that the current study wants to answer. Below is presented a brief synthesis of the research material that either focuses on or presents an analysis of women's role and issues in Sufism.

Hugh Van Skyhawk's (2014) book titled *Well Articulated Better Paths: Sufi Saints as Links between Religious Communities* is an overview of the mystical tradition of South Asia. He takes start from the syncretic literature of both Hindu and Muslim mystical writers and also discusses the different Sufi aspects such as master-disciple relations, Sufi ethics and influence of Hindu mystical tradition on Sufism. In the last section, he has taken up the feminine aspects of Sufi tradition in which he highlights the role of women in Sufi music and its varied aspects. Although in a limited way, however, it is a helpful book to see the role of women in Sufi tradition from cultural perspective.

A remarkable contribution to the field of Sufism has been sketched by Lloyd Ridgeon (2011) in his work *Jawanmardi: A Sufi Code of Honour*, which is devoted to a vital element of Persian Sufism. It explains the concept of *Jawanmardi* (young-manliness) and traces its use in Sufi texts. It goes on to trace its development as an ethic in Sufi circles that helped inculcate higher ethical values in a Sufi of sacrifice, forgiveness and humility. In this book, the term *futuwwat* (chivalry) is also used to explain the history and development of a number of groups that appeared in Arabic and Persian speaking regions from the early times until the twelfth century. This book is valuable as it collects and reviews text from three key medieval treatises such as *Kitab al-Futuwwa* by Shihab al-Din Umar Suhrawardi, *Futuwwat Nama* by Mirza Abd al-Azim Khan Qarib, and

Risala-yi Hatim al-Tayy by Husayn Waiz-i Kashifi. This book contributes significantly in clarifying the problems related to gender by providing analysis of terms and historical context that has impacted on gender relations within Sufism.

The book titled *Women Mystics and Sufi Shrines in India* by Kelly Pemberton (2010) is a significant and powerful work on women's spirituality in the current era, which is a direct attempt to explore and discuss women's participation issues in practices related to Sufi shrines situated in India. She investigates and provides meticulous details and descriptions about participation issues and rituals that are observed by women in the Sufi *tariqahs* as well as shrines in India. Her analysis uses various lenses to provide a good mix of nuances, which have shaped western perceptions of Indian Muslims as well as their impressions of women's contribution in the world of Sufism. She provides a good analysis of reasons and milieus under which women are accepted practically as a spiritual guide or authority, despite the otherwise strong rejection from official religious authorities of the same. Thus, she shows the inconsistencies between the commonly held belief against women's public role at shrines and her own observations in the living world of Sufism. Pemberton shows various modes of relationships between spiritual mentor and a disciple and maintains that the newer modes have offered opportunities for women to become and gain recognition of a spiritual leader in their own right. The author discussed and analyses women's inclusion and participation in a long range of religious performances, both traditional and spiritual, and use that as an indication of a strong role that women already have in a variety of rituals and related performances. Pemberton's work provides a highly significant analysis with exceptional details of the lived religious experiences that she observed during her field work against the standard boundaries put forward by the more authoritative perspectives in Islam. She illustrates that the more traditional explanations and set of rules for women's behaviour and public roles that prohibit

them from becoming spiritual masters, in fact, conflict with the Sufi worldview and its inclusive philosophy.

Another work edited by Sorren Christian Lassen and Hugh van Skyhawk (2008) in *Sufi Traditions and New Departures* presents a vast scoped study of Sufism. It narrates the history of South Asian Sufism and deals with Sufi saints, thinkers, their texts and practices. It includes a detailed description of the Muslim culture in Deccan, and fresh range of analysis of Sufi text such as the letters of Naqshbandi Shaykh Sirhindi, the doctrine and poetry of Shah Husain of Lahore, and Sufi Badi al-Din Shah Madar and Shihab al-Din Daulatabadi. The popular Sufism among reformist scholars of nineteenth and later centuries has also been discussed.

In the book *Sufism: Love and Wisdom* edited by Jean-Louis Michon and Roger Gaetani (2007), several essays of contemporary writers have been translated by relatively new translators of Sufism into English for the first time. The range of topics navigate a vast scope of issues around Sufi ideas around love and knowledge. These essays allow the reader to understand the wisdom portrayed through language and thinking of Sufism. An excellent article by Maria Massi Dakake titled “Walking upon the Path of God like Men”? Women and the Feminine in the Islamic Mystical Tradition,” provides a valuable analysis of earlier works on feminine principle in Sufism. Although it does not add much latest information on the subject, however it encapsulates well the overall debate related to femininity and the feminine principle discussed by earlier writers such as Sachiko Murata. It is good to see a high-quality article on women’s spirituality among the first-grade scholars of Sufism.

The Islamic Path: Sufism, Politics and Society in India edited by the Saiyid A. Husain Jafri and Helmut Reifeld (2006) provides an overview of the socio-political dimension of Sufism. It takes up the questions such as how Sufis had influenced the state and society of India. The articles

included cover the topics such as origin and reality of Sufi tradition, Sufi prose and poetic literature and its motifs and themes, the confrontational and cordial relations between Sufis and the rulers. The book has a valuable section on the cultural contexts and role of gender in Sufi tradition which includes an article on “Sufism and Women: A Note on Two Women Sufis and Their *Dargahs* at Delhi” written by Jaya Kakkar. In this article, author enlists the biographies of two women Sufis, Bibi Ji Sara and Bibi Ji Fatima Sam. It studies the life-stories of these two Sufi women and their followings in the contemporary Sufi circles.

A significant work which highlights the role of Sufi women is *Early Sufi Women* by Rkia Elaroui Cornell (2005) which is based on an earlier work on women Sufis compiled by Abu Abd al-Rahman al-Sulami, a Persian Sufi. This book provides detailed information about the lives of eighty women Sufis from the eighth to the eleventh century. The book details the contribution of Sufi women in equal position to men towards society- acting as teachers or spiritual mentors. It also highlights that women Sufis, in some cases, surpassed Sufi men in both spiritual attainment and knowledge. However, this book does not enlist the modern developments of the women in Sufi tradition. Cornell (2005) assumes that “outside of the United States or the Western Europe, it is rare to find a Sufi order that accepts women as a matter of policy.”³³ The author completely ignores the presence of women in various Sufi *silsilahs* (orders) in Turkey and South Asia. The author further maintains that outside the western hemisphere, women “exist on the margins of both Sufism and Islam” a misperception that the current study tries to address.³⁴

Another good work is *Early Islamic Mysticism* by Michael A. Sells (2004). The book deals with early period of Islamic mysticism during which Sufism flourished as one of the world's major

³³ Cornell, *Early Sufi Women*, 19.

³⁴ Cornell, *Early Sufi Women*, 19.

spiritual traditions. It explains the place of spirituality within the Islamic tradition and its foundational structures. Like many other authors, among a long list of various other men Sufis mentioned from the classical era, the study mentions Rabiah Basri as the only representative of women. It seems author felt compelled to mention Rabiah as a token to deal with the entire subject of women Sufis along with Sufi stars such as Jafar-i-Sadiq, Muhasibi, Bistami, Tustari, Junayd and al-Hallaj.

The book *Teachings of Sufism* edited by Carl W. Ernst (2004) is another broad-spectrum study of teachings and doctrines of Sufis. Though a short study, it is pleasant to see that the author has devoted a separate section to the biographical entries of the women Sufis including Bibi Ji Rabiah Basri and Bibi Ji Fidha. In addition to a discussion on early Sufi women, it also enlists the biographies of South Asian Chishti Sufis such as Bibi Ji Sara, the mother of Shaykh Nizam al-Din Awliya, Bibi Ji Fatima Sam, the disciple of Shaykh Farid al-Din. Furthermore, the book provides information on women Sufis of Rifa'i *Silsilah* such as Rabia bint Abi Bakr and Zaynab bint al-Rifa'i. Interestingly, Princess Jahanara, a Sufi devotee and a writer (Mughal Emperor Shah Jahan's daughter) is also mentioned. In a way, the book indicates a few examples from across the world and various Sufi *silsilahs* to show women's involvement in Sufism. However, it does not touch upon their role in current era.

H. J. Witteveen's (2003) book titled *Sufism in Action: Achievements, Inspiration and Integrity in a Tough World* highlights the religion of the heart, Sufism, in its historical perspective. The book studies the multi-dimensional role of Sufi tradition at its core. It traces the history of God, relationship between God and men and universality of Sufi tradition. Most importantly, the author devotes a section to the Islamic feminine spirituality in which the masculine and feminine symbolism with special reference to the Love of God has been taken up.

Another scholarly work is Camille Adams Helminski's (2003) book *Women of Sufism* which provides a detailed account of Sufi women. Starting from the era of Prophetﷺ, the study traces the role of women in Sufi tradition down to the modern times. It provides a detailed introduction to the Sufi tradition with citation of anecdotes and examples of women Sufis. It elucidates finely the spiritual status of Bibi Ji Rabiah and her spiritual doctrines. The author highlights that the vision, teachings and spirituality of Bibi Ji Rabiah have been influential for the Sufi tradition at that time and the subsequent ages. In addition, the book illustrates women's role in Sufism taking examples from different regions such as South Asia, Africa, America, Middle East, Europe and Central Asia. It is one of the most useful books on the subject of women's role in Sufism. However, it lacks sufficient discussion on the role of women Sufis in current times.

Another noteworthy work, titled as *Gendering the Spirit* comes from Durre S. Ahmed (2002). The book sketches the evolving spirituality of women as they practice and react vigorously to the endangering political and social inequalities faced in their journey toward spiritual attainment. The authors of the book are women who particularly belong to the third world and perceive themselves as religious, yet at the same time are competent scholars. The book demonstrates the various religious subgroups led by women. The authors present evidences from Hindu, Buddhist, Islamist and Christian traditions on women's spirituality. The book highlights women as healers, goddesses, saints, gurus, nuns and heretics - all sharing their responses to orthodoxy and fundamentalists' domination of women. The book shows women shaping new religious diversities of great appeal, significantly different from the often-bigoted male-dominated mainstream religions.

Some books which have been penned down by the practitioners of Sufism also demonstrate women's role in the Sufi tradition. Although these books do not follow a rigorous research

methodology, however they definitely make an effort to mention women Sufis' spiritual riches. One such work is *101 Awliya Allah Khawatin* (2002) by Khawja Shams al-Din Azimi. The book is mainly a collection of medieval women's spiritual riches with some later, modern era Sufi women also included. However, the book does not provide any analysis of their roles and thus gives very limited information about Sufi women.

An excellent and most comprehensive piece of work is *The Tao of Islam* by Sachiko Murata (2001), which provides a rich and diverse collection of Islamic teachings on the nature of triangular associations between God and the world, the world and the human being, and the human being and God. The book provides interesting comparison and juxta-positioning of Sufi ideas on various aspects of gender with Chinese spiritual tradition called Taoism on the same. A detailed analysis of the Taoist concept of 'yin and yang' is provided to analyse Sufi ideas on masculinity and femininity. The book majorly focuses on gender symbolism and demonstrates how Muslim authors frequently study the divine reality and its relations with the cosmic and human spheres through a complementarity or polarity of principles that is corresponding to the Taoist ideas on gender. She pays particular attention to the views of various eminent Sufis and philosophers, mainly focusing on Ibn Arabi and his various followers since they approach these notions with flexibility and subtleness that is not found in other schools of thought.

Claudia Liebeskind's (1998) *Piety on Its Knees: Three Sufi Traditions in South Asia in Modern Times* is another major contribution to the world of women Sufis of the modern world. The author gives a fresh perspective on the foundational changes occurring in the modern period in the South Asian Sufism. The book provides a comprehensive account and analysis of three different Sufi *silsilahs* and traditions in Awadh region of India. In an elaborate manner, it chalks out how each one of them responded and reacted toward growth and development of colonization

in India and formation of a new state under its influence. The study provides interesting analysis how the three Sufi traditions, along with many other religious movements, worked against the spread of encroaching Western style education through reforms and revival of Islamic legacy. The book touches upon women's role with regard to the emerging debate.

Pnina Werbner and Helene Basu (1998) edition *Embodying Charisma: Modernity, Locality and the Performance of Emotion in Sufi Cults* is another valuable contribution to the field of Sufism. The authors provide a wide-ranging study of varied dimensions of Sufism flourishing in different regions of the world. It includes various articles covering various aspects of Sufi tradition such as anthropomorphic dimension of Sufi tradition, Hindu-Muslim devotion to the Sufi shrines, wandering dervishes in Sufism, hierarchy in Sufi tradition and its various effects, and new challenges to Sufi tradition in modern times. Various articles touch upon women's issues, however, an exclusive article is devoted to address the challenges of the women Sufi tradition in a male-dominated society. The article explains challenges and resultant struggle to formulate new realities by women and aptly portrays the endeavours of female Sufis.

Annemarie Schimmel's (1997) work *My Soul is a Woman* is another significant contribution to the field of Sufi women tradition. Schimmel chalks out a huge canvas of women's role in the spiritual world of Islam. She talks about the huge influence of mothers and their contribution in relaying and transferring spiritual values and principles toward their children or young ones under their care. Their guiding and nurturing role is well explained by her. The author strongly defends the overall positive role played by women in Sufism. According to her, Sufi women introduced the concept of pure love into the realm of Islamic spirituality, which was earlier based mainly on fear of God. She also explains that in the Sufi tradition of Indo-Pakistan, the symbol of woman-soul has been exceedingly popular. Thus, the author writes a detailed note on

the services of women to the spiritual development of humankind. She elucidates about their sacred songs and poetry, their dreams and visions, and stories of their efforts. She convincingly illustrates the honour and respect for the feminine principle in the Sufi worldview. She covers a large part of the world ranging from Asia, Africa, and Middle East to Europe and America with regard to women's role in spirituality. With an introduction to the principles and practices of Sufism, the author illustrates the experiences of the great saints and contemporary practitioners by providing thorough narrations. In addition, she exposes that the soul is represented as a woman, often with great longing. This is a beautiful work with regard to mapping issues on women's spirituality and exhibits how the symbolism of physical love can give expression to the highest forms of mystical or spiritual love.

Arguing Sainthood: Modernity, Psychoanalysis, and Islam by the Katherine Pratt Ewing (1997) is a rich psychological cum anthropological study of meanings and teachings of the Sufi tradition. Following a psychoanalytic approach, the author attempts to interpret the development of identity or formation of the 'self' within a context of socially constructed realities that are impacted by a number of issues competing on ideological grounds. It is asserted by the author that the Western influence on the Sufi tradition as well as impact of modernity all together are shaping the idea of postcolonial identity. It examines the reasons and justifications of how Sufi tradition has been successful in keeping its identity and its heritage despite huge challenges and conflicts created by modernity and its resultant forces. The book criticizes the Eurocentric and orientalist perspectives of Sufism and shows various faces of realities lived by the Pakistani Sufis and their followers including women.

Although a bit dated but an interesting work is Irina Tweedie's (1986) *Daughter of Fire*, which documents her five-year process of purification through spiritual training under the

guidance of a Sufi teacher. She explains the gradual and painful process of peeling off various layers of ego at the hands of a Sufi Master. The book is written in the form of a diary and thus provides direct narratives of events, feelings and experiences that do not let the reader feel bored. From a psychological perspective, it also explains the process of gradual opening of closed and limited sense of self to the universal oneness and love that dwells deep under the mask of the personality. Being the first Western woman who wrote in detail about her training period and exercise through Sufi methods and yogic ways, Tweedie's book is extremely interesting in understanding a woman's journey on the spiritual path.

Another Sufi practitioner, Javad Nurbakhsh's (1983) book titled *Sufi Women* provides a good detail of numerous Sufi women from different periods. He argues that a woman who opts to walk the path of Reality can definitely gain spiritual riches in an equal position to a man. It is an enthusiastic study that gives information about the origin and development of women's role in Sufi tradition. It traces the roots of women Sufi tradition back to the early Muslim civilization and subsequent centuries. It enlists a large index of biographical dictionaries of women Sufis who enjoyed a respectful status at that time. He further includes the anecdotes of Sufi women who greatly influenced the social and spiritual aspects of people.

One of the fundamental works on Sufism that has remained fresh, relevant and informative in the last four decades since its publication is *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* by Annemarie Schimmel (1975). Each page of this amazingly comprehensive book is full of invaluable information for students of Sufism. Schimmel shows her mastery over the given topics and unparalleled knowledge of Sufic scholarship. It is a balanced account on some highly controversial issues within the Sufi world such as *wahdat al-wajud*. Along with being a historical account on the growth of Sufism, it also deals with the transnational aspects of Sufism from its inception

through modern times. The author has given an exhaustive detail of Sufi and European scholars on all key topics related to Sufism. The book though mentions women Sufis in an annex, however, this annex proves much more informative and helpful than many of the books dedicated to women Sufis. In her special scholarly style, Schimmel provides an impressive amount of information on various aspects on women in Sufism. It seems, she added this annex as an afterthought in the book. However, Schimmel' extra ordinary scholarship has turned the appendix into a brief but comprehensive analysis of women Sufis. One can see authors mentioned above borrowing hugely from her work when discussing women's issues in Sufism.

A significant older work in relation to Women Sufis is based on Margaret Smith's (1928; rpt. 1994) book titled as *Rabia: The Life and Work of Rabia and other Women Mystics in Islam* which is an authoritative and detailed introduction to the life, times and major doctrines of Bibi Ji Rabiah Basri. In addition, it also offers a fresh look to the life-stories of many other women Sufis who greatly contributed to the mystical dimension of Islam. This book sketches significant dimensions on the early Sufi women and their traditions. The doctrines of Rabiah Basri have played a significant role in constructing an image of the medieval women and their major contributions to the world of Sufism.

Along with above mentioned books and chapters dedicated to women Sufis, there are some useful academic articles that have been very helpful in scanning the intellectual horizons of Sufism and its relationship with women. A few are mentioned below:

Omer Kasmani (2016) has brought into light a strong perspective regarding the role of women in spiritualism. His article "Women Un-Like Women: The Question of Spiritual Authority

among Female Fakirs³⁵ of Sehwan Sharif” draws an analogy on the relationship of gender vis-à-vis the question of spiritual authorization. It highlights the marginality of women Sufis in male-dominated societies. It is a case study of women *faqirs* of Sehwan Sharif; however, it also traces the history back to the earliest Sufi tradition of Islam. The main argument of the author is that despite having spiritual riches equal to the men Sufis, a woman cannot enjoy spiritual status equal to her male counterparts. Kasmani highlights women’s spirituality and their capability to take part in the mystical realm. He describes the story of a woman *fakir* - a title which she inherited from her uncle. The author thus shows that women are dependent upon men for their spiritual status. He also thinks that women have potential to bring innovation to spiritualism. Women *Fakirs* have the ability to inculcate their personal experience of self-spiritual realization and relate their experience of the world to the spiritual knowledge. Kasmani argues that in contrast to male counterparts, female saints tend to stress more on their femininity to validate their distinct positions as spiritual healers. Moreover, they tend to disassociate themselves from the culturally bound notion of womanhood, thus not only distancing themselves from masculine dominance but from other women as well.

In another article, “Fakir Her-stories: Women’s Spiritual Careers and the Limits of the Masculine in Pakistan” Omar Kasmani (2016) furthers the same argument that women Sufis’ career as a spiritual guide rests at the mercy of the man Sufis. He also asserts that there is a historiographical silence the role and status of women Sufi as many of the Women Sufi have been invisible in the practice of Sufi tradition.

³⁵ Kasmani uses the spellings Fakir, which is mostly written as Faqir or Faqeer in Sufi literature following general transliteration rules where the English alphabet Q is used for the Urdu alphabet Qaf.

Iqbal Chawla and Robina Shoeb (2015) discuss the role of women saints and Sufis in preaching and spreading Islam in “Female Sufism in Pakistan: A Case Study of Bibi Pak Daman.” Authors believe that mysticism is a universal phenomenon which is not confined to the boundaries defined by gender. Instead, it is a divinely ordained talent that can be experienced by any human being who devotes himself/herself to God’s shelter of love and obedience. However, authors highlight the marginalization of female saints who are suppressed primarily because of the dominance of male saints. Authors bring into light the story of the shrine of Bibi Pak Daman in Lahore, which belongs to Bibi Ji Ruqayyah bint Ali. According to authors, women have played a significant role in preaching Islam. They mention the strong role played by six women saints, who left Makkah and travelled to Lahore in order to preach the knowledge of God. Authors stress the immense role played by women who devoted their lives to spread the knowledge of God and were successful in converting Hindus to Islam. Although, the article deals with women Sufis of classical era, however, it does touch upon the gender issues in the spiritual realm.

The article “Gender and Spiritual Self-Fashioning: The Master-Disciple Relationship in Classical Sufism” by Margaret Malamud (2014) argues that the master-disciple relationship is not a later phenomenon in the Sufi tradition. This tradition has been practiced since the inception of Sufi tradition. It traces the history of this tradition from the classical Sufism and looks at the different dimensions of the master-disciple relations. The article does not give a good analysis of all the dynamics of this relationship, though. It focuses only on the dimension of authority and tries to prove that the master-disciple relationship is another form of hierarchical and authoritative relationships.

The work “Sociological Analysis of Sufism: A Case Study of Hazret Sultan Bahu, Shorkot, Pakistan” co-authored by Rashid Menhas, Saira Akhtar and Norina Jabeen (2013) majorly studies

that sociological aspects of Sufi followings. It provides an overview of the reasons which people of rural areas visit the shrines for. The authors argue that visiting a Sufi shrine is a vital way of keeping a connection with Sufi ideas for rural people than to have a particular belief or attachment with the said Sufi. Since the article focuses on Jhang area, it is helpful to understand the dynamics of locality that is directly relevant to our current study at hand.

“*A Global Guide to Interfaith: Reflections from around the World*” edited by Sandy and Jael Bharat (2007) contains a brief article by the author of this dissertation describing the teachings of Baba Jan Sarkar. It is the only work providing some information on the central figure of the current research study that is Baba Jan Sarkar, the head/leader of the living Sufi tradition under review. Although brief, the article provides information on key themes of his teachings and some contours of his personality.

Pemberton (2006) provides a critical insight into the role of women in taking part as spiritual guides in her excellent article on “Women *Pirs*, Sainly Succession, and Spiritual Guidance in South Asia Sufism” published in *The Muslim World*. In the case of women leadership in Chishti *Silsilah*, she tells us the story of Chishti female disciple. Despite not being a *khalifa* (designated successor), the lady still held the position of a preacher and was given the authority to initiate disciples. Through the example of the famous Naqshbandi Sufi master Mirza Mazhar Jan-i-Janan, who is the founder of Naqshbandiyya-Mazhariyya Sufi sub-*silsilah*, she demonstrates that appointing women as leaders has never been a problem in Sufi circles.

Saadia Khawar Khan Chishti’s (2000) “Female Spirituality in Islam” is a comprehensive work on the topic published in the *Encyclopaedia of Islamic Spirituality*, edited by Seyyed Hossein Nasr. The article provides a detailed account on the feminine dimensions of Islamic spirituality. She demonstrates women’s spirituality first through the life and example of the saintly women of

the family of the Holy Prophetﷺ. Second, she looks at the everyday lifestyle of women who comply with the teachings of Islam and build a lifestyle which is in accordance to the will of God and *shariah*. She believes compliance to *shariah* in itself is a method of spiritual life. Third, is to look at the feminine dimensions in the doctrines of Sufis. The author focuses on the feminine principle of Islamic spirituality and related concepts such as feminine symbolism, embodiment of God in feminine symbolism, quest to become a Beloved of God and the fight between the rational soul commanding to sin and it's opposite the noble spirit. She highlights the characteristic continuity and immutability of feminine spirituality. Moreover, the entire range of subjects and chapters of *Encyclopaedia of Islamic Spirituality*, is also an excellent and most comprehensive set of analysis around a variety of issues related to Islamic spirituality. Many other articles presented in the book such as on Qadiriyya, Ibn Arabi and spiritual chivalry also proved hugely helpful in analysis of certain issues of interest to current study.

8. Relevance of the Study

The main reason behind this research work has been a sense of awe and delight to be part of a great mystical current that was not just unique and unconventional in integrating and including women. Seeing a vibrant centre of spirituality and Sufi *tariqa* thronging with hundreds of men and women devotees and disciples, with a set of truly pluralistic, inclusive and deep spiritual insights was an incredible sight. The openness and inclusivity of the head of the Sufi tradition and his rather daring attempt to practice classical Sufi ideals such as *wahdat al-wajud* and unconditional Muhammadan compassion and love in a small city that was swarming with religious bigotry and sectarian violence remained an incredible phenomenon throughout the course of research. Moreover, these teachings were given openly, equally and lovingly to women along with men, without any discrimination between the two genders was an astonishing and awe-inspiring fact pushing the

researcher to explore more methodically and learning more deeply about various aspects of women's spirituality.

This study has a few special dimensions that must be noted down. It is the first ever systematic study of a living Sufi tradition with regard to gender issues from Pakistan. As per the scan of current literature, it is also the first ever systematic study of the Qadiri-Qalandari *Silsilah* led by Baba Jan Sarkar focusing on gender. Also, the study presents a few cases of high calibre Sufi women. When people wrote about Rabiah Basri, she had long gone out of their radius and thus much was left to their belated perceptions of her life, states and teachings. However, this research is different as the researcher spent many years with the Sufi women. The study is thus a first-hand witnessing of their transformation and illumination occurring during the course of this research. Therefore, having a range of untold stories of Sufi women of the twenty-first century, is a unique phenomenon. During this research, some of the Sufi women and men passed away. Thus, their narratives and conversations remain the last account of their experiences and feelings. In a way, the research intends to be a gift back to al-Sulami in response to his first ever collection of stories of Sufi women. In doing so, this thesis brings forward a new, unique, and totally fresh body of knowledge on the roles, status and contours of women's spiritual development in current times.

Moreover, since Baba Jan Sarkar's discourses have yet not been published by any other disciple or researcher, this study is also a contribution to the *tadhkirah* literature of Sufi heritage. He passed away on June 24, 2016 leaving a great treasure of his discourses and teachings behind. We cannot determine the degree of interest with which the audience would receive the findings of present research to gain spiritual pleasure or insight. However, the general reader needing a positive approach toward gender and women's role in Sufism would find it useful not only for

gaining a general understanding of the Sufi system with its current implications regarding gender but also for valuing women's role in Sufism both in historical perspective and in current times.

9. Organization of the Study

The research is an attempt to look at the following themes, which are divided into five chapters:

After introduction, the first chapter focusing on the analytical framework and methodology titled 'Feminine in Sufism: The Pearl in the Shell' problematizes the focus of this research and gives details of methodological contours and their uses for conducting, analysing and presenting the research. It tries to define the context clearly regarding the debates in Sufi literature on gender, men and women and their role and participation in Sufism. Being the sole representative of femininity, the interesting paradox for women by becoming a symbol simultaneously of *nafs* (the lowest level of self), and *dhat* (the highest) due to both words having feminine gender as per the rules of Arabic language is discussed. The phenomenon of gendered words used as symbols of femininity and masculinity is explained at length under the title of lady-words. The chapter attempts to build an analytical framework by explaining opposing perception of women as representatives of goodness and badness, the highest and the lowest state of human self and an entity that Sufis are advised to avoid and are asked to embrace at the same time. The preciousness and gift of femininity as a pearl hidden behind the cheap and fragile shell of dogmatic understandings is explained in the chapter and various dynamics of gender definitions provided by Sufism. The chapter also provides comprehensive details of data collection, data analysis, research ethics and all other methodological details.

The second chapter titled 'Historical Context of the Spiritual Tradition: A Bird's Eye-View' provides an overview of the living Sufi tradition as adopted and promulgated by Baba Jan Sarkar. This is a highly important chapter as it gives important historical details of the life and

conceptual progression of the key figures of the *silsilah* or the spiritual tradition led by Baba Jan Sarkar. As indicated above, the present study is a highly significant and fresh contribution in the *tadhkirah* literature of Sufi heritage. This chapter makes a huge contribution in that regard as it presents anecdotal accounts of historical events, conceptual discussions and traces linkages of teachings of the pioneers of the spiritual tradition with each other. This information is being penned for the first time and thus not just a pioneering contribution but also an essential step in chalking out a historical backdrop in which the spiritual tradition was framed and developed. In an ascending order, starting with accounts of Baba Jan Sarkar's birth and childhood period and later describing his training exercises that explain his spiritual stamina and glimpses into the methods, spiritual doctrines and ideas behind the major themes of the spiritual tradition as transferred to him by his spiritual mentor who had learned the same from his spiritual predecessors. Moving on to the descriptions of events and anecdotes regarding the life of Baba Ji Fazl al-Rahman (Baba Jan Sarkar's spiritual master), the chapter gives a summary account of his life and major teachings. Again, due to unavailability of any documents, the anecdotal accounts provided by Baba Jan about this constantly travelling Sufi, who kept on traversing thousands of miles each year even at the age of one hundred and twenty years when they first met, becomes extremely valuable historical data. The chapter then adds brief accounts of Syed Ghauth Ali Shah Qadir Qalandar and Ibn Arabi as narrated and explained by Baba Jan Sarkar, however, these are validated through cross referencing to books available about these two personalities who were constantly referred to by Baba Jan Sarkar while explaining the conceptual and doctrinal foundations of his *silsilah*. The chapter also includes a brief overview of the geographical context of Jhang, though due to observing anonymity principle, no further descriptions are given about his location or geographical context.

The third chapter titled ‘Woman, Man, None or Both: The Supra-Gender³⁶ Spiritual Realm’ examines in detail Baba Jan’s views and teachings on gender. First, by attempting to provide an overview of his teachings and major themes he touched upon in his discourses, this chapter provided key ideas of how a Sufi master of twenty-first century expounded on and practically guided his disciples through the prophetic teachings of Muhammadﷺ and great early Sufi luminaries. A comprehensive account and analysis of his views on gender issues is provided. His dealing with women and men and his teachings and training methods that defied standard gendered roles in society are explained and analysed in this chapter. An overview of doctrinal analyses on the issues of gender, women, femininity and masculinity is reviewed directly in the light of Baba Jan Sarkar’s conversations and teachings.

In the last chapter, ‘The Sober Drunk – Women, Love and Discipline’, the personal and experiential aspects of women’s life in Sufism are explained. The chapter includes answers to research questions related to women’s role in the living spiritual tradition; analysis of reasons for *bayt* described by women and men; explanation of feelings and spiritual states by women and men and how far they differed from each other; and brief case studies of a few select Sufi women are provided through their narrations to exhibit their progress in spiritual life, challenges faced and transformations acquired. This chapter tries to assess the gender dimensions of a person’s life while being actively associated with a spiritual life and see whether there are any specific aspects related to women’s spirituality that distinguished them from men. It also tries to capture if the Sufi teachings as explained or practiced by the head of the tradition propagated any limitations on women’s participation, capacity, agency or authority based on sex or gender. The general behavioural characteristics as shown by women regularly attending the spiritual teachings and

³⁶ This is a new term conceived and used by the researcher in this study, explained in detail in chapter 3.

gatherings have been captured and an attempt has been made to see how far these differed from men. The supra-gender traits, as explained in the previous chapter have been examined in this chapter through women's narratives.

Last, a chapter has been added to summarise major findings of each chapter and to provide a concluding analysis of the key findings. Using the Sufi symbolism, the study concludes the overall message of Baba Jan Sarkar's life and teachings in a language used by Sufi poets and writers where wine is the symbol of love and oneness and chalice is the vessel that pours it out. The study concludes that the wine poured out of Baba Jan Sarkar's pitcher was the same old one that had been prepared by the Holy Prophet ﷺ and distributed by *Awlia Allah* including Sarkar Abdul Qadir Jilani, Mohy al-Din Ibn Arabi and Ghauth Ali Shah Qadir Qalandar, whose teachings have been included in this study.

*Pretty sea shells, some collect and use
However pretty not all would choose
How would he walk the one who whirls
Only the diver finds the pearls
Men are women and women are men
Learn from the Prophetﷺ, how and when*

Poet: Author

Chapter 1

Feminine in Sufism: The Pearl in the Shell

There is no other complex and intricate concept in Islamic history and philosophy than Sufism, which has bewildered both Western and Eastern intellectuals alike when they tried grappling with its depths. On one edge stand those who detest and contest it for being extra-Islamic or at best a later innovation that needs cleansing and removing from the true body of Islam.³⁷ On the other stand the passionate advocates and adherents of Sufi Islam with their various shades and colours. Within Islam, the story of Sufism is well summarized by a verse of the Sufi poet Muhammad Iqbal in:

*Zahid-e tang nazar ne mujhay kafir jana
aur kafir yeh samajhta hai musalman hoon main*³⁸
(The bigot Muslim took me as an infidel,
and the [one titled] infidel, considers me a Muslim)

Yet, there is another group of Orientalists and non-Muslim seekers, who like Moses came to the Sufic mountain to get a bit of fire but met with the Divine Blaze. The light of knowledge through that fire helped them write comprehensive works to explain some of the classical Sufi texts, which otherwise would have been less known to the larger world beyond Arabic or Persian speaking communities³⁹. Drawing mainly from those translations, this section will provide a snapshot of Sufi worldview vis-à-vis the taxonomy of gender both from hermeneutical as well as social aspects

³⁷ Salafi explanations of Islam are more rigid and legalistic and vehemently criticize Sufi perspectives and their use of music and dance in sacred ceremonies. A lot has been written on the difference of opinion between the two. For further details on political and ontological differences between the two see, Alexander Knysh, "Contextualizing the Salafi-Sufi Conflict," *Middle Eastern Studies*, Vol. 43, No. 4 (2007): 503-30.

³⁸ Syed Abdul Wahid Mueeni, *Baqiyat-i-Iqbal* (Lahore: Sheikh Muhammad Ashraf, n.d.), 21. These lines are part of a poem titled 'Faryad-i-Ummat', which was published as part of the collection of Iqbal's unpublished poetry by the Head of Majlis-i-Iqbal, Karachi.

³⁹ For details on the spread of Sufism among Western scholars, see foreword by Seyyed Hossein Nasr in *Sufism: Love and Wisdom*, eds. Jean- Louis Michon & Roger Gaetani (Lahore: Suhail Academy, 2007).

to see the linkages between literal and allegorical aspects of gender. It is pertinent to do so at the outset to deal with the ambivalence of language in *tasawwuf*.

1.1. Framework of Analysis and Methodology

The language used by Sufis is quite perplexing as it is mostly metaphorical and figurative, while at the same time, it also tries to take off the veils of words and go deep into the realm of meaning, hence one of its name ‘*ma‘nawiyyat*’ (meaningfulness).⁴⁰ There is a famous prayer of the Holy Prophet ﷺ beseeching the Lord for granting him the knowledge of ‘*haqiqat-ul-ashiya*’,⁴¹ the true reality of things, which also alludes to the inner meanings of things. Following his prayer, reaching the ‘reality of things’ also includes words that produce concepts, commands and communion. Thus, Sufis have attempted to unveil the reality of words, and their hermeneutical details as well.

The reality of women and men is the same. They both are from the same ‘Origin’. However, they respond to and express their relationship and need to connect with that Origin differently. Looking from a more feminine concept love, God deserves our love and submission to be worshipped without any material or ethical reason.⁴² The concept of unconditional love without any demand or desire to seek a reward in return was given by women Sufis. Furthermore, the concept of *Ishq* (intense ardour)⁴³ that merged the human love into divine and tried bridging barriers between human limitations and Divine grandeur and the remembrance of *Ehd-i-Alast*, (the covenant of all the souls with God at the time of creation) are also some of the concepts that were

⁴⁰ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, ed., *Encyclopedia of Islamic Spirituality* Vol. I (Lahore: Suhail Academy, 2000), see introduction by the editor, xiv.

⁴¹ The prophet’s prayer “*Allahumma arinal ashya kama hiya* (O Allah grant me the knowledge about reality of things as they are”.

⁴² Margaret Smith, *Rabia: The Life and Work of Rabia and Other Women Mystics in Islam* (Oxford: Oneworld Publications, 1994), 113-133.

⁴³ Kamran Ahmad, *Tariqat* (Islamabad: Mehergarh Publications, 2001), 20.

emphasised by women Sufis.⁴⁴ The intimate and passionate way of loving their Beloved Lord through every breadth and each cell is a major contribution of women Sufis recognized alike by Sufis and scholars. The intoxication of love, the longing for oneness and Union (*wasl*), the pain of separation (*dard-i-hijr*),⁴⁵ and the fulfilment of companionship with God, all came to Sufi world and literature, due to women's contribution and eternal love for Allah.

The above passionate way of loving the Lord may not be understandable for some. For others, the feminine depth of love is the most beautiful way and thus they adopted it and used the same language. The different opinions have created a debate around the gender as well as masculinity and femininity issues. Before talking about the Sufi concepts and feminine terminologies, let us first look at what womanhood came to be known in the later centuries that followed the early Sufis. The next section attempts to have a gist of the current academic and social debate around those issues.

1.2. Women, Femininity and Gender

Gender, as a concept gained fame in 1970s when subject specialists distinguished it from 'sex'. The biological and physical differences between male and female mainly based on their reproductive systems and determined their physical characteristics are termed as 'sex'. United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) defines gender in the following words:

“Gender refers to the roles and responsibilities of men and women that are created in our families, our societies and our cultures. The concept of gender also includes the expectations held about the characteristics, aptitudes and likely behaviours of both women and men (femininity and masculinity). Gender roles and expectations are learned. They can change over time and they vary within and between cultures. Systems of social differentiation such as political status, class,

⁴⁴ The Holy Quran, Surah al-A'raf, Verse 172. See also, Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, 24.

⁴⁵ Annemarie Schimmel, *Deciphering the Signs of God: A Phenomenological Approach to Islam* (Lahore: Sang-e-Meel Publications, 2006), 146.

ethnicity, physical and mental disability, age and more, modify gender roles. The concept of gender is vital because, applied to social analysis, it reveals how women's subordination (or men's domination) is socially constructed. As such, the subordination can be changed or ended. It is not biologically predetermined nor is it fixed forever."⁴⁶

Thus, it is a set of perceptions, roles, behaviours that a man or a woman has to play or display as per the norms of a particular society or context they belong to at a certain time. Gender is also explained as 'the state of being male or female' with reference to social and cultural idiosyncrasies not just based on biological differences. Moreover, gender is not static. It changes with location, age, and other attributes that can be learned or acquired through external sources.⁴⁷

Described under womanhood as well, 'femininity' is regarded as a general set of attributes or behaviours associated typically with women or girls. Though, in each culture, femininity is socially constructed, and in different ways, however, it is also a product of both socially and biologically-constructed factors. Academically, femininity is accepted to be different from the female biological sex as it can exhibit itself both among males and females. However, generally women are more associated with it. In addition, all the negative aspects of femininity are mostly ascribed to female sex and women have come to be known as the exhibitor of feminine behaviour.

Before moving further let us quickly look at the so-called gender traits that are taken as of two types: first is the famous 'yin and yang' duo, where 'yin' symbolizing femininity stands for receptive, passive, yielding, sensitive, gentle, empathetic and emotional part of the whole. Whereby, 'yang' representing masculinity, brings in active, dynamic, forceful and rational aspects.⁴⁸ Together, they both fulfil and complete each other. Concluding the discussion on the

⁴⁶ "United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organisation (UNESCO) Gender Mainstreaming Implementation Framework," accessed April 30, 2017, <http://www.unesco.org/fileadmin/MULTIMEDIA/HQ/BSP/GENDER/PDF/1.%20Baseline%20Definitions%20of%20key%20gender-related%20concepts.pdf>.

⁴⁷ Caroline O. N. Moser, *Gender Planning and Development: Theory, Practice and Training* (London & New York: Routledge, 1993), 22.

⁴⁸ Durre S Ahmed, ed., *Gendering the Spirit* (London & New York: Zed Books, 2002), 83.

two sets of attributes, one can see that attributes representing beauty, love, desire, passivity and humility are considered feminine as opposed to pride, strength, action and sagacity being masculine.

At the next level, there are further off-springs of the above narrated beliefs about women's behaviour, which are highly derogatory and negative. A common perception of women being inferior is based on their emotional predispositions and hence a pre-determined inferiority for lack of wisdom and rationality. On one hand, if women, being the feminine, are taken as representing appreciable attributes, their femininity also determines their inferiority in many ways such as beauty taken as potentially dangerous for the ability to use this as a trap; love that makes them too emotional and too possessive and attached to things and relationships; humility and passivity that causes meekness, cowardice and lack of willpower. One stark example of widely held negative beliefs is the notion of women being *'naqis-ul-aql* (inferior in rationality or wisdom) and the term being used as almost a religious tenet among the Muslims.⁴⁹ It has gained wide acceptance in South Asia and other regions that one can see its use not only in religious discussions around women but also in common household conversations as well as in academic debates and media portrayal of women. A quick scan of any culture in the world can give us many other examples of femininity being inferior, evil or deceptive expressed through literature, proverbs, idioms and concepts. Furthermore, there are the negative traits such as jealousy and hatred, treachery and deceitfulness, competition and rivalry, seduction and sexual display, which are all taken as by-products of femininity. The women have been considered, used and portrayed as sexual objects for physical pleasure all around the world over centuries. For some, the main culprit is patriarchy whereby women have been turned into sexual objects and then shamed for being or having the potential to

⁴⁹ Maulana Shah Ashraf Ali Thanwi, *Sunni Bahishti Zewar* (Lahore: Al-Maktaba Al-Madina, 1982), 791.

be one.⁵⁰ Being a sex symbol, a trend that feminists and sociologists believe women have been forced into, is used against women to consider them a representative of sexuality and profaneness and thus less worthy of rights, respect or power.

Eminent feminist writers like Simone de Beauvoir and Judith Butler have contended that the roles and behaviours associated with femininity and masculinity are created and propagated through consistent repetition of roles and performances by both genders. Like a vicious cycle, these roles and performances further augment and reproduce similar roles and performances and so the gender stereotypes and categories are set into motion over centuries. There is some disagreement among feminists over the issue of extreme and unnatural standards of beauty that they believe to be intentionally created for subjugation and sexualisation of both women's minds and bodies. It was meant to put them into a constant struggle over achieving standards of beauty and acceptance by society and becoming a perpetuator of what kills their mental, intellectual and spiritual growth.⁵¹

At a further level of analysis, when women or men are inclined to show traits or behaviour of opposite sex than what they are born in, the acceptance of male attributes in women opens new vistas. Julia Serano notes that girls and women exhibiting masculine behaviour, including cross-dressing face comparatively lesser social disapproval and better acceptance from their parents, families and society at large than boys and men who adopt feminine characteristics. This is because 'maleness' is more valued and preferred in the society and thus societal norms are built to reject any possibilities between genders to overcome male superiority. There are other analytical

⁵⁰ Deniz Kandiyoti, "Bargaining with Patriarchy," in *The Women, Gender and Development Reader*, eds. Nalini Visvanathan, Lynn Duggan, Laurie Nisonoff and Nan Wieggersma (London & New Jersey: Zed Books, 1997), 86-92.

⁵¹ Wendy O'Brien and Lester Embree, eds., *The Existential Phenomenology of Simone de Beauvoir* (Berlin: Springer, 2013), 40.

dimensions of the gender detailed in the book as well as presented by other analysts. However, that would not relate to our research at hand. The point that is made here is that so-called male attributes were preferred by society whether eastern or western, ancient or modern.⁵²

Now, let us briefly have a look at the Muslim world's response to the feminist debate. It has seen a steady increase in propagation of perspectives considered 'Islamic feminist' since the last few decades. Such perspectives are also grounded in Islam's fundamental teachings, however, interpret the same teachings in a different way. They call for space and allowance for absolute equality between genders both in public and private spheres including space and role in the mosque. Moreover, they call for equality and opportunity of leading the congregational prayer by women and not just in attending it. Such perspectives have been flourishing despite criticism and even legal decrees by some other Muslim clerics against feminism and its approach being un-Islamic. Thus, the feminist arguments of gender equality combined with Islam's foundational teachings picked up by modern scholars on women's liberation, Aisha Abd al-Rahman's Quranic exegesis and books about the women of the Holy Prophet's ﷺ family, Najuib Mahfouz, Fatima Mernissi and more recently Amina Wadud Mohsin by writing as well as by leading a mixed gender Friday prayer and delivering a *khutba* (sermon) in 2005 had ignited a hot debate about women's role and status in mainstream Islamic rituals.

When talking about gender roles or status of men and women as perceived by scholars of *shariah*, most arguments have been based on the Holy Quran. Does the Holy Quran imply created inferiority? Many scholars have answered in affirmative. Though, writes like Fatimah Mernissi and Amina Wadud Muhsin have given a detailed analysis of the Quranic text and its context

⁵² Julia Serano, *Outspoken: A Decade of Transgender Activism and Trans Feminism* (Oakland: Switch Hitler Press, 2016), 179.

proving that the Holy Quran does not imply any primordial inferiority of women. Muhsin explains that there is no essential difference in the value attributed to men and women because their life, honour, wealth and dignity is equal. They get the same and equal consideration and are created with the same equal potential by their same Creator. They have the same and equal responsibility towards God and also have the same equal '*ajar*' (reward) for good and punishment for doing bad.⁵³

From ancient beliefs such as Shamanism to Islam, the youngest of the Abrahamic siblings, there is a wide range of religious beliefs and explanations having implications on gender roles and status, which are used as anti-women or deny a truly equal status for women like men. Anthropological studies indicate that ancient religions gave more pronounced roles to women such as ancient Shamans or Hindu *devis* (goddesses).⁵⁴ Why societies, that feminists term as patriarchal, associate a lot of negative emotions and associated lower values with women? Why women are regarded as more prone to jealousy, rivalry, treachery, deceitfulness and revenge? There are proverbs and sayings against women in all cultures depicting them as the most lowly, deceitful creature. In Islamic countries, women receive special respect as mothers.⁵⁵ However, that is only because of the Islamic injunctions regarding respect of mothers. Yet, there is a distinction between the word 'woman' and 'mother' as if mothers are not women. Generally, accepting the notion that 'women are treacherous' is more plausible than the notion that 'mothers are treacherous.' This shows the psycho-social paradox that women face in everyday life.

⁵³ See for details, Amina Wadud Muhsin, *Quran and Women* (Kuala Lumpur: Penerbit Fajar, 1992).

⁵⁴ Abu Rehan Al-Biruni, *Hindu Dharam: Hazar Baras Pehlay* (Lahore: Nigarshat Publishers, 2002), 55. See also, Pt. Yogesh Verma, *All About Hinduism: The Religion of Enlightenment* (New Delhi: Goodwill Publishing House, 2004), 68.

⁵⁵ Annemarie Schimmel, *My Soul is a Woman: The Feminine in Islam* (New York: Continuum Publishing Company, 1997), 89-97.

The above section has attempted to explain the tension that gender issues have been generating whether from a western feminist or Islamic feminist perspectives. We can see that that the general religious interpretations of gender have been regarded by sociologists, psychologists, feminists and gender experts rather negative for women. It also shows that generally societies have a negative bias against women, which is also depicted against traits, qualities and behaviours considered feminine. Such patriarchal attitudes have tilted societies and culture against women and worked against their equal and rightful status among those societies. The question of gender has been dealt through various angles. Religion, sociology, economics, politics, philosophy all have contributed to perspectives on gender and provided answers. All have explained gender as a system of classification. A classification where people are divided into roles and responsibilities mainly on the basis of biological or sexual identity. Scholars using their preferred lens have tried explaining the gender issues, gender biases and resultant impact on societies and proposed solutions for issues. The development paradigm has tried ‘gender mainstreaming.’ Amidst all these attempts, it seems pertinent to assess how Sufis look at gender and how do they perceive women, femininity or masculinity? These queries lead us to the next section.

1.3. Sufi Perspectives on Gendered Language: The Impact of ‘Lady Words’

Language is nothing, but emotions arranged in words. As the vehicle of expression, it has played the most instrumental role in disbursement of ideas by glazing them with love or hatred, goodness or badness and success or failure. As explained earlier, emotions, behaviours and attitudes all are set in gendered domains. Thus, the nature and rules of language in expressing ideas make a substantial difference. The first language where most of the key Sufi literature was developed, i.e. Arabic, has the ‘noun-class system’ where all nouns have a gender. Thus, all nouns, whether proper names such as names of people or places or common nouns such as names of things, body parts,

emotions, and other innumerable nouns are either masculine or feminine. For example, *mahabbat* (love) is feminine, and *ghadhab* (anger) is masculine in Arabic and Urdu as well.⁵⁶ The parts of speech change as per the gender of the noun in sentence construction, hence the grammatical gender is at its full play.⁵⁷ Similar is the case of Urdu and old Persian, though modern Persian cleansed itself of grammatical gender like the English language.

Like all mystical traditions, Sufism also uses the language of symbols. When we look at the use of metaphors and symbols on the wider perception of genders, it seems that there are several words and terminologies derived from feminine roots that have a deep implication for women. Ibn Arabi has discussed this at length in his writings. In this study, the feminine-rooted words discussed below are titled as ‘lady words’. A quick look at how Shaykh al-Akbar, Ibn Arabi and other writers have meticulously explained some of the significant ‘lady words’ and their impact on Sufi worldview. Murata presented a detailed landscape and analysis of the feminine symbols in Sufi literature. Below, a summary is presented of the major feminine symbols in Sufi literature, which is highly indebted to the rich treasure shared by Ibn Arabi.

The first question that arises in mind is what is the Arabic word and its symbolic significance that is used to describe the female gender, ‘woman’? The word in Arabic for woman is *awra* and *aurat* in Urdu, which means a thing that needs to be covered. *Awra* also means the private/sexual parts that must be covered.⁵⁸ One can see that the very word to name the feminine gender in Arabic and associated languages indicate the need for hiding or covering the same. This brings in the context of veiling of women. Woman, per the definition of her name, is a thing to be

⁵⁶ Maulvi Feroz al-Din, *Feroz al-Lughat Urdu* (Lahore: Feroz Sons, 2005), 1272, 970.

⁵⁷ Maria Massi Dakake, “Walking upon the Path of God Like Men? Women and the Feminine in the Islamic Mystical Tradition,” in *Sufism: Love and Wisdom*, eds. Jean- Louis Michon & Roger Gaetani (Lahore: Suhail Academy, 2007), 133.

⁵⁸ Feroz al-Din, *Feroz al-Lughat Urdu*, 44.

hidden and kept in secret. However, in mystical literature, it has been used in ambivalent ways. On one hand, one should not show what is most private in terms of sexual modesty and on the other, whatever is most beautiful, most precious must not be revealed to public for the sake of safety and sanctity. Hence, veiling at one level is taken as a need for divine beauty to be kept hidden.⁵⁹

Women are mothers who create new life. They derive and share this with God who is ‘the Creator’. As Hazrat Ali (R.A), the Gate of the Prophetic knowledge⁶⁰, and the leader of all Sufi *silsilahs*, has asserted that the entire Quran was summarized in just one verse, the most-repeated one at the beginning of each chapter, ‘*Bismillah-ir-Rahman-ir-Rahim*’ (With the name of Allah, the Most Compassionate, the Most Merciful). Thus, the Divine names, the attributes of the Divine Essence, most repeated in the holy Quran are Rahman and Rahim, the two greatest indicators of Mercy. These two have been discussed in detail by Ibn Arabi and other authors. Both are derived from the root ‘r-h-m’, the same for the word *rahm*, meaning the womb, a symbol widely used by the Holy Quran in many verses. A powerful derivative of this, *rahma*’ is grammatically feminine word, a lady-word by our definition, meaning ‘mercy’. God is Rahman and Rahim and therefore emanates *rahma* (mercy) that creates, protects and sustains the universe. It has certified in the Quran that his mercy has encompassed or enveloped everything⁶¹, resultantly, even His wrath.⁶² Thus, all His actions proceed from His mercy and all things manifest through the same Mercy. Like the womb of mother envelops and holds the off-spring, Allah’s mercy holds, encompasses, protects and nurtures all things in the universe. Explaining the Quranic injunctions on the creation

⁵⁹ See for a detailed discussion, Sachiko Murata, *Tao of Islam* (Lahore: Carvan Press, 2001).

⁶⁰ Reference to the famous hadith ‘I am the city of knowledge and Ali is its gate’.

⁶¹ The Holy Quran, 7:156, *Al-Araf*. Verse confirming divine decree that “my mercy encompasses all things”.

⁶² Murata, *The Tao of Islam*, 215.

of Adam, the '*nafakhtu ruhi*'⁶³ (I blew my breath), Ibn Arabi expounded that all things came into existence through the Breath of Compassionate, (*al-nafs ar-Rahman*)⁶⁴ without that exhalation of Mercy, no being comes into existence, and since all things are encompassed by *rahma*, thus we return to the same ocean of Mercy at the end of life. ⁶⁵

Furthering the same idea of God's Mercy as the divine womb,⁶⁶ creating and sustaining all things, Ibn Arabi proposes that all creatures are children of that divine mercy having same loving and intimate relationship that a child has with a mother. Furthermore, the idea of divine being a mother to all creatures, is strongly supported by Prophetic sayings, which are emphasized and highlighted by Sufis. For example, through the famous saying that Allah loves his creatures seventy times more than a mother, Allah is explained and depicted through a feminine symbol of motherhood. A similar idea has also been advocated through another tradition saying, 'people are a family of God'⁶⁷. Thus, another feminine concept of family used to describe the love and nearness of God to his creation.

The second important lady-word used extensively in Sufi lexicon is *nafs* (soul or self). It is a feminine noun and is used hundreds of times in the Holy Quran and is qualified with various adjectives to show its changeable qualities from being the *nafs al-ammaraḥ bi'l-su*⁶⁸ (commanding to evil) to *nafs al-mutmainnah* (the contented self)⁶⁹ and then to further states, with a long journey in between all stages. Used with a feminine pronoun, *nafs*, comes to represent another element of

⁶³ Frithjof Schuon and P.N Townsend, *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts* (Lahore: Suhail Academy, 2001), 58.

⁶⁴ William C. Chittick "Ibn Arabi and His School," in *Encyclopedia of Islamic Spirituality*, ed. Seyyed Hossein Nasr, Vol. II (Lahore: Suhail Academy, 2000),62.

⁶⁵ Schuon and Townsend, *Spiritual Perspectives and Human Facts*, 58.

⁶⁶ William C. Chittick, *The Elixir of the Gnostics* (Provo: Brigham Young University Press, 2003), xxix.

⁶⁷ A hadith saying 'al kahlqu ayallullah (all creation is a family of Allah)

⁶⁸ The Holy Quran, 12:53, Al-Fajar

⁶⁹ The Holy Quran, 27-28:53, Al-Fajar. For a detailed discussion see Titus Burckhardt, "Sufi Doctrine and Method," in *Sufism: Love and Wisdom*, eds. Michon and Gaetani, 12-18.

femininity that many cultures in the world have in common – the commanding desire in one’s heart for lustfulness, worldliness and egoistic pull. Thus, the *nafs* with all its negative attributes at the lowest level is taken as a depiction of womanhood or femininity, which like a woman can lure men into worldly and sexual activities.

Another lady-word close to *nafs* is *duniya* (the world), which is used as a representation of women and vice versa, because of women’s soft and loving nature and consequent attachment to the object of their love, they are a symbol for attachment with and weaknesses for the worldly life. On the contrary, the *aql* or (intellect/rational faculty) or *ruh* (spirit), are grammatically masculine, and are symbols of manliness that a spiritual seeker must use to overcome the *nafs* and *duniya* in order to embrace the Beauty of *dhat* (the Essence).⁷⁰ *Nafs* and *aql* are also put as a contrast by Sufis since *aql* is a masculine gender. Moreover, the *nafs*, being the feminine, is veiled from the divine Beauty, and also serves as a veil against *aql* to let it truly recognize, appreciate and submit to the lordship of *ruh* (*spirit*), another masculine word within the same orbit.⁷¹

The third and probably the most important lady-word in this list is *dhat* (the essence or the core). If on the lowest or farthest away from God is placed *nafs*, then *dhat* is His true essence where no duality exists. It is interesting to see how Ibn Arabi plays around with this paradox of symbolism. On one edge, there is *nafs*, a feminine and on the other *dhat*, another symbol of femininity. Sufis talk about *dhat* being hidden under ‘seventy thousand veils’ from the seeker, who is eternally pulled by Its Beauty.⁷² Use of feminine gender as a symbol for the divine Beloved has been a favourite Sufi aptitude. The ecstatic Arab Sufi poet, Ibn al-Farid, is well known for his

⁷⁰ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Living Sufism* (Lahore: Suhail Academy, 2000), 42, 43, 147.

⁷¹ Frithjof Schuon, *Dimensions of Islam* (Lahore: Suhail Academy, 1999), 51.

⁷² Dakake, “Walking upon the Path of God like Men”? Women and the Feminine in the Islamic Mystical Tradition”, 134.

sweet words to call his divine Beloved by using female names such as Layla, Num, Salma and many others as metaphors of eternal beauty, grandeur and perfection.⁷³ Others like Rumi, Ibn Arabi in high class languages of Arabic and Persian to Sultan Haq Bahu, Waris Shah and Shah Hussain in local dialects of Punjabi or Saraiki languages also use similar feminine symbols or feminine voice in beautiful ways to seek, praise and call upon the hidden, veiled and most Desirable Beloved.

It is interesting to note that there is an obvious paradox between the two most striking extremes that the feminine could present. The tension between the commanding self, as the symbol of lowliness of feminine, to the essence of divinity, which is the ultimate goal of *salik* (the spiritual wayfarer), the changing faces of femininity are awe-inspiring. Femininity thus entails the paradox of being detestable to being the most desirable. This polarity or tension can only be resolved if one could journey between these two poles and bridge the divide. Just like the two poles of the planet earth, one could not be present at both. There is a tremendous distance between the two and yet the two are probably the same. This interesting, apparently paradoxical, yet inwardly a rewarding journey could only be taken at the hands of a learned Sufi master, who is also a symbol of motherly love and nurturing for his or her disciples.

Woman as the representative of the soul longing to join her Beloved is a common theme in the folk poetry of Pakistan. Hir, Sassi, Sohni and many other women lovers are eternally living due to the love, longing and pain they ignite in the hearts of people through their characters. Interestingly, the Holy Quran augments this theme through Zulaikha (the prototypical lover of Prophet Youssuf (A.S)), a symbol of Divine Beauty.⁷⁴ Ibn Arabi has shared intricate etymological

⁷³ For a detailed discussion, Schimmel, *Mystical Dimension of Islam*, 274-79.

⁷⁴ Schimmel, *My Soul is a Woman: The Feminine in Islam*, 119-79.

and hermeneutical details of many other terms. However, it would be more pertinent to discuss those in the next chapter under the section where his legacy for the Sufi *Silsilah* under review will be provided. Summarizing a few key feminine symbols that are used both negatively and positively, as expounded by Sufi masters for the seekers of the spiritual reality, the above section attempted to convey the wide range of possibilities between the two opposite worldviews of ‘womanhood’. The next section attempts to show how the epistemological debates on gender took another turn when it entered the practical domain of Sufism in action. It also attempts to show as to how the emerging ideas related to masculinity came in contact with Sufism and affected its contours.

1.4. Sufism Crossing Paths with *Futuwwa*

Sufi worldview has generated some powerful parallel notions. *Futuwwa* (chivalry) was one of them. It grew in the lap of Islam since its early days. Early and well-known Sufis like Ibn al Husayn al-Sulami (d. 1021) wrote his *Kitab al-Futuwwa*⁷⁵ in the eleventh century expounding invaluable lessons for adopting and practically moving on the way of Sufism. The book was translated as *Book of Sufi Chivalry* (1983) by Jerrahi Sufi *silsilah* for its significance and relevance for Sufism. Without understanding the conceptual and contextual details of *futuwwa*, the current study cannot do justice to the contours of living Sufi tradition under study due to some common dynamics. Also, *futuwwa*, essentially is a concept based on gender, and is complicated for being etymologically a feminine word but standing for masculine ideals. Without having a good grip on its key dimensions, the gender roles and dynamics in Sufism cannot be understood properly.

⁷⁵ Ibn al Husayn al-Sulami, *Kitab al-Futuwwa*, English tr., Al-Halveti, Sheikh Tosun Bayrak al-Jerrahi. *The Book of the Sufi Chivalry* (New York: Inner Traditions International, 1983)

Futuwwa can be translated as chivalry or young manliness but none can convey the full meaning since it is a mix of many connotations. It is derived from the Arabic word *fata* that literally means ‘a young man’, depicted a concept that amalgamated bravery, fearlessness, passion and magnanimity of a person regardless of chronological age.⁷⁶ Persian translation or substitute of *futuwwa* was either the use of the similar word as *futuwwat* or translated as *jawanmardi*, i.e. young-manliness.⁷⁷ As indicated by its Arabic name, the movement had its roots in the Arab land. As the famous saying of the Holy Prophet ﷺ goes, “*La fata illa Ali, la sayf illa Zulfiqar*” (There is no youth except Ali and no sword except [his sword named] Zulfiqar).⁷⁸ Thus, the superiority and leadership of Hazrat Ali (R.A) in the *futuwwa* movement is not only understandable but also a distinguishing character. The major part of world of Islam, agrees on the valour, fearlessness and combat skills of Hazrat Ali (R.A) as well as his superiority in knowledge, eloquence, spiritual accomplishments and unparalleled compassion.⁷⁹

As indicated above, Sufi *silsilahs* became increasingly organized between twelfth and sixteenth centuries and produced literature abundantly on various aspects of Sufi systems. The intricacies of admission into Sufi *silsilah* as well as *adaab* (etiquettes)⁸⁰ to follow the path and detailed instructions on *dhikr* (remembrance of Allah) and seclusion or meditation were explained in great details.⁸¹ Sufi *silsilahs* became very stringent to admit someone for becoming a Sufi or a dervish and most required renouncing the normal, standard way of life by adopting a highly disciplined, strenuous, impersonal life shared with other Sufis and *dervishes* of *silsilah*. Therefore,

⁷⁶Lloyd Ridgeon, *Jawanmardi A Sufi Code of Honour* (Edinburg: Edinburg University Press, 2011), 27.

⁷⁷ Seyyed Hossein Nasr, *Islamic Art & Spirituality* (Lahore: Suhail Academy, 1997), 155.

⁷⁸ Ridgeon, *Jawanmardi A Sufi Code of Honour*, 45.

⁷⁹ Reza Shah-Kazemi, *Ali, Justice and Remembrance* (London & New York: I.B. Tauris, 2006), 37-38.

⁸⁰ There were detailed treatises being written on *adaab* (etiquettes) for Sufis. For detailed discussion see, Mwnahem Milson, *A Sufi Rule for Novices: Kitab Adab al-Muridin of Abu al-Najib al-Suhrawardi* (Cambridge and London: Harvard University Press, 1975), 16, 27.

⁸¹ William C. Chittick, *Sufism: A Beginner's Guide* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2009), 20-33.

many who would have liked to be a part of Sufi *silsilah* felt intimidated and were not able to join. To make the fruits of Sufi teachings available to those who could not dedicate themselves fully to the Sufi path by renouncing the world, yet wanted to practice its teachings, *futuwwa* became a bridge between the worldly life along with a higher, nobler way of life. Thus, to facilitate a milder way of spiritual practice that also integrated demands of everyday life and providing space to account for worldly responsibilities, *futuwwa* became a welcome discipline in itself.

There is plenty of *futuwwa* literature, which describes the rules and qualities of *futuwwa* both in the Arabic and Persian worlds. Various writers described and promoted certain conditions and values associated with *futuwwa*. They also share how *futuwwa* was different from Sufism. One of the most eminent writers on *Futuwwa* is Abu Hafis ‘Umar Suhrawardi (d. 1234), mentioned a number of working people such as guards, soldiers and merchants, being permitted and encouraged to join *futuwwa* groups, who could not join a Sufi *silsilah* as a full-time engagement. As early as Ibn Battuta, writers mention *akhis* (Arabic for brother and the term used in Turkey for members of *futuwwa* group) working during the day and sharing his income to the master of *futuwwa* in the evening. Suhrawardi provides a sort of a list of ‘Dos and Don’ts’ that informs us of twelve major traits and characteristics required to be part of *futuwwa* – pertaining both to the external and internal aspects of personality. The external aspects included the *nawahi*, that is acts to refrain from such as refraining from sexual immodesty, eating illegally permitted food, slander, listening to or looking at anything unworthy of *futuwwa*, engaging in violent conduct, and pondering to ambition and desire. The positive internal dimensions that are advised to be inculcated included munificence, generosity, humility, compassion, selflessness, and sobriety in the spiritual endeavour.⁸² It is interesting to note that all negative qualities that needed control or removal such

⁸² Ridgeon, *Jawanmardi A Sufi Code of Honour*, 14-26.

as anger, sexual desire or animosity were more masculine and all positive, internal dimensions that are encouraged to be adopted were more feminine qualities.

1.5. *Futuwwa*'s Relationship to Gender Dynamics in Sufism

Interestingly, most of the Sufi *silsilahs* though had become tough on admission criteria and demanded full-time engagement, yet, they were open to women in principle and did not stop admission on the basis of gender, whereas *futuwwa* organizations did. References to women being part of Sufism have been provided by Knysh and Smith (1928) and Ahmet Karamustafa (2007).⁸³

One can see that in the *futuwwat Nama-yi-Mirza*⁸⁴, a book by Abd al- Azim Khan Qarib-i-Garakani had clearly listed those who were not permitted for admission. It said:

*"Futuwwat is not for the hermaphrodite (tanjir), and neither for a woman, because the two are equal. The hermaphrodite is the person who is neither a man nor a woman, and is imputed to [engage] in shameful acts, which are despised among men. And there is no futuwwat for women because the Prophet ﷺ said, 'They are incomplete in intelligence and in religion.'"*⁸⁵

It is important to see that how parallel movements like *futuwwa* banned women's participation in spiritual activities as that might have affected later years' Sufi views on restricting women's roles and activities in Sufism. As indicated by Cornell, while explaining as-Sulami's early Sufi women that their leadership role as teachers, leaders of Sufi lodges and spiritual icons have started diminishing.⁸⁶ This attitude is already visible in some Sufi leader's writings such as Shihab al-Din Suhrawardi's two Persian works on *futuwwat* that is *Kitab fil-Futuwwat* and *Risalat al-Futuwwat* that voice such rules.⁸⁷ He has similar attitude in his famous *Awarif al Ma'arif*. As compared to al-Sulami's simple and straightforward *futuwwa* rules that did not discriminate among men and

⁸³ Ahmet T. Karamustafa, *Sufism: The Formative Period* (Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press, 2007), 116.

⁸⁴ *Futuwwa* with a t sound at the end in Persian, Turkish and Urdu.

⁸⁵ Ridgeon, *Jawanmardi: A Sufi Code of Honour*, 5.

⁸⁶ Cornell, *Early Sufi Women*, 65.

⁸⁷ Ridgeon, *Jawanmardi A Sufi Code of Honour*, 25.

women and only helped to bring in more sincerity, commitment, devotion and selflessness in a Sufi while practicing the teachings, Suhrawardi is far stricter. He declares:

“Know that there are eight groups (*ta'ifa*) for whom *futuwwat* is utterly impermissible, unless they repent. The first is the gossip (*ghammaz*),...Second a tell-tale (*nammam*),...Third...who scorns (*mi'yar*) the means of earning, ...Fourth jealousy and miserliness is utterly impermissible...Fifth is having dark (*asfar*) complexion...Sixth is the innovator... Seventh, the person who is born imperfect, either blind, deaf or lame...Eighth, *futuwwat* is not for the hermaphrodite (*tanjir*), and neither for a woman, because the two are the same...And there is no *futuwwat* for women because the Prophet ﷺ said, ‘They are incomplete in intelligence and in religion.’”⁸⁸

A highly interesting response provided by women was a parallel, competitive concept termed, *niswan* (female chivalry) adopted and practiced by women. *Niswan* was generally practiced after thirty years of age, which meant that woman would have been free from their motherly responsibilities for young children by that time since it was a custom to marry women off as early as possible after puberty. Derived from *nisa* (a common term to denote woman), al-Sulami uses *Niswan* in comparison to *fityan* (those who practiced male chivalry). However, he also mentions women, who, instead of *niswan*, practiced *futuwwa* as they chose to be with and serve *fityan*.⁸⁹ The practice of female chivalry, whether in parallel or in competition to male chivalry was a response that women adopted, however, it did not help them regain their status as equal counterparts to enter institutionalized *futuwwa* organisations. Likewise, similar corrosion had entered Sufi circles due to some *futuwwat* leaders also being Sufi masters. The ban on women imposed by more orthodox Sufis like Suhrawardi mentioned above is a vivid example.

As Schimmel points out the sentiment against women’s entry and active role in Sufism grew stronger and affected some Sufi circles so deeply that they turned hostile to women and “would not touch food cooked by a woman.”⁹⁰ One can see that Sufism started becoming less open to women in certain forms where other objectives, either political or social, took more prominence

⁸⁸ Ridgeon, *Jawanmardi: A Sufi Code of Honour*, 131.

⁸⁹ Cornell, *Early Sufi Women*, 66-68.

⁹⁰ Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, 426.

instead of focusing mainly on spiritual development for the sake of reaching God. Such attitude became worsened in certain other cases as the degeneration of those political or social movements, such as *futuwwa* impacted the social or organizational aspects of Sufism too. Since *futuwwa* ran very close to Sufism, its influence on Sufi circles was natural. On one hand, Sufism did provide women the opportunity to excel in their spiritual endeavours. On the other hand, its orthodox and stricter explanations forced women to accept second grade citizenship if they wanted to enter the boundaries of *tasawwuf*. This tension seems to have continued over centuries, augmented by growing patriarchal and male dominated systems throughout other social structures and systems as well.

The question arises whether women would get the same status and respect as their male counterparts when they entered the ranks of ‘men of God’ (on the basis of their spiritual calibre). This, one needs to figure out, both through peeping into annals of history and current times. History tells us that there have been exemplary spiritual women since the advent of Islam who have been highly regarded in the world of Islam. As shown in the literature review section, there is a considerable body of knowledge produced about women’s role in Sufism during medieval times. However, when it came to discuss the spiritual ranks of a Sufi woman, there has always been a discriminatory lens applied by later writers. Eminent writers and Sufi masters of medieval times like al-Sulami had clearly established and provided evidence that women can achieve highest ranks during their spiritual ascension depending upon their journey and dedication to God, just like men. All stations of *abdal*, *qutb*, *qalandar* are open to them. There was no dichotomy between men and women on that point.

However, when later writers, could not deny their predecessor eminent writers about women’s possible achievements as *abdal*, *qutb* or *qalandar*, could not remain as just, honest and

courageous as earlier Sufi writers like Sulami were. They tried at least to show that women, though could achieve a spiritual rank like that of a *Qalandar*, however, they would be worth half a degree less than a man achieving the same rank.⁹¹ Thus, Bibi Ji Rabiah Basri, though was considered a *qalandar* by them, but only half a *qalandar* as opposed to Shahbaz Qalandar of Sehwan Sharif and Bu Ali Qalandar of Panipat, for no other failure or weakness but her sex. Therefore, they promoted the myth of the world having witnessed only ‘*dhaai* (two and a half) *qalandars*’ so far.’ This not only was aimed at devaluing Rabiah’s spiritual accomplishments, but also overall promoted the sense that even though a woman could achieve a rank, she would only have half of the powers of that rank as compared to her men counterparts. It sounds a bit ironical that the myth of ‘*dhaai qalandar*’ has pervaded so deeply into popular perception that even the people of various *tariqahs* in the sub-continent believe in it.⁹² Moreover, it seems that after Rabiah, writers either did not find or consider any other woman Sufi to use as an example.

There may be various reasons for above misconception and decline of women’s active role in some circles of Sufism. Declining educational, social and economic conditions of Muslim societies around the world under dwindling and defeating political rule and an increasing colonization of territories seem to be the most impacting factors. Academic and intellectual achievements of Muslims slowly corroded due to above factors and women were increasingly marginalised in all spheres of life. Sufism operated under certain social and cultural milieus and a general decline of Muslim societies in their education, science, cultural and economic robustness over centuries had natural impact on Sufi world too. Like other spheres of life, women’s participation and leadership in Sufi circles seem to have been affected too.

⁹¹ Adil, *Shan e Qalandar*, 14-15.

⁹² Inam Mohammad, *Hazrat Qalandar Lal Shahbaz of Sehwan-Sharif* (Karachi: Royal Book Company, 1978), 127.

1.6. From Gender to Supra-Gender: Are Sufis Defining or Defying Gender?

When trying to find a term to describe Sufi teachings on gender, one feels bewildered to ascertain whether they define, redefine or defy gender. Sufis go far beyond the boundaries of commonly established gender concepts and roles, therefore, no current terminology around gender could fit the concept. To show the Sufis' 'leap' beyond established boundaries, terms such as trans-gender, pan-gender or bi-gender were considered. However, these are already defined by experts and are already in use to explain certain notions in the academic world. Moreover, these terms are based on physical characteristics and sexual orientation of people, therefore, did not suit the Sufi concept of gender, which is not based on these. Since Sufis' view on gender is beyond the terms coined by gender and other experts, therefore, to adequately describe the Sufi definition of gender, this research proposes a new term, i.e. supra-gender. This term tries to capture the real essence of Sufi view on gender and thereby adds to the intellectual and academic works on both gender and Sufism.

Let us look at this in depth since this is the crux of this research and a term that has never been used by any other researcher to date. Supra-gender denotes a gender that is based and adopted on the basis of spiritual inclinations instead of biological sex or sexual orientation. Unlike all other definitions of gender as mentioned above such as trans-gender, pan-gender, bi-gender and others that have been used by gender experts and other specialists and academicians opining on gender or gender-based issues from the social, medical or psychological perspectives, none have defined the gender definition from a spiritual point of view. Some of the works mentioned in the literature review section do indicate some researchers' attempts to look at women's role in Sufi circles, however, they have not been able to articulate the spiritual sense of gender that is not based on any physical, sexual or social condition. Even when some writers tried such as Murata mentioned

earlier in this study, the sense of a person defining him or herself as beyond the physically or socially established boundaries of gender has not been termed clearly as a separate definition of gender the way this study attempts to do.

The most important sources on which Sufi worldview of gender is based is the Holy Quran and *hadith*. Sufi foundations of defining gender are based on a *hadith*⁹³ that clearly defines gender roles by differentiating them into three classes, saying, “*Talib al-dunya muannisun; talib al-uqba mukhannisun; talib al-mawla muzzakkirun.*”⁹⁴ It means ‘aspirant/seeker of this world is a female; aspirant/seeker of the hereafter is a eunuch and aspirant/seeker of the Lord is a male’. One sees that the three biologically determined sexes have been re-categorized under the three major objects or goals of life, i.e. this world; the hereafter; and the Lord.

Following the above-mentioned command of the Holy Prophetﷺ, Sufis define gender roles on the basis of their *talab*. i.e. their object in life. *Talib* is derived from *talab* that can be interpreted as desire, need, aspiration or goal in life. It also means having the strongest determination and passion to acquire the object of one’s desire. In this saying of the Holy Prophetﷺ, people are segregated on the basis of their *talab* (want), their life-goals, or the prime object of their desire rather than their physical or biological sexes. *Talab* can have various degrees in exercising its power on the heart and mind of its keeper. For example, the body has ‘*talab*’ for food as its main source of life. However, people can have different levels and types of ‘*talab*’ with regard to food. Thus the ‘*talab*’ for food will change immensely with regard to quantity, quality, taste, price etc.

⁹³ Although many Sufis, as eminent as Ibn Arabi, Farid u-Din Attar and Sultan Haq Bahu, have accepted and related this as a *hadith*, some writers have mentioned it as Sufi saying, see Schimmel, *As through a Veil*, 155. Based on the authority of the most eminent Sufis, this research accepts this as a *hadith* and uses it with the requisite honour and respect. Moreover, the central figure of this research, Baba Jan Sarkar Dr. Muhammad Youssuf Shaheen, also related this as a *hadith* many times in his discourses.

⁹⁴ Khadim Sultan al-Faqr, Hazrat Sakhi Sultan Mohammad Najib-ur-Rehman, *Sultan Bahu: The Life and Teachings* (Lahore: Sultan-ul-Faqr Publications, 2014), 153.

of food for each person. A common use of this word in every day vocabulary is *talib-i-ilm* (seeker of the knowledge) used for a student. The Sufi nomenclature also terms the traveller of the spiritual path as '*talib*', only when they start walking the path to seek the truth and union with the divine Beloved.

Before we go further into the gender discussion, let us look in a bit detail of the three objects of desire mentioned for three groups of people. *Duniya*, the physical, material world contains and consists of the riches of the physical, material and ephemeral nature. As indicated above, *talib al-duniya* is busy in seeking or fulfilling the needs and desires relating to *duniya* for the pleasures of worldly life. It entails a range of desires relating to accumulating and spending money, using or abusing sexual pleasure, having and exercising power and status, and earning fame and good reputation among people. Although, there can be an extensive list added here, however, all that keeps a person tied only to the worries of this world is considered lowly and unfit for an aspirant of the 'Reality' or Gnosis. Thus, the seeker of the world, who is only concerned with having a good and plentiful worldly life is regarded a female. Apparently, the stereotype of female being a home-maker possessive of their house, children, things and relationships is used here as a symbol to shun the same thing they are known for. It also indicates that it is a behaviour possible for anyone from any sex, thus using the stereotype as a symbol for a behaviour and not for a certain sex, which makes this statement a strong attack on the stereotype itself.

Uqba or *Uqbah*, the hereafter, includes the riches of the next world, the paradise and its bounties, especially *houris*, a concept that needs deeper understanding, that has been explained by the traditional exegetes of the Holy Quran as beautiful virgin women promised for the believers of good and noble deeds. The paradise will offer innumerable bounties and pleasures to men and women proven eligible to live there. Thus, for *talib al-uqba* ensuring entry into paradise will not

just warranty the eternal pleasures but is the only way to avoid hellfire and associated punishments, which is the other possibility left for the wrong doers. To receive these bounties in the paradise, they refrain from worldly pleasures. People who seek paradise, generally look down on those who seek pleasures in this life and take pride in refraining from it. Their utmost devotion, vigorous work, prayers and fasting, piety, charity and voluntary meditations and invocations - their most precious earning of entire life - are geared toward buying the comforts and pleasures of paradise. Therefore, *talib al-uqba*, who is none other than a seeker of the unending bodily and sexual pleasure, is classified as eunuch. In reality, they crave for pleasure but can't have it fearing to lose their eligibility to enter paradise. It is ironical that they seek to achieve in the paradise what they reject and consider bad or lowly throughout life. They are even lower than those who seek this world, since they at least gain worldly pleasures. Whereas, they seek what they shun and on top of it are not even sure they will get in the end since the entry to paradise is not guaranteed.

The last category, *talib al-Mawla*, includes the key word *Mawla*, meaning the Lord, denotes the Divine entity. Here God becomes the prime object of desire whose *talib* is the only one regarded a male by the Holy Prophetﷺ. This is the choicest class of Sufis, *dervishes*, *faqirs*, seekers of the Divine Beauty and His *m'arifa*. They are neither distracted by the beauties of this world nor the bounties of the paradise. They only have one goal, i.e. seeing the Face of God⁹⁵ and wholeheartedly go for it without any second thought. This is expressed beautifully by Bibi Ji Rabbiah Basri in a verse:

⁹⁵ In the Holy Quran, there are various references to the face of Allah and to those who seek His Face. For instance, “[He] who gives from his wealth to purify himself. And who has (in mind) no favour from anyone one to be paid back. Except seeking the Countenance of his Lord, the Most High” (Surah al-Layl, 92:18-20) and “(Saying), we feed you for the sake of Allah alone: no reward do we desire from you, nor thanks” (Surah al-Insan, 76:9. These and many other references are given by the Quran for a special category of people who, unconditionally, do good and be their best, only to seek the Face, Presence and Approval of Allah without any benefit of this world or the next. They are different and higher than even those who are noble and do good deeds for heavenly rewards.

"O Lord, if I worship You because of fear of hell,
then burn me in hell;
if I worship you because I desire paradise,
then exclude me from paradise;

but if I worship You for Yourself alone,
then deny me not your Eternal Beauty"⁹⁶

Looking at the above, it is obvious that though there is a use of biological sexes to classify people into three groups, however, the way they have been nominated under each group has nothing to do with their physical and biological nature. In fact, their biological sexes have been underplayed and instead superseded by their life goals and spiritual inclinations. Thus, all those who are after the worldly life, whether men, women or trans-gender, placed into one basket, i.e. of being a female. A biological female is not necessarily a spiritual female and vice-versa. Likewise, those who are after the next world and its rewards are spiritual eunuchs, whatever sexually they may be. Thus, the only spiritual males (*muzakkir*) left under this definition are those, whether male-bodied or in the garb of women and trans-gender, who seek nothing but God, not for any worldly or heavenly benefits but purely for the sake of His Beauty and Majesty. Interestingly, a sexual male could be a spiritual female and a sexual eunuch could be a spiritual male. A spiritual male emanates spiritual life force to the universe and has spiritual *futuwwa* (chivalry) that nurtures and protects its spiritual family.

The above Prophetic tradition has been widely used in Sufi circles to declare that all those who walk on the path of God, in whatever body-form they are, will be considered men. It is simple yet challenging to convey in words as to how women walking on the spiritual path become 'men'. Before that, it is even more interesting to ask what do men become, who are doing the same? Interestingly, when the sexually determined males walk on the path of God, they also become

⁹⁶ Smith, *The Life and Work of Rabia and other Women Mystics in Islam*, 65.

‘men’. Or rather only then they truly become men. Hence, it becomes more evident that the word man must be meaning something different. It cannot be the biological man with the male physical characteristics such as beard and moustache. It is a rank and not a biological characteristic. The rank of man, as defined by the Holy Prophet ﷺ will have all kinds of ‘bodies’ carrying pure spirits.

Let us have a look from another angle. There are certain categories of physical characteristics that are considered fixed and unchangeable. For example, Hindu *shudras*, the lowest among the four classified classes are born as lowest and meant to spend their entire life serving others. Likewise, black people were considered lower and having no rights against whites just on the basis of the skin colour they are born with. There are many other racial superiority maladies history has seen resulting into prolonged conflicts and wars among nations built on the premise of certain people born superior than others. Despite years of struggle, racist sentiments are still deeply embedded in the psychology of people and discrimination due to skin colour, race and ethnicity is still present. Therefore, what is being asserted here is that biases and prejudices based on physical bases and characteristics run very deep and are extremely hard to tackle with. This *hadith* is hitting the supposed superiority of a gender over the other due to physical basis.

Furthermore, while issues like racism have been acknowledged better, gender biases have not and are rather more rampant and more acceptable in many societies. Men are proud, prominent and powerful because they are born as men. No one can compete with them outside that sexual category against their perceived and prescribed role as men in the society. Women or trans-gender are not given the same prerogatives to perform the same role with the same weightage just because they are not born as men. History, society and nature have rendered them unequal already. There are tons of literature in the world proving that women, whether they work much harder, achieve

more or have higher intelligence than their counterpart men, more often than not, are regarded less than men. Likewise, is the case for trans-gender who are regarded even lower.

Moreover, while explaining Islam's stance on status of women, various interpretations are used to prove them inferior against their counterpart men. The above hadith shows that the founder (ﷺ) of the same religion has given a verdict that the classification of men, women and trans-gender has to be done by a different measure. When determining status, people should be ranked by their spiritual aspirations instead of their sexual identities. Men, women and trans-gender are not fixed and unchangeable categories having no absolute or immutable superiority over each other due to their biology. They are not bound to their physical identities and can move within these categories using their spiritual endeavours. Men can be women and women can be men based on their longings, objectives and aspirations. Anyone can become the other, only if they chose their object of desire carefully. Though the word 'man' still gets the highest rank among genders, but it should not be confused with the ordinary use of the word. In the Arab society, like many others in the world, words like man, male, masculine were used for a biological man but with a connotation of a higher status and rank attached to it. Now the same word is used in the hadith to denote a higher rank among sexes, but it does not refer to the biological man. One could argue that it was used on purpose to jolt his (ﷺ) followers that the way they define 'man' is not the right definition. He (ﷺ) tagged them differently. All those who categorised themselves as men because they were born biologically men may not be men any more so how could they be proud of a name that no more belonged only to them. How would now any biological category ridicule, mock, deride or disrespect other since all have been rendered changeable on the basis of spiritual quest. Men, women and transgender, just like the chess pawns, who could be moved to any house up or down,

equally chanced to win or lose, have same weightage in the gender game. Any one, who would consider devaluing or demeaning the other because the other sex was ‘born’ inferior due to bodily or social roles, will fall down the ranks itself. Man was not someone born with masculine sex but a spiritual status that has to be earned. All individuals have full right and capability to attain the highest status if they exercise the highest spiritual temperament.

One can see that the above-mentioned, most powerful saying of the Holy Prophet ﷺ not just completely dispels gender biases but also demolishes the rigid walls against intra-gender movement, which otherwise is much harder to break. The possibility of intra-gender movement from one group to another despite belonging to a specific biological sex or socially determined gender is what makes the gender debate different in Sufism. Superseding the binary classification of gender based on biological, sexual differences between men and women, it automatically points attention to a different set of competencies required for each group. This saying is further complemented by another where the Holy Prophet ﷺ has stated that none had any superiority over another on the basis of skin, blood, ethnicity or social status. Those examples already dispelled the idols of superiority and supremacy founded on bases related to social hierarchical attributes. Setting a big blow to another huge idol of supremacy, i.e. sex or biological determination, the Holy Prophet ﷺ demolished all the bigotry and biases built around sex or gender.

The above also shows that there is a supra-gender realm beyond biological or social determination or classification of individuals. A seeker of God will attain the ‘manhood’ by aspiring only for highest spiritual goals yet when he/she turns a ‘man’ (only due to the use of the word), he/she is already outside the sexually or socially determined gender realm. That is where the boundaries of both sex and gender disintegrate. A eunuch or trans-gender has the full authority to be called a man in the supra-gender realm and not a eunuch anymore. With the possibility of

intra-gender movement, men and women do not remain prisoners of their bodies and the roles societies associate with those bodies. They are bound to their gender in a free manner. Within their ascribed gender roles and vis-à-vis the opposite sex, the issues that become the seeds of discord for common gender, bear the fruit of harmony for supra-gender and their followers. Concluding on the explanation of supra-gender realm where men can be women and women can be men, the major force behind dispelling gender boundaries is the spiritual thrust of a soul that can be contained in any body-form. The spiritual sensibility creates a spiritual sense of identity which this author has defined as supra-gender.

Overall, Sufi weltanschauung (worldview) on gender shows a great promise with its intricate intellectual heritage and vast etymological and hermeneutical details about masculine and feminine. The characteristics of a spiritual man (who can be biologically a woman) of the supra-gender realm are different and sometimes opposite of the man in the gender realm. In the third chapter, we further see the characteristics of men and women walking on the spiritual path. We try to see, if and how, in supra-gender roles, men and women remain within their gender, play their ascribed sexual roles and still not belong there. The Sufi worldview consider gender both sedentary and dynamic, socially relevant yet personally irrelevant. When the gender specialists consider gender ‘a state of being’ that is what Sufis also affirm. It is a state. Not a station. A state that can be changed, revised and totally abolished as well.

1.7. Methodology and Sources

This section covers details of the overall research framework, data collection methods, data analysis and various sources used. At the outset of methodological discussion, it must be noted that essentially this is a story of a living Sufi tradition. A tradition that was led by a unique and

mesmerizing Sufi master leading a Sufi *silsilah* in the twenty-first century with an unconventional approach. The story is full of charisma, love and compassion, as well as deep teachings of *maa'rifa* (gnosis). Also, his story contained myriads of other stories, of his magnificent women disciples. The stories, and the way they unfolded themselves over many years, were so beautiful that applying coarse, inadequate, or coercive methods would have meant subjecting the whole research experience to damage by blemishing its originality.

Alluding to research methods as the proverbial 'Procrustean bed',⁹⁷ where a researcher had to constantly worry about the method requirement and sometimes artificially adjust or extend variables, Rosemary Anderson clearly confesses the limitations of external research observations regarding 'internal states of spiritual experiences' and thus recognized the wide range of exceptional, intense, spiritual experiences that cannot be captured through standard research methods.⁹⁸ Both authors establish that during a research that is also part of a researcher's personal development, the need to keep the observer and the observed seems equally necessary and redundant. Moreover, the authors also recognize about recent times insofar as their focus on transpersonal psychology that "mystical and indigenous forms of Judaism, Christianity and Islam (especially Sufism) have also been increasingly influential in shaping the trans-personal orientation in shaping the human experience."⁹⁹

The need for using newer ways of inquiry when hearts and minds go beyond normal egoistic patterns with mystical and spiritual experiences has also brought into action more 'organic

⁹⁷ Procrustean bed is a plan or scheme to produce uniformity or conformity by arbitrary or violent methods. After Procrustes, the bandit from Greek mythology who stretched or amputated the limbs of travelers to make them conform to the length of his bed." *Dictionary*, June 30, 2017.

<http://www.dictionary.com/browse/procrustean-bed>.

⁹⁸ William Braud and Rosemarie Anderson, *Transpersonal Research Methods for the Social Sciences Honoring Human Experience* (New York: Sage Publications Inc. 1998), xiv.

⁹⁹ Anderson, *Transpersonal Research Methods for the Social Sciences Honoring Human Experience*, xxi

methods', where the researcher and researched all go through and grow together accepting beforehand the possibility of "divine/ human interaction" for anyone who was ready to accept it.¹⁰⁰ The current research, though, does not use any innovative, trans-personal method, however, needs to establish a similar fact. The current study is organic in one way that it grew at the pace of its subjects. Since it has been part of a larger than life experience out of which an attempt has been made to share just one dimension but with a similar impossibility that one would face while examining a ray out of a glittering diamond and cannot help being constantly dazzled by innumerable others pouring out simultaneously.

1.7.1. Data Collection Methods and Selection of Participants

The study sets itself in a multidisciplinary arena. As indicated above, first, a living Sufi tradition led by Dr Muhammad Youssuf Shaheen (1936-2016), reverently called by his disciples as Baba Jan Sarkar, a Sufi leader of the Qadiri-Qalandari *Silsilah*, based in Jhang, Punjab, Pakistan, was purposively chosen to study his role as a spiritual leader and women's role in the selected spiritual tradition. The research objectives and scope had already established the need for qualitative strategies. Case studies, mainly exploratory, but also explanatory, have been at the fore front of qualitative research. The work at hand has both strands. It was a big challenge to choose the most appropriate method out of many, which could capture these so far untold stories in their true essence. Looking at the research questions, there was an obvious need to use range of methods to appropriately elicit required information. A significant part of it relates to history of Sufism vis-à-vis the tradition under review. Since history of tradition had to be sought as part of the study, thus,

¹⁰⁰ Jennifer Clements and Vinalhaven Maine, "Organic Inquiry: Toward Research in Partnership with Spirit," *The Journal of Transpersonal Psychology* 36, no. 1 (2004): 27.

use of a life-history method was weaved in to steer conversations toward facts and details about life of the pioneering personalities from whom Baba Jan Sarkar gained his worldview.

The immersion in the research universe was used to understand the entire deeper and larger milieu of research. Participant observation and immersion have been used initially to prepare a list of themes around which further, detailed queries were to be conducted. Sampling was easy for general research questions as any regular visitor consecutively over five years was eligible to provide general insights. However, immersion, as being part of the research universe, helped in selecting fewer women participants for further case inquires who had been on the path for more than ten years and had already gained a higher spiritual role or unique status. The detailed cases of these women in the last chapter provide further details.

Since the overall need of the topic was to create a case study of the Sufi tradition itself, which necessitated the task of mining and collecting various other stories from history as well as present times. Hence, the need for a complementary method to support the overall case study approach as well as to do justice with these story-shells scattered across shores of past and present in which all other methods mentioned above could be weaved in smoothly. Narrative Inquiry, a comparatively newer method that has steadily gained repute and respect in social sciences, was found most suitable and thus selected to be used as the major research vehicle to support the case study.¹⁰¹ As Reissman and Speedy mention, “narrative inquiry in the human sciences is a 20th century development; the field has ‘realist’, ‘postmodern’, and constructionist strands.”¹⁰² Being true to its name, the method “is the study of experience understood narratively” and uses three

¹⁰¹ Alan Bryman, *Social Research Methods* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), 556.

¹⁰² C. K. Reissman, and J. Speedy, “Narrative Inquiry in the Psychotherapy Professions: A Critical Review,” in *Handbook of Narrative Inquiry: Mapping a Methodology*, ed. D. J. Clandinin (Thousand Oaks: Sage Publications, 2007), 429.

major avenues of “temporality, sociality and place”, which the current study uses as a conceptual framework to elicit and analyse information.¹⁰³ In the section below, the details of how narrative inquiry has been mainly used to develop a case study of the living Sufi tradition with regard to gender and women’s role in Sufism.

1.7.2 Use of Narrative Inquiry

Narrative Inquiry was used as the major method to capture the lived and the told stories. A series of long conversations, subtle musings, unstructured probing over the course of eight years were conducted at a pace suitable to participants to help not just ask questions but also observe and see the transformation that women went through. As mentioned above, three essential dimensions or elements of narrative inquiry, i.e. temporality, (the context of time), sociality and place have been taken into account in this study. These three elements were simultaneously used and explored to deal with complexity of research subjects’ feelings, experiences, situations and relational compositions both inside the research framework as well as out of it.¹⁰⁴

1.7.3 Temporality (Time)

The research tries to capture the essence of Baba Jan Sarkar’s teachings in the last forty-nine years when he migrated from Fort Sandeman and settled in Jhang, Punjab. However, in terms of its chronological frame, the research looks at the last eight years of Baba Jan Sarkar’s teachings, i.e. from 2008-2016. In the current research, the aspect of time was of essential nature for the women Sufis case writing since they essentially narrated their experiences, feelings, change in feelings, emotions, behaviours and even conceptualizations of certain spiritual doctrines that occurred over

¹⁰³ Reissman and Speedy, “Narrative Inquiry in the Psychotherapy Professions: A Critical Review”, 429.

¹⁰⁴ For a detailed discussion see, D. J. Clandinin and J. Huber, “Narrative Inquiry,” in *International Encyclopedia of Education*, eds. B. McGaw, E. Baker and P. P. Peterson (New York: Elsevier, nd).

time. The change in social and environmental milieus and their respective gender roles over the years are also captured as well as their consequent effects on the life and experiences of participants. A very interesting aspect of timelessness within time due to the teachings that were being connected with the time of the Holy Prophet ﷺ and earlier Sufis has also been mentioned and captured.

1.7.4. Sociality

As per the principles of narrative inquiry, both personal conditions as well as social conditions of research subjects were observed simultaneously. The deep and mystic feelings of women disciples both aligned to divine or religious ideas as well as their personal love and devotedness for their *Murshid-i-Pak* along with the intricate and complex web of both positive and negative emotions have been taken into account. Furthermore, the study also took into account the social conditions under which women disciples' experiences, behaviours and feelings were generated or expressed. Thus, the spiritual ambiance generated through the holy presence of Baba Jan Sarkar during spiritual *mahafil* played a specific role in shaping women's experiences. Along with that women's interactions with him and with each other have been analysed. Baba Jan had eleven sisters, three wives, four daughters and three daughters-in-law, which meant having twenty-one women directly related and living under his familial leadership role. A great amount of information was received from his sisters, wives, and daughters about his childhood and family life.

Moreover, he had hundreds of women disciples out of which a few visited daily and some even lived at his place for extended periods of time. It was natural and unavoidable for them to develop both affinity and affection as well as conflicts and differences of opinion, particularly when all of them simultaneously and deeply loved one person. The study tries to describe and

analyse the interesting dynamics among women family members and women disciples. Furthermore, the women devotees had their normal, common, social roles as wives, mothers and sisters within their respective families. Therefore, those roles and any changes that occurred to within their familial and other social circumstances due to their spiritual training have also been part of the observations and research.

Since sociality also covers the relationship of researcher with the research participants' lives, as a narrative inquirer, the author could not, and did not wish to, subtract herself from the frame of inquiry. Although, this could have been a challenge or a limitation, it proved a boon for the study. Since Baba Jan Sarkar allowed and encouraged the author to talk to women on such subjects, it made the entire research process easier. Also, strict adherence to respecting women's interests, inclinations and willingness to discuss topics of their interest at a pace convenient to and chosen by them though made the research period long but also enriched it with thoroughness.

One thing that a narrative inquirer must do always is listening - as intently, as sincerely, as openly and as freely as possible - to its subjects. The stories were collected mostly individually and sometimes in groups, when there was an occasion, such as *Urs Pak*¹⁰⁵ (annual celebration of union of a Sufi's soul with the Beloved) when women from various cities of Pakistan were visiting together. There were many *Urs* celebrated in a year related to death anniversaries of various Sufis such as Sarkar Ghauth al-Azam, Hazrat Data Ganj Bakhsh and Baba Ji Jame' Shah (shrine in a local *Faqir* in a near-by village). Thus, fortunately, frequent opportunities were available to talk to women from other cities. Baba Jan Sarkar liked his disciples to have healthy, focused and friendly conversations among themselves when he was engaged in his clinic or some other work.

¹⁰⁵ Lit. death anniversary of a Sufi that is celebrated with Sufi music and sometimes dance.

His usual and friendly advice to his disciples was to have ‘*gup-shup*’ (chit chat) among themselves. Such opportunities were used for group discussions with the available women. That helped hugely in eliciting their narratives and collective views on some of the general research themes.

1.7.5. Locality (Place)

Connelly and Clandinin sum it up suitably when they assert that “all events take place some place.”¹⁰⁶ They also define place as “the specific concrete, physical and topological boundaries of place or sequences of places where the inquiry and events take place.”¹⁰⁷ Thus, for the current research, most stories were collected at *Astana-i-Pak*, which served as a spiritual training centre for his devotees and disciples where women gathered regularly and frequently for spiritual events such as daily or weekly spiritual gatherings (*mehfil-i-Pak*). The researcher also undertook journeys to other cities and countries wherever possible when Baba Jan travelled to meet with disciples and to deliver talks during spiritual gatherings. The research covers observations, teachings and discussions conducted in Islamabad, Gujrat, Lahore Karachi, Quetta, Multan, Rahim Yar Khan and Mianwali. The research also benefited from observing and attending talks delivered by him at Copenhagen University, Denmark (2014), Holland (2015) and Saudi Arabia (2013, 2014 and 2015).

To follow the footsteps of two pioneering figures of the spiritual tradition, two field visits to India were conducted. Baba Ji Fazl al-Rahman had taken a *chilla* (spiritual retreat, of generally of forty days but can be longer) at a river in Deccan, India. A field visit to Hyderabad, Andhra Pradesh was conducted to explore information about him, which did not prove fruitful due to absence of any recorded evidence. Also, a visit to the shrine of Baba Ji Ghauth Ali Shah Qadir

¹⁰⁶ Clandinin, “Narrative Inquiry”, 481.

¹⁰⁷ Clandinin, “Narrative Inquiry”, 480.

Qalandar was undertaken in November 2014 to collect and add to details already mentioned about him in *Tadhkirah-i-Ghauthiyah*. However, the current group of people voluntarily looking after his shrine could not add to what is already mentioned in the book. In addition, a visit was undertaken to Oxford, UK to collect books and journals dedicated to the teachings of Muhyiddin Ibn Arabi at a library dedicated to him. This was a fruitful visit due to successful access to a great treasure of scholarship on him. All of these field work visits, however, do not extend the geographical scope of the research beyond its main focus on Baba Jan Sarkar and his teachings.

1.7.6 Data Analysis

Overall, a narrative inquiry approach was used in analysing texts to continue with the overall research design. Multiple ways were used to collect and create field texts. Also, collection included photographs, relevant artefacts such as things used by the leader of the *silsilah* or his predecessors, diaries or letters shared by women. Being part of participants' lived experiences at the centre of spiritual activities, researcher is bound to be subjected to certain biases. Despite all the efforts for being objective and honest to research participants, it must be taken into account that the interpretation and explanation of those lived experiences carries the understanding of the researcher at the end. Also, it is necessary and perhaps natural too that the past experiences of participants, especially the parts that they narrated was interpreted from the present perspective of research study. Nevertheless, all biases are accepted – as essentially 'qualitative' means dealing with 'quality' and hence that already carries a judgement, a bias and a feeling.

1.8. Research Ethics

The study entailed dealing with intricate, private and sometimes deeply painful feelings and memories of women. Thus, it needed a very sensitive ethics code for ensuring that their

conversations and experiences were dealt in ethical, professional manner. Their emotions and feelings were fully embraced and respected and where they did not want to answer a question, they were not pushed. The research strategies ensured that no harm was generated to any participant by ensuring privacy during conversations and anonymity during analysis. Respect of their opinions and non-judgmental probing was ensured. Flexibility in terms of always following their preference for the time and length of conversation was also ensured. Anonymity was ensured and hence their real names have not been revealed. Either their pseudo names are used or a general term ‘devotee’ is used for concealment of identity. Wherever a city is mentioned, further details are intentionally avoided for ensuring anonymity. In the two case studies, with informed consent and Baba Jan Sarkar’s permission, real names and some personal information has been shared. Since there were hundreds of women devotees shining in the light of spiritual love, it was difficult to decide whose case studies should be presented in detail. With Baba Jan Sarkar’s help, this issue was resolved as well. Incidentally, all three of them passed away during the preparation and finalization of this thesis. It is beyond the comprehension of rational mind to assess why those three were selected who all passed away during the completion of this work.

Informed consent was the first step as without permission of Baba Jan, the head and leader of the spiritual tradition under research, it was not even possible to initiate the research. In response to an article about Baba Jan written in 2007 in a book published in USA, there was quite a lot of interest showed by readers, who requested to write more about him. Subsequently, Baba Jan was requested for permission to undertake research on his teachings. However, since he first declined, thus the idea for the proposed study was dropped. After some time, he was again requested. It was only after his permission and informed consent was sought that the work was initiated, albeit at a

slow pace. He also informed his wives and some of the women devotees himself that they would be interviewed.

1.9. Research Challenges and Mitigation Strategies

Abundance of ideas and information sometimes works as a challenge for the researcher as it demands more discipline and effort to organize information. A major challenge was the richness of information collected over the years since it was so intense and dynamic that it was difficult to decide what to leave out of writing. However, to keep the study manageable, the chapters were divided according to the major research questions. Further, under each chapter, a set of sub-questions related to relevant themes were adjusted.

When Baba Jan and research participants responded to questions and probing, many a times, there were disruptions due to the busy environment of *Astana-i-Pak*, constant phone calls and arrival of unexpected guests. It was a constant challenge and thus sometimes an interview took months to complete before a full picture could be understood. Many a times the women repeated the same events or feelings they had shared months back. It needed patience to let them repeat things and then to probe further. Nevertheless, it proved worthwhile as the women who were repeating information were validating in a way the factual accuracy of events, the intensity of their feelings or experience without realizing that they were validating their own accounts. Patience, repetition of questions and using notes from previous conversations helped in overcoming this challenge.

Astana-i-Pak is a huge building with access from three sides into the sitting area. Using voice recorder proved quite useless due to noisy environment thronging with sounds from all directions. Jhang has a long summer spell from February to almost October. Thus, fans and air-

coolers worked round the clock during hotter days, resulting into making the voice recorder almost ineffective. Also, women did not feel comfortable in front of voice recorder, so the idea was using one was abandoned. Instead, taking notes from their conversations proved more helpful.

Another challenge was to capture the historical facts in an appropriate sequence. The richness and repetition of narratives made it difficult initially to discern a historical sequence of events. Also, the analysis part for second chapter with a lot of historical descriptions was difficult as there were not many historical records available to verify certain dates or contextual background. Based on accounts shared by Baba Jan Sarkar about his Murshid-i-Pak, and information sought from his wives, daughters and sisters, the information about Baba Jan's childhood rely heavily on the anecdotal, descriptive accounts.

To address the above challenge, and to develop a fact-based chronology, Baba Jan's school records and other educational certificates were analysed to verify dates. Wherever possible, dates and associated places have also been verified through verification of personalities and events mentioned in the life history. Furthermore, facts recorded in personal diaries and notes written by some devotees and Baba Jan's family members before the initiation of this research were also very helpful to verify certain issues. Interviews and conversations were conducted separately with the eldest three sisters of Baba Jan with long intervals in between to ensure that the three accounts of his childhood are recorded separately and then analysed for any discrepancies among narrators. The eldest two had also participated in some of the activities like taking the goats out for grazing along with him. They gave their personal accounts of his early childhood and his 'specialness' since that time. Further, interviews and conversations were held separately with all other sisters on separate occasions to collect more details of certain anecdotes.

It must be noted here that the working modalities were never ‘created’ to suit the research objectives. The queries and observations were done as per the flow of life at *Astana-i-Pak*. The major reason for this was the genuine respect that the environment induced in one’s heart. People came there with their most noble and highest aspirations. As a person, one had the freedom to agree or disagree with their perspectives. However, as a researcher, it was a professional and ethical responsibility to understand, respect and empathize with their emotions, feelings and opinions. The research participants were devotees of a spiritual master and seekers of spiritual training. Therefore, their objectives were given a higher value than the research objectives. Thus, the research in no way tried to bind people with a protocol. The study and the inquirer were part of the whole. Whatever the whole presented, at its own pace, the inquirer took without judgement and criticism. However, subtle, polite and relevant probing was used to get to the conclusion of their thoughts.

نہ تخت و تاج میں نہ لشکر و سپاہ میں ہے
جو بات مروّ قلم کی بارگاہ میں ہے

Neither the crown of a monarch nor the mighty armies possess

What is received only in the presence of a Qalandar

Poet: Baba Ji Allama Muhammad Iqbal

Translation: Author

Chapter 2

Historical Context of the Spiritual Tradition: A Bird's Eye-View

There is quite a sufficient literature on the history of Qadiri *Silsilah* in South Asia. As indicated by its name and all historical accounts, the Qadiri *Silsilah* was founded by the great Sufi, jurist and scholar Hazrat Muhy al-Din Abd al-Qadir Jilani (d. 1166). He is one of the most illustrious and eminent Sufi masters, greatly revered by all Sufi *silsilahs* and is known for his unique and lofty spiritual status as *Ghauth al-Azam* (the Supreme Helper), *Piran-i-Pir* (Master of the Spiritual Masters), and *Dastgir* (Benefactor of the Needy). In Baba Jan's spiritual tradition, he was lovingly called as Sarkar Ghauth Pak and was an everyday reference by Baba Jan Sarkar for all the teachings he provided. It is thus pertinent to have a glimpse of this central figure of the select Sufi tradition to know his insights and Weltanschauung and opinions about women.

Trained and certified as a Hanbali scholar of Quran¹ and *hadith*, Sarkar Ghauth Pak was a most eloquent speaker of his times about a vast range of subjects related to religious, ethical and spiritual fields and was respected alike by traditionalist, *shariah*-loving Muslims and scholars as well as mystical and spiritual-minded Sufis and *dervishes*. Many of his discourses have been recorded. His personality is haloed with a great nimbus of mysterious events narrated not just by the masses or uneducated people, but by the highly respectable and honourable personalities including both Sufis and scholars of the time and innumerable luminaries over centuries.²

It is far beyond the need of this study to prove his spiritual authority or spiritual powers as eminent Sufis like Khwaja Muin al-Din Chishti, Shaykh Najib al-Din Suhrawardi, Shah Abd al-

¹ Follower of the school of Islamic jurisprudence established by Imam Ahmed bin Hanbal (780-855 CE).

² See for details of miracles and other key events Muhammad Riaz Qadiri, *Sultan of the Saints: Mystical Life and Teachings of Hazrat Shaikh Syed Abdul Qadir Jilani (R.A)* (Lahore: Talha Publication, 2000).

Haq Muhaddith of Delhi are just a few names who have accepted his authority wholeheartedly. His statement that “my foot is on the heads of all the saints”³ was taken seriously that a serious writer like Mawlana Abd al-Rahman Jami (d. 1492) states that many eminent saints practically put their head under his feet.⁴

There are innumerable miraculous events associated with Shaykh Abd al-Qadir Gilani.⁵ However, there is one most-outstanding miracle that does merit mention. In order to understand that miracle, let us have a look at the social and political milieu in which he lived and operated. The Ummayyad dynasty was increasing in pomp and show day by day. Becoming more and more cantered on accumulation and show of wealth, the spirit of an Islamic welfare state had disappeared. Poor were getting poorer and rich were plundering wealth. Among the masses were hearts aching at the state of affairs and degeneration of society. Also, general Muslim *Ummah* was becoming alienated from Sufism. Two hundred years have not been enough to dim down the echoes of Mansur Hallaj’s (d. 922) *Ana-l-Haq* (I am the Truth) and the legalists’ hue and cry that ended in his crucifixion in the city of *Ghauth al-Azam*, Baghdad. It was a huge jolt for both the sober and the spiritually-drunk Sufis as the unending debate and conflict around Mansur’s state had rendered the entire field of *tasawwuf* a victim of debate, doubt and damage.

It was a chaotic moment for Islam and Sufism. On one hand, the materialism of rulers was at its peak, and there was a need to revive the true Islamic characteristics. On the other hand, the traditionalists were gaining ground by using Mansur’s case as an excuse to shun communication

³ Khaliq Ahmad Nizami, “The Qadiriyyah Order” in *Encyclopedia of Islamic Spirituality*, Vol. II, ed. Nasr, 13.

⁴ Maulana Nur al-Din Muhammad Abd al-Rahman Jami, *Nafhat al-Uns*, Urdu trans. Syed Ahamd Ali Chishti Nizami (Lahore: Mushtaq Book Corner, n.d), 644.

⁵ For details see, Shaykh Abd al-Qadir Jilani, *Fayyuz-i-Ghauth-i-Yazdani*, Urdu trans. Maulana Muhammad Ibrahim Qadiri (Lahore: Rumi Printers, 1986).

and expression of spiritual ideas. Sufism was becoming equal to heresy. In that situation, his true miracle was the revitalization of the Islamic faith through an exemplary combination of *shariah* and *tariqah*. His undisputed acceptance both by the traditionalists as well as Sufis served the cause of Islam in the best manner, as indicated by his name, *Muhyuddin*, Reviver of Religion. His unparalleled oratory attracted thousands of listeners, who became so passionate by listening to his speech that their lives changed forever there and then.⁶

It is pertinent to mention here that women have played an immense role in the life of Ghauth al-Azam Jilani. He was helped, supported and guided by women in significant ways. He has mentioned this in his talks recorded in his autobiographical sketches. A most popular story widely known by masses over many continents is about his illustrious mother and her advice for him to always tell the truth in all situations. Acting upon this simple yet powerful instruction, he could lead an entire gang of robbers leave robbery and change their lives forever, when he was still a young child.⁷ His paternal aunt was also a Sufi woman who could invoke rain through her prayer whom he has mentioned in his talks. However, a less known incident that must be mentioned here is of his meeting with an African woman, who was a great sage of her time. He met her during his journey for pilgrimage along with another Sufi. He could recognise that she had excelled so much in her spiritual victories that she could see things clearly from miles away with her naked eyes. God's bounties descended upon her at her request in miraculous manners. She hosted Sarkar Ghauth Pak for opening his fast and assisted him receive celestial gifts. He has mentioned her as an *arifah* (the gnostic) in his writings. Thus, the level of respect and open acceptance of women's possibility of spiritual attainments is clearly exhibited in his position on

⁶ Shaykh Abd al-Qadir Jilani, *Fayyuz-i-Ghauth-i-Yazdani*, 21.

⁷ Hakim Ghulam Haider Suhail, *Shaykh Abdul Qadir Jilani* (Lahore: Mairiy Library, 1963), 13-14.

women's spiritual potential. One can see that down the line, the Qadiri *silsilah* accepted and respected women's spiritual endeavours and achievements as established by the life of its magnificent founder.⁸

Sarkar Ghauth Pak's eloquence, grace, munificence, miraculous powers and an unparalleled spiritual calibre made his personality and his teachings highly popular among masses. After his passing away, the spiritual *silsilah* founded on his principles of regeneration of religious and spiritual life gained swift popularity across various regions.⁹ During its spread around the world, it branched off to various sub-*silsilahs*.

2.1. Historical Progression of the Qadiri-Qalandari Tradition

In South Asia, Qadiri *Silsilah* first landed in Uch Sharif, a small town in Southern Punjab, Pakistan around the second half of fifteenth century. Sayyid Muhammad Gilani, a descendent of Shaykh Abdul Qadir Jilani brought the spiritual tradition of his ancestor to the Indian sub-continent where he initiated spreading Qadiri teachings.¹⁰ After him, both his progeny and spiritual followers included a great number of luminaries who continued to raise the Qadiri flag high in this region. Some of those include Shaykh Abd al-Qadir Sani (d. 1533), Shaykh Abul Ma'ali (d. 1615) of Lahore, Shaykh Abd al-Haqq Muhaddith (d. 1642) of Delhi, the compiler of *Akhbar al-Akhyar*, Baba Ji Mian Mir (1550-1635) of Lahore and his famous disciple, Mughal Prince Dara Shikuh (1615-1659), son of fifth Mughal King, Shah Jahan were staunch devotees of Qadiri *Silsilah*. Dara Shikuh wrote many books including biographies of Sufis titled *Safinat al-Awliya* and *Sakinat al-Awliya*.¹¹

⁸ Suhail, *Shaykh Abdul Qadir Jilani*, 37-39.

⁹ Nizami, "The Qadiriyyah Order", 8.

¹⁰ Shaykh Abdul Haq Muhaddith Dehalwi, *Akhbar al-Akhyar* (Karachi: Madinah Publishing Company, n.d), 429.

¹¹ See for details, Saiyid Athar Abbas Rizvi, *A History of Sufism in India* (Lahore: Suhail Academy, 2004), 55.

In South Asia, Qadiri *Silsilah* spread to other areas from Uch Sharif. One of their descendants Syed Zahur al-Hasan came and settled in Panipat.¹² Baba Ji Ghauth Ali Shah, the grand shaykh of Baba Jan Sarkar (Murshid-i-Pak of his Murshid-i-Pak) was a descendent of Qadiri family of Uch Sharif. He later on settled in Panipat,¹³ near Delhi, where currently his shrine is situated. Baba Jan Sarkar met Baba Ji Fazl al-Rahman, a direct disciple of Ghauth Ali Shah, in Fort Sandeman (current Zhob), Balochistan. Around 1967, he was instructed spiritually to come and settle in Jhang (Punjab).¹⁴ It is interesting to note that the Sufi tradition which was hosted first by Southern Punjab came back to it. The wine-cup of Qadiri *Silsilah*, which went from Southern Punjab (Uch Sharif) to Panipat, came back to Southern Punjab (Jhang) to quench the thirst of spiritual seekers now through Dr Muhammad Youssuf Shaheen Shah, Qadir Qalandar Pak. Despite living in one of the most conservative and conflict-prone areas of Pakistan, Baba Jan Sarkar continued transmitting the teachings of his spiritual mentors and predecessors, openly and effectively for around forty-nine years. As this study indicates, Baba Jan Sarkar showed unconventional and unique traits as a master. While living in the twenty-first century, a cursory look at his eloquent discourses and every-day life reminded one of the eminent Sufis of the past¹⁵. However, this resemblance required further study to see the connection and linkages with the heritage of these spiritual champions. One of the research queries was to see if he could prove as

¹² Gul Hasan Shah Qadiri, *Tadhkirah-i-Ghauthiyya* (*malfuzat* of Hazrat Ghauth Ali Shah Qalandar Qadiri) (Delhi: Jauhar-i-Hind Press, 1880/81), 11.

¹³ The author of this study visited Panipat, India in 2014 to gather first-hand information about the great-grand Shaykh of the Sufi tradition under study. However, the visit did not yield more information than what is already mentioned in *Tadhkirah-i-Ghauthiyya*. Since he did not marry and had no children, thus the hereditary succession system was not set up at his shrine. At the time of the visit, there was a small local organization with a few members who were voluntarily looking after the upkeep of his shrine in Panipat.

¹⁴ Personal conversation with Baba Jan Sarkar (February 26, 2011).

¹⁵ Such as Sarkar Ghauth al-Azam (1077-1166), Ibn Arabi (1165-1240), Nizam al-Din Awliya (d. 1325) or Ghauth Ali Shah Qadir Qalandar of Panipat (1802-1880), who for many serve as bygone heroes of olden times but Baba Jan's talk reminded one of them frequently.

effective as them to inculcate spiritual values in hearts and minds of people belonging to the current materialistic and confounding era.

2.2. General Characteristics Reflected by the Leader of the Spiritual Tradition

Baba Jan Sarkar, Dr Muhammad Youssuf Shaheen Shah,¹⁶ head and leader of the select Qadiri-Qalandari tradition¹⁷ was a medical doctor and practitioner who had certified expertise in allopathic, homeopathic and traditional Chinese acupuncture treatment as well. However, that was only his apparent and worldly vocation. In the garb of a doctor of physical bodies, he, in fact, treated the sicknesses of heart and soul. He was selected and picked by Baba Ji Fazl al-Rahman, a wandering dervish of the same tradition around 1940s when he was only four years old whereas Baba Ji Fazl al-Rahman was around 120 years old. Since his selection as a *baby-faqir*, he was made to journey deep into the spiritual realm and far into various Sufi *silsilahs* of Islam as well as other religions mainly Hinduism and Christianity. Although he received *dastar-i-khilafat* (turban of succession) – indicating the certified authority formally received from the head of the *silsilah* to conduct *bayt* (spiritual initiation) and lead propagation of teachings. His spiritual lineage of Qadiri-Qalandari¹⁸ *silsilah* has been annexed as Annex.1. Although he had received *khilafat* from

¹⁶ In Pakistan, ‘Shah’ is generally used with the names of the descendants of the Holy Prophetﷺ, also known as Syed, to mark respect and reverence for their lineage. However, the same title is used for Sufis due to their rule on the hearts of people by inheriting the spiritual legacy of the Holy Prophetﷺ. The same was used for Baba Jan Sarkar. His given name at birth, Faqeer Ahmed, was later changed to Muhammad Youssuf Shaheen, which was mentioned in all his legal identification papers and academic certificates. However, he was lovingly and reverently known by his disciples with different titles. Baba Jan Sarkar was the most often used title. In writing, when they used his name, Shah was added to denote their reverence for him as the king and leader of the Sufi world. In this thesis, Shah is thus also used at certain places to recognize that mark of reverence for him.

¹⁷ As mentioned earlier, the term tradition (from a sociological perspective of being a set of beliefs or behaviours and practices followed by people and continuously passed down) is being used in place of *silsilah* (a term from purely Sufi lexicon) due to its suitability for the concept.

¹⁸ Generally, in academic works it is referred to as Qadiriyya-Qalandariyya. However, in this study we are using the terms as they were used by Baba Jan Sarkar.

multiple Sufi *silsilahs*,¹⁹ his main preference to train his disciples was under a general rubric of Qadiri-Qalandari *Silsilah* that he led in his own distinct way. For him, all *silsilahs* were essentially the same as all issue forth from the Holy Prophet ﷺ. Sometimes when a new comer asked him about his spiritual *silsilah*, he smilingly said, ‘*silsilah-i-mashrib-i-rindan*’ (the chain of the drunk ones).²⁰ Some would laugh taking it as a joke and others would just nod. However, he clearly declared that he was not a puritan or a formal Sufi ordering to his disciples’ ritualistic following of either religion or *tariqat* (Islam’s spiritual path). *Tawhid* (the concept of Oneness of Existence) was his *shariah* and ‘love’ was his *tariqah* (*method*).²¹ He came from Quetta and settled in Jhang in 1967. Initially, he slowly started sharing his insights and experiences with a limited audience of friends and co-workers through informal gatherings at friends’ places or during his night vigils with a selected audience. Later, gradually, *Mehfil-i-Pak* (lit. holy gathering) was initiated every Friday evening, at his home, which was later respectfully called by his disciples as *Astana-i-Pak* (lit. the holy lodge).

All *silsilahs* or spiritual traditions have been contoured by the personality and preferences of the leader. In his case, his teachings, though coloured by the teachings of his predecessors such as Baba Ji Ghauth Ali Shah Qadir Qalandar of Panipat (details about him are provided below in a section dedicated to him), Ghauth-al-Azam, the founder of Qadiriyya *Silsilah* and Ibn Arabi, yet had a new shade peculiar to him. He frequently referred to the above and many other Sufis and traced back his teachings to the Holy Quran and *hadiths*. He had a tremendous knowledge of Quran

¹⁹ He had received permissions in Qadiri-Qalandari, Chisti-Sabiri, Qadiri-Noshahi, Qadiri-Gurgami, Qadiri Imami, Chisti Nizami, Naqshbandi and Suhrawardi *Silsilahs*. He had also spent time with Hindus, Christians and Buddhist mystics.

²⁰ Personal conversation with Baba Jan Sarkar on March 25, 2009. *Mashrab-i-rindan*, as explained by Baba Jan in some of his talks, is somewhat like the *bi-shara* or *malamtia* Sufis who apparently did not follow *Shariah* but secretly meditated and conducted night vigils. They did not like to follow the puritan ways of dogmatic rituals.

²¹ Personal conversation With Baba Jan Sarkar on October 22, 2010.

and *hadith* and referred to them in his teachings while connecting the same thought to other religious traditions too. He openly referred to Jesus Christ and Krishn Ji Maharaj with respect and affection. He did not stress on strict and blind observation of rituals. Instead, he explained the inner meaning of rituals and their practical application in life. His explanations sounded fresh, unique and unconventional. They addressed issues and challenges of today's life rather than only dwelling upon the gone-by golden days of Islam.

The way he led the spiritual tradition, it exhibited a non-discriminatory, inclusive character. Some of his devotees belong to Sikh, Hindu and Christian religions. When food was distributed, all the non-Muslims ate together with the Muslim audience, sometimes in the same plate and drank from the same glass. During the time of this study, this inclusive and fraternal scene was observed several times in a year – a unique case of interfaith harmony, while outside in Jhang city there were news of communal tensions among Wahhabis and Shias²². One of a Christian couple asked him to name their daughters and invited him to celebrate Christmas at their place. He went.

He preferred the terms '*faqr*' (spiritual poverty), *faqiri* (the way of *tariqat*) and *faqir* (to refer to himself) instead of using the word Sufi or mystic.²³ For him, spiritual poverty means spiritual richness. A *faqir* is "always concerned with the Reality or the spirit of things apparent. That is why his way is called the spiritual way, as they are less concerned with forms and physical distinctions".²⁴ However his *faqr* was not the renunciation of worldly life, rather a balanced adherence to it. His well-dressed, non-bearded, graceful personality exuded peace and comfort. With a great sense of humour, he loved hearing jokes and used to say, "*achha naheen hai keh*

²² Two sects within Islam

²³ All his conversations and discourses show that. He would even refer to mystics or yogis of other religions as Hindu *faqir* or a Christian *faqir*.

²⁴ Personal conversation with Baba Jan Sarkar (October 05, 2013).

hanstay kheltay rasta tay ho jaye” (Isn’t it good that the journey is covered while smiling and enjoying?). Every day, during the entire length of this study, without fail, before leaving for clinic, he stood at the door, turned back and addressed all present, “*Allah Pak ko muskaratay huey chehray piaray lagtay hain*” (God loves smiling faces).²⁵ This simple statement had therapeutic effect on people’s minds and their facial expressions would change from gloomy to friendly and smiling.

Women were integrated in all possible ways in the spiritual tradition. There were women from his family, devotees, patients and general public who visited him regularly though they did not have *bayt* with him. When asked why he considered women eligible for spiritual leadership and mentoring role, he said, “This is how I have learnt it from my Baba Ji, and he from his Baba”²⁶. He believed that the chain of transmission of teachings from the Holy Prophet ﷺ to himself through his spiritual forefathers always respected and integrated women in spiritual life. “If they are entitled by their virtues, they should not be denied spiritual riches due to their gender. This *faqir*²⁷, himself has had the honour of meeting with and sitting at the feet of many women *faqirs*”.²⁸ He considered the spiritual realm genderless and therefore, the questions of gender did not bother him while dealing with men and women. More details on how women were treated and played a role in his spiritual tradition and *mehfil*²⁹ (spiritual gatherings) are provided in chapter three and four.

Under his leadership, his spiritual tradition not just included, trained but also considered women eligible for becoming *murshid/Shaykh* (spiritual teachers/mentors) after completing the required training and attaining and accomplishing due level of spiritual understanding and

²⁵ A statement uttered by him daily while standing at the door before he left for his work at his clinic.

²⁶ Personal conversation With Baba Jan Sarkar on 22, 24, 25 March 2008.

²⁷ Baba Jan Sarkar generally referred to himself in a third person as ‘this *faqir*’, or in plural pronoun used in old Urdu as ‘hum’ (we). He always pointed to his body as ‘this’ and not ‘I’. For the

²⁸ Personal conversations With Baba Jan Sarkar on 22, 24, 25 March 2008.

²⁹ *Mehfil*, an Urdu word for a congregation or gathering of good company. Disciples call it *Mehfil-i-Pak* (the holy gathering) to show their respect. In this study, we use both terms inter-changeably.

character. In his lifetime, he granted the *dastar* (turban – permission to be a spiritual teacher) to six women and a five years old girl (daughter of one of his disciples), out of whom three are still alive.³⁰ The indication was to tie a turban on their head just like he did with men *khalifah*³¹.

2.2.1. Life Sketch of Baba Jan Sarkar: Birth and Early Childhood

History speaks of instances where arrival of a *faqir* or a Sufi transfigured the ordinary extraordinary. By the same token, one ordinary day of 1936³² in village Chagran, near village Kohja, tehsil Hoshiarpur, district Jalandhar of the then India did not remain so any more. The cries of a new born boy echoing in the house of his maternal grandfather Chaudhry Muhammad Kalu, who had been hosting her daughter Aziz Bibi for her delivery, turned that house auspicious.³³ His father, Chaudhry Ghulam Ali used to work in Fort Sandeman (now Zhob in present Balochistan). Destiny marked this *faqir* with the most obvious name, i.e. Faqeer Ahmad had such a charming countenance that whoever saw fell in love with him. His arrival exhibited some wondrous phenomena. Even the unknown, unseen world was excited as his mother saw two hands appearing out of thin air, picking him up a few feet into the air. She first froze with fear and then lunged forward to snatch him away from his unseen admirers.³⁴ The new born did not show any interest

³⁰ Personal conversation With Baba Jan Sarkar on July 06, 2010.

³¹ Being out of the scope of this study, the total number of men *khalifahs*, as it was not necessary to answer any of the research questions. The number mentioned here is based on eye-witnessing the ceremonies when certain men disciples were selected.

³² As indicated elsewhere in this study, Baba Jan used to mention 1936 as his year of birth and mentioned that he same was put in school record. However, later his father got it changed to 1938 and the same remained part of his academic records.

³³ Various conversations with Baba Jan Sarkar on this topic, in 2009, 2011, 2012, 2014, 2015 and 2016. Specifically, when the researcher visited India in 2014, the events of his birth in the presently Indian Punjab were discussed at length. Baba Jan Sarkar narrated what he had learned from his maternal grandfather and maternal uncles. While noting the name of the village, when the researcher could not write it accurately in Urdu, Baba Jan Sarkar spelled it saying each alphabet separately in Urdu for correction. Then he looked at what was written and reconfirmed that he was born there. He even approved the idea of the researcher visiting that village, which, did not become possible at that time, due to visa issues.

³⁴ Various conversations with Baba Jan's sister at multiple occasions, mainly in March and October 2011, July 2012, October 2012, when they were visiting *Astana-i-Pak* to attend *Urs* ceremonies. Their mother had narrated this strange happening repeatedly over the years, thus all sisters and other family members knew this incident.

in the world he had arrived. He kept his eyes closed and did not suck milk. This made his mother and grand-parents highly worried as already his first-born brother had died in infancy due to some complications. They asked the nearby *ved* and *hakim* (traditional doctors) but nothing worked for three days. At the peak of their anxiety, a Sikh mendicant appeared at their door and asked to see the new born baby. He blew some chants and prayers onto baby, telling his parents that he was a special soul and must be protected from women when grown young as he would be highly enchanting for them. Later, Faqeer Ahmad opened his eyes and started sucking milk. His parents were relieved but still did not realize that they have been blessed with a spiritually elevated soul.³⁵

Faqeer Ahmad was a '*madarzad wali* (a category of Sufis and saints born with high spiritual calibre) and grew to be a unique, rather eccentric child. As indicated by the Sikh mendicant, he grew further charming in countenance and had already started attracting all the '*masis*' (pl. of *masi*, a Punjabi word for aunty) of his *mohalla* (street/neighborhood) around him. They would fight on taking turns to bathe, comb and dress him up. Later, when he started talking, they would not let him leave their side. One would keep him sitting with her while working on sewing machine; the other would keep him close while milking cows. He was already being claimed by all aunties, who adored him more than their own sons. Yet, he loved seclusion, and looked for places and opportunities to be completely alone. Since he was chased by all those who loved him, he had to look for places where his admirers would not disturb him. The best of such places was the nearby graveyard, which was situated a bit away from the houses. Since most people would visit there only for funerals and burials, thus it was the quietest place that he could find. It fulfilled well his innate desire for seclusion to connect deeply with his soul. To hide himself

³⁵ Conversations with Baba Jan's sisters in March and October 2011, July 2012, October 2012, when they were visiting *Astana-i-Pak* to attend *Urs* ceremonies. All confirmed this incident.

completely, he would sit inside and sometimes would even lie down in old, crumbled, half-open grave, if he found one. Once someone saw him lying in an old, open grave and told his father. Thenceforth, his father would come looking for his son in the graveyard when he was nowhere to find.³⁶ Later, when he grew older, he would walk or ride his bicycle to nearby hills to sit there. When the researcher asked what he did there. He said, ‘Nothing, just to be’.³⁷

Another of his favourite place to get seclusion was the close-ended backyard behind his home jointly used by neighbours. People had placed a lot of old, obsolete stuff there. However, they had abandoned using it after often seeing a snake crawling in and out of there. The snake was known as *do-munha* (double-headed) due to a mark on its tail, which looked like another head. For the fearless and seclusion loving Faqeer Ahmad, the snake was a gift since it brought him another possible place to fulfil his innate *muraqbatai* (meditational) needs. Thus, he would hide in that backyard locking himself up and sitting for hours. Why that place was chosen by a young child. He liked it as no one came there. One could get seclusion. He used to sit for hours on a huge drum that someone had thrown in there. Finally, one of his favourite *maasis* would come and knock on the door to bring him out of that place.³⁸

Later, when he was seven-eight years old, as a custom of the area, he had started helping in small chores for the household like going to the shops to buy groceries; fetching water and taking his family’s goats to the nearby hills for grazing sometimes. He used those opportunities for meditation and *muraqaba*. He used to take the two eldest sisters with him. They narrated that “when we reached the hills, he would ask us to collect the round, glass-like stone that shone

³⁶ Separate conversations with Baba Jan’s sisters in March and October 2011, July 2012, October 2012, when they came visited Astana-i-Pak to attend *Urs* ceremonies.

³⁷ It is difficult to translate Baba Jan’s simple but profound sentences into English.

³⁸ Personal conversations with Baba Jan’s two eldest sisters in 2009, 2010, 2011, 2012 in March, July and October.

brightly. It used to be found easily scattered around in those hills at that time. We would get busy in collecting those beautiful, little shiny, pieces of stones that we used call ‘heeray’ (diamonds). He would disappear into hills for and would come back after a few hours”.³⁹

What a child found fascinating in a graveyard? Why would he like to do something so unusual such as lying in an old, open grave? How come he is so fearless that sitting in a backyard with a closed door where a snake was lurking in would not terrify him. Where did he disappear for hours in the hills? His parents could not completely understand his spiritual states. They got immensely worried and their anxiety turned them very controlling over him. His mother tried the only solution she knew, i.e. beating, to turn him into a ‘normal’ boy who would just go to school and spend the rest of the time at home.⁴⁰ She could not understand his need for seclusion and mostly read it as a threat toward a normal, prescribed progress of her son.

After Faqeer Ahmad’s arrival, his parents had a long queue of daughters showered on them. One after another, in a row, they were blessed with eleven daughters. Unlike the custom of the time which preferred sons over daughters, his father welcomed each new daughter with love. Although, wishing to have another son, his father used to distribute sweets in the entire neighbourhood on the arrival of each new daughter, an unconventional practice for someone in those times. Faqeer Ahmad’s parents were traditional, shariah abiding Muslims. Although his father had his *bayt* with a *faqir* named Baba Ji Jame’ Shah (Wehran Walay), who after partition settled in Gilan Sharif, a small village near Faisalabad, in Punjab, Pakistan. Yet, he was a traditionalist

³⁹ Separate conversations with Baba Jan’s sisters in March, July and October 2011, March, July and October 2012, when they visited Astana-i-Pak to attend *Urs* ceremonies during these months.

⁴⁰ Separate conversations with Baba Jan’s sisters in March and October 2011, July 2012, October 2012, when they visited Astana-i-Pak to attend *Urs* ceremonies during these months.

who did not have much understanding of Faqeer Ahmed's spiritual endeavours.⁴¹ Baba Ji Jame' Shah loved Faqir Ahmad intensely since his childhood. Once he palced the young Faqeer Ahmad on his chest and was stroking his back affectionately while saying, "We would like our son to be a faqir, a great faqir. His father interrupted and said vigorously, "No Baba Ji. We don't only want *faqiri* (spiritual life). We have only one son. We want to have the world too". Responding to him, Baba Ji Jame' Shah said smilingly, "yes, yes, he will have a lot of the world too."⁴²

Fort Sandeman was a small hill station.⁴³ His parents were Punjabis living in a Pashtun area, where abduction was a known crime. For his security, he was asked not to stay out of home for long durations. Later when he started school, he had mostly Pashtun friends. He used to go their homes frequently, which became a point of concern for his parents. Being a mother of twelve, Aziz Bibi became a stern mother trying to manage so many children. Having a single boy, who was already being claimed by the whole *muhalla* (neighbourhood), she remembered the advice of the Sikh mendicant and tried to control Faqeer Ahmad's outer activities, though in vain. He had no clue of why there were already tons of women around him, but he loved them and they all loved him like a mother. His mother tried to keep an eye on his outside activities and furiously tried to discipline him to a normal life. She knew only one way of disciplining a child, severe and frequent

⁴¹ A personal conversation with Baba Jan returning from *Urs* celebration conducted at the shrine of Baba Ji Jame' Shah in Gilan Sharif on July 05th, 2010.

⁴² This was another oft quoted incident by Baba Jan Sarkar himself and his sisters.

⁴³ "Zhob is a small town and district capital of Zhob District in Balochistan province of Pakistan at an elevation of 4,678 ft (1,426 m). Zhob is located on the banks of Zhob River. The city was originally named Apozai after a nearby village. During the colonial era it was named Fort Sandeman. It obtained its current name on the 30th of July 1976, when the then Prime Minister of Pakistan, had the name changed. Until the Zhob Valley expedition of 1884 the area was practically unknown to Europeans, and in 1889 the Zhob Valley and Gomal Pass were taken under the control of the British Government. In December 1889 the town of Zhob, then known as Apozai, was occupied by the British and named Fort Sandeman after Sir Robert Sandeman. The district of Zhob was formed in 1890, with Fort Sandeman as the capital. The population was 3552, according to the 1901 census of India. The military garrison included a native cavalry and a native infantry regiment. It was also the headquarters of the Zhob Levy Corps." The quoted information is drawn from the official website of Government of Balochistan, which summarizes some facts about Fort Sandeman, now called Zhob. See, <https://bhc.gov.pk/district-judiciary/zhob/introduction/history>: accessed on June 12, 2015.

beatings to correct his mysterious behaviour. In her opinion, she was doing the right thing to save him from getting spoiled. However, the young, sensitive and gentle-hearted Faqeer felt hurt each time more than previous when he was beaten. His innocent mind couldn't understand why he was given such harsh treatment. What was wrong in going to the graveyard and hiding there? He felt so peaceful there. Yet, the more she tried to control him, the more he grew out of her control. Frequent beatings made him love spending time out of home even more. Sometimes, when Baba Jan talked about those moments, he had tears in his eyes remembering his childhood memories. However, he never complained or said anything negative against his mother. He always justified her act and considered her a cog in the big wheel of events that were pushing him toward his destiny. Other than those harsh memories, Baba Jan shared a lot of joyful, naughty and thoughtful moments from his childhood. Along with his seclusions, rest of his time was spent as a sporty and social boy, who wanted to play outside and visit friends.

Due to her severe punitive treatment, some people believe that she was probably not Faqeer Ahmad's real mother. However, when the researcher asked Baba Jan Sarkar about it, he confirmed that she was his real mother and said, "*Ammi Jan ki maar kaam aa gayi. Nah mar parti, nah hum rota, nah Baba Ji se mulaqat ho pati. Maan ki maar to rehmat ban kar aayi*" (Mother's beating proved helpful. Had she not beaten me, I would not have cried and would not have met with Baba Ji. Mother's beating proved to be a blessing).⁴⁴ Over the years, he was heard saying similar things many times when someone asked a question or when he was narrating his childhood events. The incident of meeting with his spiritual master that Baba Jan referred to in this quotation is narrated in more detail in the next section.

⁴⁴ Baba Jan mentioned this during various conversations. Specifically, when the field visit to India was conducted in 2015.

The young Faqeer Ahmed was hanging between two opposites at home. On one side, there was the extremely anxious mother, and on the other his eleven sisters, who adored him. As described by Baba Jan, they were the opposite of eleven brothers of Prophet Youssuf (*alaih i salaam*). They doted on him and he doted on them. The eldest among sisters (two years younger than him) has hundreds of his childhood incidents in her memory and loved to talk about him. She was the one who also sang and played with him the most. All other sisters had many fond memories. Being the eldest brother, he quickly assumed the role of a guardian angel and took great care of them. He would wash and polish their *takhtis* (wooden tablets used for writing practice); put covers on their books and note books; bring them sweets and stuff from outside. In the evenings, he would sit among them and ask them to sing songs. Some sisters still remembered their pet songs that they used to sing in that gathering.⁴⁵ In his teen age, he got interested in learning photography and established a dark room at home to practice. He practised on them. One sister confirmed still having those pictures with her where they posed as per his instructions.⁴⁶ When he started his job, he would give them money secretly so that their pocket money from parents is not deducted and they could spend as they wished.

2.2.2. First Meeting with his Mentor / *Murshid-i-Pak*

Why did Faqeer Ahmad need seclusion and what did he do? The question may be answered by looking at another aspect of his life. When he was around four years old, as usual, his mother had beaten him on something and he was crying. There was a huge tree just opposite of his house, which he had chosen as his crying place outside, away from mother. That day, when he was standing there crying, an old man with a few other men passed by. Seeing a child standing there

⁴⁵ Various conversations occurred with his sisters over the years narrating incidents from their childhood of love and affection they received from him. This para draws from conversations held on August 13, 2010.

⁴⁶ August 13, 2010.

crying, he stopped, caressed his head and gave him a coin. Then he left. After a few weeks, again Faqeer Ahmad again got a beating and went out to his favourite shelter for crying. Again, the same old man with his companions passed by and saw the child standing there crying profusely. He came over to him and started talking to him. Asked him why he was crying and when told that it was a beating from mother, he smiled and said, “*Maan ne mara ha? Koi baat naheen. Maan ka marna to achha hota hai*” (Got a beating from mother? It’s all right. A mother’s beating is good). This time, he gave him another coin but gently taking his hand, he took him to a nearby house where he was living these days. This was Baba Ji Fazl al-Rahman, who was on his usual long trips from Bengal to Turkistan. As given in his biographical sketch, he used to travel round the year and on the way to Afghanistan and central Asian regions, he used to visit Fort Sandeman where a few of his devotees lived. Every year, he would visit and stay in Fort Sandeman for a few days or a few weeks depending upon his further travel plans. He told Baba Jan to visit him if he got a beating again instead of standing under the tree. His loving and kind behaviour had a huge impact on a young mind. Thenceforth, an immensely compassionate and loving ‘mother’ was found in Baba Ji Fazl al-Rahman by Baba Jan Sarkar and the frequent beatings by his mother at home became more tolerable. Since that innocent age, Baba Jan started gaining the spiritual insights from a great sage though his intellectual faculty did not understand.⁴⁷

Baba Jan learned from his beatings that he should not mention about his loving Baba to anyone. Fearing that they would stop him from meeting his beloved Baba Ji, Baba Jan kept this a secret within him. When he was ten years old, he was given a separate room at the upper story since already his parents have had four more girls by that time. This gave him more independence. He devised a strategy to meet his beloved Baba at night since he knew that many people frequented

⁴⁷ Personal conversation with Baba Jan Sarkar (August 14, 2010).

him at night. He found a rope that he would tie with one of the *roshandan*, (ventilator) of his room. He would lower down the rope and will climb down from roof to outside house secretly by or so when everyone had already gone to sleep. He had asked a shopkeeper to hide his bicycle in his shop and would walk to that shop, pick his bicycle to ride down a few miles into the hills or to the house where Baba Ji Fazl al-Rahman used to stay. Well before morning prayer, he would return, hiding the bicycle back in the shop and climbing back up by rope onto the roof, hiding the rope too and going to bed quickly. When his father used to come to wake him up for morning prayers, he would be fast asleep and found it hard to wake up. Fortunately, he could hide his night vigils in the hills for *dhikr* and meditation practice given by Baba Ji or attending Baba Ji's *mehfil*. His mother suspected something strange about him but could not understand his mystical activities.⁴⁸

As noted above, Faqeer Ahmad was an unusual child as he loved to visit graveyards and spend time there alone. At school too, Faqeer Ahmad was a special student. The more he grew into boyhood, his mystical habits and needs became more intense. He was found missing classes frequently. On search, he would sometime be found sitting at a nearby stream completely engrossed in something beyond anyone's comprehension. He loved listening to the sound of water in a running stream. Streams in hilly areas make a noticeable sound. Water used to sound like music to him and had such a strong impact that he will get completely absorbed in that sound forgetting that he had to return to his class.⁴⁹ Seeing the episodes of his graveyard visits, disappearance into mountains and immersion in the sound of water, the head master of Fort Sandeman's middle school, later raised to secondary level, Mr. Karamatullah called for Faqeer Ahmad's father. Mr. Karamatullah had a remarkable reputation among the community for his

⁴⁸ Personal conversation with Baba Jan Sarkar (February 26, 2010).

⁴⁹ Personal conversation with Baba Jan Sarkar (February 26, 2010).

noble work and spiritual personality. People in Fort Sandeman still remember him for being a great teacher as well as a mystic himself.⁵⁰ Looking at Faqeer Ahmad's seclusion, meditation and absorption, he sensed the child's predisposition and advised his father to change his name concluding that his name 'Faqeer' (meaning a sufi/sage/monk) is exacerbating some of these effects. His father immediately agreed as he was already highly concerned for his child. Master Karamatullah suggested the name Youssuf due to Faqeer Ahmad's charm and magnetism. Later Shaheen was added and thus, Faqeer Ahmad's name was changed to Muhammad Youssuf Shaheen when he was in class 7th.⁵¹

2.2.3. Baba Jan's Spiritual Training and Exercises

Muhammad Youssuf Shaheen was now under a thorough training regime by a wandering Baba who loved travelling throughout the year. His earliest exercises were learning patience to deal with an extremely stern mother at home. He was told never to retaliate, no matter what. The earliest teachings that were remembered by Baba Jan were all about patience, forbearance, compassion and love. He was guided and helped to treat everyone with care and respect, including his stern mother. He was told to be as kind to his sisters as he wanted his mother to be for him. Once, when he again started crying in front of Baba Ji about mother's beatings, he turned his concept of motherhood upside down. Baba Ji said, "*teri maan woh hai, jis ke qadmaun mein teri jannat hai*"⁵² (your mother is under whose feet is your heaven). The young Youssuf immediately understood that his Baba Ji was his real mother as he found heavenly peace and love in his company. He felt a strange peace and strength to tolerate his physical mother, knowing he had a loving mother in

⁵⁰ Personal conversation with Baba Jan Sarkar (February 26, 2010).

⁵¹ Personal conversation with Baba Jan Sarkar (February 26, 2010).

⁵² "*Al jannatu tahta al-aqdam al-ummahat* (heaven is under the feet of mothers) is a tradition of the Holy Prophet ﷺ that is a famous and canonical tradition accepted by all Muslim sects.

the form of Baba Ji Fazl al-Rahman. As indicated in the previous chapter, a mother's proverbial unconditional love does not necessarily come from the body of a woman who had given birth to another. Spiritual master as the real mother provides that proverbial love, whether his body is masculine or feminine. For Youssuf, his 120 years old, long-white-haired, white-bearded, old man was the most loving mother he could ever ask for.

In his early childhood, young Youssuf was given a number of *dhikr-i-jahri* (vocal/loud *dhikr*) and various kinds of *vird* (formula/phrase) in Arabic, Persian or Pushto to recite for some time continually. It started from a few minutes and went on to a couple of hours. In summers, sometimes, when he went to visit Baba Ji, he was given a task. There was a fireplace built in the room as per olden architecture of Balochistan. Big logs used to burn there during winters. However, in summers, it was not used and remained empty. In summers, he was asked to sit inside that fireplace facing the hind wall and keep reciting that *vird*. Several of those *vird*, Baba Jan remembered and used to give to his young disciples. Some of those were Quranic verses and names of God but some were very unique statements or phrases of Pushto or Persian, seemed to be created by Baba Ji Fazl al-Rahman to help his disciples focus on their reality. Since these are part of the mystical teachings and spiritual exercises, therefore, their details are not mentioned here.

He learned fast and after seeing his spiritual *hosla* (stamina and inclination), he was soon given more exercises of *muraqaba* (focused meditational exercises) to help him increase focus and control over scatterings of thoughts. His concentration and focus surprised many elders. He could sit for hours doing a given exercise becoming totally oblivious of the physical conditions. A generic one was the proclamation of faith (There is no deity but God) along with his breath. He practised that regularly. During the practice of this *dhikr*, Baba Jan was visiting his maternal grandparents in eastern Punjab, where a Hindu mystic saw him and called him. Without Youssuf

uttering a word, he told him that what he was doing through his breath was '*maha jap*' (great invocation).⁵³ He was reciting the proclamation of *Tawhid* under his breath. The mystic offered him some milk and asked him to return to him again.

Around tenth year of his life, more practical exercises started. The first exercise was being trained as a shepherd. Baba Ji Fazl al-Rahman knew that young Youssuf used to take his family goats for grazing in the nearby hills. However, he did not consider it enough for him to learn the ways of a shepherd. Youssuf was thus asked to look for a shepherd in his area who had a big herd of goats and sheep. In Balochistan, it was a normal vocation for many nomadic tribes. People used to give their goats and sheep to professional shepherds on payment to raise them for a few years. This way, the animals had good growth by grazing in hills and jungles. Once he found a shepherd with a big herd, Youssuf was asked to be with and serve the shepherd for 90 days. However, he was also given the flexibility to complete the entire 90 days in shorter spells of time as was convenient for him during his off days and school holidays. It took him around three years to complete the ninety days exercise. It proved an extremely challenging exercise since he had no clue initially how to handle animals. He was advised to walk behind the herd with a staff in his hand but to use it mainly to bring the bushes or fodder down, clear the way and save animals from harm. To use it for beating animals was prohibited but he could use it to bring them and keep them together. He was asked to pick up a baby, weak or ailing animal on his shoulders if it could not walk properly. He was supposed to keep them all together and make sure that none was left behind in the hills on the way back. Leaving none behind was his major duty that he loved because it taught him that each member of the herd was equally precious. Apparently, these were practices

⁵³ Personal conversation with Baba Jan Sarkar (Feb. 27, 2010).

for a shepherd. Inwardly, these were spiritual lessons, which were to remain with him for the rest of his life.⁵⁴

Another challenging ninety-days came with the begging exercise. He was first asked to choose a Hindu and a Muslim *muhalla* (neighbourhood). He was to visit in the garb of a beggar, during the wee-hours right after the call of morning prayer regularly for a week but alternating in the Muslim and Hindu neighbourhoods. It proved extremely interesting and learning exercise for the young boy by having to absorb the reactions of people he begged from. He was trained to utter the beggar's call with a different phrase to be used for Muslim and Hindu settings. When he uttered the beggar's call as instructed by Baba Ji Fazl al-Rahman, he observed different reactions. Sometimes he was snubbed by Muslims rushing for the morning prayers for begging at that precious hour. More passionate ones would even give him a little slap as well for wasting their time. Sometimes, he witnessed Hindus, especially women, treating him with lots of kindness and running after him to give him alms. Along with other things, he learned that kindness is a state of the heart. It does not come with just by observing the rituals of any religion.⁵⁵ He gained humility, patience, understanding of human behaviour and generosity. He was not allowed to eat anything out of the alms however much he liked it. He was to bring all of it back to Baba Ji's *astana* (lodge) and share with everyone.

His other exercises included more spells of ninety days to learn thoroughly the ways of nomads. He spent ninety days with clay-toy makers, a nomad tribe where women made toys and sold them while men stayed home, cooked and played cards. Another adventurous spell came when he was to spend ninety days with snake-charmers. He was supposed to learn how to catch and

⁵⁴ While driving, whenever Baba Jan Sarkar passed by a herd, he would stop his car and look at the shepherd intently. He would also ask his fellows to look at the shepherd and the herd attentively and later share what they felt or observed.

⁵⁵ Personal Conversation, Baba Jan Sarkar (Aug 14, 2010).

control a snake without harming it. He learned how to identify several types, touch, hold and handle a snake, even poisonous one gripping its head so that it couldn't bite. He learned how to communicate with the reptile and entering Solomon's pledge.⁵⁶ Everything else except playing *been* (the special flute like instrument traditionally used and played to charm the snake). The head of the tribe asked him for five hundred rupees before teaching him *been*-playing. At that time, it was too much of an amount for him to manage. He went back to Baba Ji and told him, who asked him to discontinue at that point saying that the purpose was not to turn him into a snake charmer but for him to seek spiritual insight from the experience. Along with learning to respect and cherish forms of life that could potentially harm human life, he also learned to deal with fear and fearsomeness fearlessly. All of these exercises were meant to have better awareness of and control over thoughts, bodily reactions and general physical boundaries.⁵⁷

It is important to briefly include a very significant and painful event of his childhood that left Baba Jan with huge lessons and a deep understanding of life. His parents came to visit their relatives in Punjab in a small village called Bagh. Once he was outside the house, a fierce dust storm started blowing. It was so huge and thick that all became dark and he couldn't see his way back. But, he kept walking and by the time the storm was over in a couple of hours, he had completely lost his way back to the village. The more he tried to get back home, the farther away he kept going. Hours of walking without food or water exhausted him completely. He was 7-8 years old child lost in an area that he was not well familiar with and couldn't speak the language well too. His spiritual training and teachings received from his Baba Ji came to his rescue. He did not let himself feel disheartened. He decided not to cry but to look for some work in order to earn

⁵⁶ These are all different gestures that traditional snake charmers use in order to take control over and imprison a snake by entering into a verbal contract in the name of Prophet Solomon. After the promised period, the snake is freed without harm. It is done only by the ones properly trained by a snake charmer.

⁵⁷ Personal Conversation, Baba Jan Sarkar (Aug 14, 2010).

money to buy food. That attempt opened new vistas of life for him. He worked as a servant in a house where the land-lady was too harsh and would beat him with the handle of her hand-fan for any reason she found suitable. Despite him doing all chores, she wouldn't give him enough food. He ran away from there in a few days and tried looking for some other work. From house to house, place to place looking for work and running away from beatings, he went through a number of harsh experiences. It is a seemingly impossible feat for a child of that age to keep on going undeterred with the conviction that he will find his way back home. His courage and conviction turned the impossible possible. Once at a train station, a man asked him who he was and when he told him about his getting lost while visiting a village of his relatives, the man jumped in surprise. He knew that village and some of his relatives there. Thus, Youssuf's brave-heart and undeterred courage brought him back to his parents who had gone almost crazy in his search by that time. This experience left deep impact on him and he could see that how God challenged him but also protected and sustained him. He thought that if he was not already attached to his Baba Ji, he would have experienced a different result. Baba Jan used to always tell people to treat their servants very kindly and look after them well as he had experienced being one of them.

While growing into a young man, he was steadily trained with tougher exercises such as the ones to learn control over hunger, thirst, sleep and other bodily feelings. He was first asked to go and look for a graveyard somewhere far from the city that was not much frequented by people. Once he did that, he was instructed to prepare for a few days by decreasing his food and water intake gradually. Once that was done too, he was further instructed to sit in that graveyard for a *chilla* (forty days long training exercises, can be even longer as well) near a fire that he had to keep burning day and night. During the *chilla*, he was to have only a handful of raisins and a cup of *qahwa* (tea without milk) in the morning and evening and constantly repeat a special *dhikr*, which

Baba Jan did not share with the audience. It was summer and during the day the temperature went very high. However, he had to keep the fire burning, sit close whether the sun was up or down. Nothing else was permitted in terms of food or water. After eleven days, Baba Ji Fazl al-Rahman came over and asked him to conclude his exercise saying that the required accomplishment had been gained.⁵⁸

When he was being trained to deal with sleep and wakefulness, he was asked to keep awake for a prescribed number of nights. During long winter nights, it looked almost impossible to keep awake. To fight the sleepiness, he would keep a bucket full of water. Due to very low temperatures of Baluchistan during winter, the water would be freezing cold. Whenever he would get a bout of sleep, he would soak a towel in the cold water and rub on his face and neck. The jolt of freezing cold wet towel served well to push away sleep for a good while. He said he found dealing with sleep most difficult as he loved sleeping and wanted to sleep for long hours undisturbed. However, the effects of that kind of training were visible to all of his disciples. Everyone was amazed at Baba Jan's stamina to keep awake for hours and hours without even yawning while having special spiritual gatherings or driving at night. Also, whenever he went bed, he could fall asleep in seconds. It looked as if he had a secret remote control. When the author asked him about this, he said, "Sleep is like a pet-dog for me. When I signal it to come", he said snapping his fingers as if calling on a pet, "it comes running to me and when I ask it to leave, it goes away instantly".

Another time, when he was in college, around sixteen or seventeen years of age, he was asked to look for a cave in nearby hills of Quetta. Once he found one, he was asked to clean it properly. After a few days, Baba Ji asked him to visit the cave at night and sit in there for a few

⁵⁸ Personal Conversation, Baba Jan Sarkar (Aug 14, 2010).

hours reciting a special *dhikr* and other meditations. Sitting in a cave was not an issue. He liked it and had done it many times. But, he used to sit inside facing the opening of the cave. However, he found it very hard when he was instructed to face the rear wall of cave turning his back to the entrance. Baba Jan used to laugh sharing that the first two nights he was awfully scared. The cave-opening was big enough for any wild animal to enter. Instead of concentrating on the *dhikr* and his meditation, he was only fighting the fear that something might attack him from behind. From the third night onward, his fear started subsiding and soon it resolved completely to let him immerse in his meditation fully.⁵⁹

He was also taught to deal with creatures beyond human or animal kingdom. Dealings with *djinnss* (genie), fairies and spirits of dead people was the next step. A Hindu boy who used to play with him and accompanied him sometime for goat grazing was a peculiar case. Once, they both took the goats to jungle. On the way back, it started raining. When the goats were passing through a stream, a wave of flash flood came and swept the goats away. Those which were closer to the other bank jumped out but his favourite little one was swept away. Faqeer Ahmad tried jumping into water to save his favourite goat but his young friend stopped him. He stretched his arm toward the goat that has been flowing away speedily with the flood water. Faqeer Ahmad was stunned to see his arm stretching a bit too far until it reached the goat in the middle of the stream, picked it up and placed near Faqeer Ahmed. Seeing his shock, the Hindu boy smiled and said, “Friend, this is our last meeting. I am from the *djinnss* (genies) and liked to play with you. Now that you have recognized me, I’ll have to return to my original form. But don’t worry, I’ll keep on visiting you whenever I would miss you, though you may not notice that’. Overcoming his shock, Faqeer

⁵⁹ Personal Conversation, Baba Jan Sarkar (Aug 14, 2010).

Ahmed asked his eerie friend's name. Saying, "*Dahal al Ghayyush*", he disappeared.⁶⁰ He mentioned meeting with fairies and the spirits. Quite amusingly, he shared how terrified he was when he insisted to his Baba Ji to give him a *dhikr* that could enable him to see his *hamzad* (alter-ego). Upon his insistence, he was given one. However, one day when he was reciting the same, a huge, dark figure appeared and yelled '*kia hai*' (what). He almost fainted with fear and then promised himself not to insist to Baba Ji for such things. Likewise, he mentioned meeting fairies, out of which one he mentioned as Jamila.

2.2.4. Meeting with other mystics and Sufis

Baba Jan Sarkar was thoroughly trained by Baba Ji Fazl al-Rahman in *adhkar* (pl. of *dhikr*); *tasawwur-i-murshid* (visualization of spiritual teacher); *chilla kashi* (spiritual retreat) for self-purification and control. He sometimes asked Baba Jan to meet with other Sufis and dervishes in other cities or spend time at the shrine of a certain *faqir*. He always tried to enhance Baba Jan's exposure and insight. Because of this enrichment, Baba Jan's spiritual calibre and achievements, he was loved and respected by many Sufis whom he met later in life. Many Sufis and *Faqirs* of local areas who were much older than him and were established leaders of their *silsilahs*, respected him deeply despite being much younger than them.

Baba Jan used to very eagerly meet with anyone whenever he got to know about a *faqir* in any city. He would make an effort to go and see him. In Jhang, he was frequently visited by local Sufis and *faqirs* who used to visit him in his clinic or at home, some on daily basis. Baba Ji Ghazi, a *faqir* of Warisi *silsilah* loved Baba Jan deeply and visited him frequently. He also gave him spiritual authority to pass on the Warisi *ihram* (a peculiar two-piece clothing awarded to people as

⁶⁰ Personal Conversation, Baba Jan Sarkar, Aug 14, 2010.

a mark of a special achievement and training). Baba Ji Barkat Ali Shah, a well-known local *faqir* of Qadiri *silsilah* also used to visit Baba Jan in his clinic frequently. When he entered the clinic, he used to say loudly, “we have come to see our own Youssuf”, which carried a double-meaning. He liked to be around Baba Jan and asked him not to stop attending patients and this way spent hours at the clinic watching Baba Jan deal with patients. His *khalifa* Baba Ji Sakhi and many others of that *silsilah* used to visit Baba Jan too. Baba Ji Barkat Ali Shah would only ask Baba Jan to examine his most favourite female disciple, lovingly known as Bibi Ji, whenever she fell sick.

A *majzub* (absorbed) *faqir* of Jhang, Baba Murad known as Baba Moda by people, was a frightening figure for many due to his apparently bizarre and uncanny behaviour. He always roamed around streets bare feet, wearing a long shirt but no trouser. Whenever he passed by, people will get aside or look away from him. Women were particularly very scared of him since he could go to a *burqa*-clad lady and suddenly turned the veil upside. However, he used to visit Baba Jan frequently too like a whirl wind and at hours of his own choice, sometimes early in the morning. If someone told him that Baba Jan was still asleep, he would barge in and jump into bed with him and then suddenly leave. Sometimes he would come rushing asking, ‘*chola de cha*’ (give me your short). If Baba Jan gave him a new one, he wouldn’t accept and would ask for the one that he was currently wearing. Baba Jan had to take took off his shirt and hand over to Baba Moda who would then dash away as if he snatched a prize. Surprisingly, he did this only to Baba Jan and only wore shirts worn by Baba Jan already. Maan Ji (Baba Jan’s wife) told the author that since she felt bad seeing Baba Jan losing shirt after shirt, which meant entire suit was wasted, she came up with a

solution. She stitched a few long shirts and asked Baba Jan to wear those as a night shirt. Whenever she heard Baba Mod asking for a shirt, she would quickly send one of those⁶¹.

Baba Jan also met with the well-known Sufi Barkat Ali of Samundari, Faisalabad, Pir Chandi Shah near Bahawalpur, and a large number of other spiritual personalities in Punjab. It would be interesting to mention here that he also met with famous writer Ashfaq Ahmed in Lahore after watching his play *man chalay ka soda*. Once on a train ride, he met with Ali Bakhsh, the man who served Baba Ji Allam Iqbal for many years. He asked a lot of details about Baba Ji Iqbal and Ali Bakhsh shared a lot of spiritual events that he personally witnessed in Baba Ji Iqbal's life. Moreover, Baba Jan Sarkar liked to visit the shrines of Sufis and paid visits to numerous shrines all over Pakistan.

Moreover, his training as a medical doctor was also highly meaningful for his spiritual life since it also contributed in enhancing awareness, empathy and ability to cure people of ailments. Although not a Sufi in the traditional sense, Baba Jan considered his medical supervisor and teacher, Dr Ronny Holland, a great noble soul who taught him some wonderful things not just in the field of medicine. Dr Ronny Holland was made in-charge of mission hospitals in Quetta and Shikarpur in 1948. Baba Jan learnt eye surgery from him. Both his mother and wife were nurses. When Baba Jan met Ronny, his wife was confined to a wheel chair due to polio. However, the disease could not contain her energy and commitment to support her husband as she served as an anesthetist and also supervised hospital accounts. Ronny used to carry his wife in his arms while shifting her from wheel chair to bed or vice versa. He never showed the slightest sign of feeling tired or bored of having a disabled wife. Baba Jan used to say that he deeply respected Ronny

⁶¹ Events extracted from conversations with Baba Jan Sarkar, Maan Ji (2009) and Baji Shahnaz (2013)

Holland not only as a doctor and as his perfectionist trainer, who even used to hit his hands with forceps during surgical training if he would make a mistake. He loved and respected him more for being a loving husband and for his unfaltering commitment to meticulously looking after his disable wife.⁶²

Baba Jan Sarkar went through many other exercises, which are not mentioned here since they involve more serious and sacred aspects of spirituality that are beyond the scope of this study. The purpose of recording various exercises he went through is to help the reader understand how thoroughly he was trained in numerous aspects of spiritual life. All of his exercises, experiences and life events, he believed were planned and executed purposefully to build, enrich and help him grow spiritually. All contributed to prepare him for spiritual leadership that he was asked to undertake soon after his medical studies. Baba Ji Fazl al-Rahman bid him farewell at the end of his medical studies saying that he was leaving him under the direct guidance of Sarkar Ghauth Pak, Baba Ji Ghauth Ali Shah of Panipat and Hazrat Ali (RA). Before moving forward, there is a need to know more about Baba Jan's spiritual master, his background and spiritual teachings, which is briefly attempted in the next section.

2.3. Baba Ji Fazl al-Rahman: A *Selani* (Wandering) *Faqir*

Tasawwuf is named as the realm of the heart where all knowledge is transferred from heart to heart. Books or works of intellect recorded in black and white have lower value than the words uttered by a Sufi master. Similarly, most of the information about the *Murshid-i-Pak* received by disciples comes through oral history tradition narrated either by the Shaykh himself or other people of his time. This is the case here. The incidents and information mentioned in this chapter have been

⁶² Personal Conversation, Baba Jan Sarkar (Sep 24, 2009).

received through oral tradition and cannot be substantiated through any book. The point here is not to establish its historicity, but rather show what it means to be a *faqir* in the real world. How a disciple should have unwavering trust in his Shaykh and certitude that all his actions are correct and beneficial for the disciple. The arduousness of the spiritual journey and the daunting and unforeseen challenges that had to be confronted at the behest of the *Shaykh* are marked peculiarities of the way treaded by Baba Ji Fazl al-Rahman. There are no historical facts that one could draw from history books. All the information in this section has been provided directly by Baba Jan Sarkar in several of his discourses and was mostly repeated in various sessions. Other disciples might have collected these incidents, however, until the writing of this thesis, none of these has been published by any one so it is a precious account of his life directly shared by a primary source unknown to general public so far.

In short, his is a story of eccentricity par-excellence. Just like a mythical fable, everything is unusual and exceptional in the story of Baba Ji Fazl al-Rahman. He was a travelling mendicant who met Baba Jan during one of his travels to Turkmenistan when his chosen disciple was only four years old while he was already around 120 years, as mentioned above. It is estimated that their first meeting happened around 1940 in Fort Sandeman (now Zhob) in Pakistan's current province of Balochistan.⁶³ Capturing exact dates from oral accounts is sometimes very difficult. Based on the above, it would be a safe guess to assume Baba Ji Fazl al-Rahman was born somewhere around 1820. His family belonged to the central Asian region of Turkestan, as mentioned by Baba Jan Sarkar. His ancestors had immigrated to Bengal from Turkestan at some point. However, he used to travel back and forth to central Asia through Afghanistan and Balochistan every year. He did his B.A. from Calcutta during the colonial era. He could speak

⁶³ Personal Conversation, Baba Jan Sarkar (Sep 24, 2009).

many languages including Bengali, Deccani, English, Persian, Punjabi, Pushto, Tamil and Urdu. He had an excellent knowledge of English language and literature and used to teach Baba Jan the right pronunciation of English words while helping him with his homework sometimes.

Sometimes also pronounced as Fazl-e-Rahman, was born around 1820s in Bengal where his family had emigrated from Turkestan at some point in history. Turkestan, also spelled as Turkistan, originally meant as any area where people of Turkish origin lived. However, alter on a vast region in central Asia was called Turkestan. Again, it is not well established whether his family belonged to the city named Turkestan, which was later took by Russian forces and merged into Kazakhstan or somewhere else in the larger area that was called Turkestan and is situated among the vast bounds of Turkmenistan, Tajikistan, Kazakhstan, Uzbekistan, Kyrgyzstan up to Chinese Turkestan. Central Asia via Balochistan and Afghanistan. However, he kept his connection with Turkestan and kept visiting the central Asian states through constant travelling between Bengal and Afghanistan/Turkestan areas.⁶⁴

Historically, the existence of people from Turkestan in Bengal has been established by hagiographers. Shaykh Jalal of Sylhet mentioned in *Gulzar-i-Abrar* was from Turkestan who came to Bengal as a warrior saint to wage jihad and invite local non-Muslim populations to Islam. He came to Bengal with a few hundred devotees of Saiyid Ahmed Yasawi, who was his spiritual master.⁶⁵ Although, we don't have any further evidence that Baba Ji Fazl ar-Rahman's family had any connection with same Turkestani army or Shah Jalal, it is clearly established by history that Bengal had been penetrated by Sufi Islam as well as by people of Turkestan.

⁶⁴ Personal Conversation, Baba Jan Sarkar (Sep 24, 2009).

⁶⁵ Saiyid Ather Abbas Rizvi, *A History of Sufism in India* (Lahore: Suhail Academy, 2004), 314-16.

Baba Ji Fazl al-Rahman met his Shaykh, Baba Ji Ghauth Ali Shah Qadir Qalandar of Panipat, the greatest Qadiri Sufi master of 19th century (1804-1880)⁶⁶ and considered himself highly blessed to have his *bayt* with him, as he was considered a most eminent and unique Sufi *Shaykh* of his times. The journey began where a great luminary, dauntless, chivalrous *Shaykh* led an equally spirited and highly committed disciple following him unquestioningly.

One of the incidents that happened during his spiritual training period says a lot about the uncanniness of the spiritual training given to him. Baba Ji Ghauth Ali Shah Qadir Qalandar was a wandering *Dervish*. He loved to travel and sometimes took his spiritual friends and disciples with him. Once traveling on foot around river Iravati⁶⁷ (currently named Ravi), a place came where a big flat rock like stone was seen. There, Baba Ji Ghauth Ali Shah told his disciple, “*yahan beth jao. Dekhyo, door matt jaaiyo. Hum aatay hain*” (Sit here. Look, don’t go far from here. We will be back soon). Following his orders, he sat on the rock. The day passed, evening came, without any signs of his *Shaykh* coming back. He spent the night sitting on the rock thinking the *Shaykh* might be back any minute. When morning came, he had to go for nature’s call. He only went to a nearby field as the order was, “Look, don’t go far from here”. It was a deserted area far from any village or settlement, therefore, there was no possibility to get some food nearby. He knew that as a disciple he was supposed to fulfil the command of his *Shaykh* in its entirety without any fail. He was told not to go far so he would not go far for any purpose whatsoever.⁶⁸

⁶⁶ Personal Conversation, Baba Jan Sarkar (Sep 24, 2009).

⁶⁷ The research to spot the area where this incident might have happened could not succeed since no historical records were available at the shrine of Baba Ji Ghauth Ali Shah in Panipat, when visited by the researcher. Around 725 km long Iravati (now Ravi) river runs many miles along the Punjab plains crossing many towns of current Indian Punjab. Panipat, the home town of Baba Ji Ghauth Ali Shah is situated in Haryana, which was part of the Indian state of Punjab until 1966. The possibility of the two friends of God having this conversation seems to have happened while exploring the wilderness of Punjab near Iravati.

⁶⁸ Personal Conversation, Baba Jan Sarkar (Sep 24, 2009).

The next day brought new hope that the Shaykh will be back soon to take him with him. He must have met someone or held by something important, but he will sure be back as he had confirmed, "...we will be back soon...". He kept on sitting on the rock for that day and for many more days to come but the Shaykh never returned. After a couple of days, he was feeling extremely hungry but had no inclination of going away in search of food. A shepherd who used to pass by that area along with his animals came to him on the third day and told him that he was surprised to see him sitting still on that rock for two days. He tried to get more information from him and offered him some milk. Baba Ji Fazl al-Rahman simply said, "As you wish". On hearing that, the shepherd filled a pot with milk and offered to Baba Ji. He drank that. When in the morning the shepherd returned with his herd, he again filled the same pot with milk and offered to Baba Ji. This became his usual practice and the way God provided food to Baba Ji without him having to go far to look for some. The shepherd must have talked about him in the village, as after a few days people started bringing food to him and asked him to pray for them in return. Some wanted to be blessed with children, some with money and others had other desires to be fulfilled. They understood that if an old man with his eyes closed is sitting on a rock in such a deserted area for days, he must be a holy man meditating for some higher purpose. On their insistence, he prayed for them. When people felt that their desires and wishes were met after he had prayed for them, the news of a holy Baba sitting on a rock in the wilderness near the river spread to nearby villages.

Seeing that the Baba keeps sitting under the sky, his visitors decided to build a hut for him. When they started building the hut away from the rock on a plain piece of land, a man passed by and asked them as to what they were doing. They answered that they were trying to build a hut for the Baba who keeps on sitting on a rock. The man advised them that they must build the hut over that rock because it seems the Baba will not leave the rock. "Make sure that when you build the

hut, not a single straw falls on his head”, he further added and walked on his way. People took his advice and built a roof over some wooden pillars around the rock. Baba Ji Fazl al-Rahman kept sitting on the rock and did not say a word to anyone. He was supposed to wait and that is what he was doing, unconcerned with people around him. Slowly, people started gathering around him and the wilderness turned into a permanent festival. After 11 years, suddenly the Shaykh returned. He did not say a word about where he had been. He only said innocently, “*aray dost, hum to bhool hi gaye thay, chalo chalain*” (O, Friend, we forgot. Let’s go”.⁶⁹

After meeting Baba Jan Dr Muhammad Youssuf Shaheen around 1940, he kept on visiting his fondest disciple for the next 20 years in Fort Sandeman until Baba Jan Sarkar moved to Quetta for his college studies in 1953. Thereafter, Baba Ji Fazl al-Rahman never visited Fort Sandeman and only came to Quetta to meet with Baba Jan. Reading from Baba Jan’s accounts, Baba Ji Fazl al-Rahman was an extremely high calibre Sufi. This great luminary seems to have the heart of an exceptionally loving mother as he deeply cared for his disciples. He gave Baba Jan his fullest attention and love so that Baba Jan found it difficult to pay attention to school or home. He would skip school as well when there was a *mehfil* at day time. Thus, his innocent mind found a solution to his unending misery. He once asked baba Ji, ‘when will you die?’ first he did not pay attention but when he repeated a third time, the great sage got up from his lying position and asked to repeat the question again. Baba Jan once again asked about his expected death time. He smiled and asked why he is asking that. Baba Jan then shared with him, “when you are around, I can’t pay attention to anything else. I don’t want to go to school and can’t finish my homework. Thus, I get beaten at school and then the teachers complain to my parents for my absenteeism. I get beaten by them too. If you die, I would not have to go through this predicament and would live a normal life. Thus, I

⁶⁹ Personal Conversation, Baba Jan Sarkar (Sep 24, 2009).

wanted to know as to when you would die.” Hearing this explanation, Baba Ji did not give a simple answer back. He said, “We would never die. We would always be riding on your neck”.⁷⁰The young *faqir* had no clue that it was the indication toward a master’s eternal presence in the life of his disciple. But narrating this, Baba Jan used to cry and say that my Baba said the truth. He did not die and is truly riding on my neck as he is always with me.”⁷¹

Baba Ji Fazl al-Rahman was a travelling dervish. He liked to keep travelling and did not stay in any place for more than a few weeks or months. Like his great Sufi master, he was fully immersed in *tawhid*. For him, all diversity was no more than an illusion, which one should treat as such. In reality, only God existed. Sometimes he could be as honest and curt as Mansur Hallaj stating loud and clear that all apparent phenomenon was just a mirage. He showed his harmony and dialogue with natural phenomenon many times.⁷² He did not pray in conventional ways addressing God like mullahs did, beseeching to do things. He talked to nature around him. He conversed and communicated to the universe around him to make things happen. Once, Baba Ji was supposed to travel from Fort Sandeman. All preparations were done. The Jeep was ready with the luggage. His companions all set for journey but suddenly rain started pouring. For a few days, rain constantly fell without stop. People got restless and started asking Baba Ji to pray that rain should stop as it had now started making havoc. The area was inundated, and houses had started crumbling down. Baba Ji kept quiet. After a week or so, when they all insisted for him to pray, Baba Ji got out of his quarter under the open sky. He pointed to the clouds as if he was tearing them apart and said, “would you give me the way or not?” In a little while, dense clouds parted in two different directions and all was clear. Everyone was thankful for this miracle. Similarly,

⁷⁰ Personal Conversation, Baba Jan Sarkar (Sep 24, 2009).

⁷¹ Personal Conversation, Baba Jan Sarkar (Sep 24, 2009).

⁷² Personal Conversation, Baba Jan Sarkar (Sep 24, 2009).

another time, heavy rain was pouring down, and someone asked him to pray for the rain to stop. Baba Ji did not respond. Instead, he asked Baba Jan, who was his youngest disciple to take off his shirt and stand in the rain. Baba Jan was a child of nine or ten. He did so and stood outside in the rain for quite some time. When he was asked to return into the room where people were asking questions as to why Baba Ji does not pray for such things not to happen. He himself and everyone else was astonished to see that his body was all dry. Not a single drop has touched him. Then, Baba Ji explained that nature acts upon command. Each drop falls with intelligence and a purpose to fulfil the command that it carries. It will not touch where it is not commanded to touch.⁷³

Once a person came and asked him to pray to catch the thief who had stolen his stuff. Baba Ji did not respond to him. After a while, Baba Ji suddenly started looking for his purse. He also asked a few people around to look for his purse. Everybody started looking but there was no trace of his purse. With a sad expression on his face, Baba declared that someone, who needed it more, must have taken it away. Looking at this, the guy who wanted him to pray for his theft, got up and left saying that what should he expect from someone who could not save his own purse. Later Baba Ji explained that though he had not lost any purse, he wanted to show to the person that such things are possible with anyone and thus one should not go asking for prayers to recompense loss and catching thieves. Loss should be dealt with patience and conviction that it will be replaced with something even better by the Almighty.⁷⁴

Another time when someone insisted incessantly to pray for him. Baba Ji asked him to do you want me to pray or do you want your wish to be granted. He said he would rather have his wish granted. Thus, Baba Ji asked all people present to raise their hands in prayer and started

⁷³ Personal Conversation, Baba Jan Sarkar (Sep 24, 2009).

⁷⁴ Personal Conversation, Baba Jan Sarkar (Sep 25, 2009).

cursing the guy in a strange way, “O God, we pray that this man should be ruined. We pray that all his affairs must be roughened”, and other strange and strong things like that. The guy kept listening but did not get angry. After three days he came back with sweets and told Baba Ji that his wish had been granted for which he had been praying for many years. On other times, when people asked him to pray for them, he would ask innocently whether they sought his prayers or their wishes. Most people admitted that they wanted their wishes to be granted. He would then lower his head toward his heart and say, “O Friend, are you not listening? He is not separate from you. Why don’t you do something about it?” This worked as a miraculous act for the aspirant and Each time the aspirant would come back with sweets and news of their wishes granted.⁷⁵

Baba Ji Fazl al-Rahman let his hair grow very long, like women do, up to his lower back. He would some time part that into two sides and sometimes let it lose at the back. Once, one of his woman disciples asked him if she could wash his hair. He agreed. She washed. Later another one came and said, who washed your hair. It does not look right. Let me wash it again”. He agreed. A bit later, a third lady came and did not like the way his hair was washed and asked him to let her wash it. He again agreed. Each time he lied obediently on a charpoy, hung his hair loose down and the desiring lady would wash his hair with intense care. That day, around four women washed his hair. Next day, when Baba Jan went to meet him, he could not recognize a bald man sitting in place of Baba Ji. Hardly recognizing him, he asked the reason for shaving his head off. Baba Ji said, “Son, I realized that my hair was giving a lot of trouble to some people. I thought let me help them get out of this trouble, so I asked the barber to come over and shave the head off”.⁷⁶

⁷⁵ Personal Conversation, Baba Jan Sarkar (Sep 25, 2009).

⁷⁶ Personal Conversation, Baba Jan Sarkar (Sep 25, 2009).

Baba Ji Fazl al-Rahman had a great command on scriptures of other religions. He knew Hindu Upanishads, Gita and other scriptures as well as had deep knowledge of Holy Bible. When Baba Jan had become a doctor, and was serving in the mission hospital Quetta, his supervisor, Dr Ronald (fondly known as Ronny) Holland, a British surgeon in charge of the Mission Hospital, was upset about him skipping his evening shifts at times. He called Baba Jan to explain his unavailability for night shifts. Baba Jan told about his Baba Ji and that when he was in Quetta, all his evenings and nights are spent with him. He got curious and wanted to see Baba Ji himself to ensure that Baba Jan was telling the truth. When Baba Jan took him there, he spent hours in his company and kept visiting a few times more. Mostly they talked about the Holy Bible and its mystical meanings. He was amazed a Baba Ji's knowledge and depth of thought. He then told Baba Jan Sarkar, "your Baba is the University of *Tasawwuf*".⁷⁷

In the physical realm, Baba Ji Fazl al-Rahman last came to Quetta to meet with Baba Jan around 1960-62 to inform him that it was their last meeting. He performed the '*dastarbandi*' (award of a turban to a disciple indicating the succession of spiritual authority) of Baba Jan Sarkar and told him, "Now it's not me. Now, it's either Ghauth or Ali". He left thereafter. When Baba Jan was asked whether he knew about his spiritual master's resting place, he said he did not as due to the extreme respect of his *Murshid-i- Pak*, he did not question him further about his whereabouts. Baba Ji Fazl al-Rahman did not talk much about his family or home as he was constantly travelling. It was known though that Baba Ji had two sons who lived somewhere in Bengal. Baba Jan Sarkar therefore concluded that most probably he returned back to Bengal but was not sure whether it was the then Pakistani Bengal (East Pakistan) or the Indian state of

⁷⁷ Personal Conversation, Baba Jan Sarkar (Sep 24, 2009). The writer used to feel exactly the same about Baba Jan Sarkar and has described him so in one of the articles about him mentioned in literature review.

Bengal.⁷⁸ He never returned for his usual visits in the physical form after that incident, though he kept on meeting with Baba Jan in the spiritual realm.⁷⁹

2.4. Syed Ghauth Ali Shah Qadir Qalandar of Panipat

Syed Ghauth Ali Shah Qadir Qalandar (1801-1880), a Sufi Master of nineteenth century, who is known and respected for his unconventional, courageous, open and pluralistic teachings, of which some could be found in *Tadhkirah-i-Ghauthiyah*.⁸⁰ The following account mostly draws on the information provided in that book since that is the only and most authentic source about his life and teachings. All other books refer to this masterpiece that was composed by his disciple Baba Ji Gul Hassan Shah with support from other living disciples in the year. In another account of Sufis of India and Pakistan, Sharib could only refer to one source that is *Hayat-e-Ghauthia*. The details given there fully validate information provided in *Tadhkirah-i- Ghauthia*. Baba Ji Ghous Ali Shah Qadir Qalandar was born in 1801 at Panipat, in the present-day state of Haryana in a family of Sayyeds, who were direct descendants of Sarkar Ghauth al-Azam Abdul Qadir Jilani. As his mother had fallen ill right soon after his birth, he was given to the wife of a neighbouring Pandit Ram Sanaihi, a pious and God-fearing Hindu.

He was given various surnames including “Khurshid 'Ali (One who shines by the light of Hazrat Ali)” by grandfather; “Abul Hasan (Father of Hasan)” by his father; “Ghauth-i-Ali” (Under the protection of Ali) by his mother; which is his most famous name generally written as Ghauth Ali. His Hindu foster parents had yet another name that is “Ganga Bishan (An offering to river

⁷⁸ Personal Conversation, Baba Jan Sarkar (Sep 24, 2009).

⁷⁹ A personal conversation With Baba Jan Sarkar on Sep 25, 2010; also on Nov 19, 2009. Feb 14, 2008.

⁸⁰ For details see Qadiri, *Tadhkirah-i-Ghauthia*.

Ganges)”.⁸¹ All these names had some significance in his life. Later, due to his immense spiritual riches, he is titled as Ghauth Ali Shah Qadir Qalandar by the follower of his *silsilah*.⁸²

Ghauth Ali Shah Qalandar received his Muslim and Hindu educations simultaneously. When he started learning the Holy Quran from his mother, at the same time Pandit Ram Sanehi, his foster father initiated his education in Hindu scriptures. Later, his father got him initiated into three different Sufi *silsilahs* including Silsilah Suharwardiyya, Qadiriyya and Naqshbandiyya one after another. Due to his multiple initiations, he learned at the hands of eleven Muslim and eight Hindu teachers. Syed Ghouth Ali Qalandar earned a large number of disciples, both from Muslim and Hindu quarters. Gul Hassan Shah, his closest disciple, had noted down some of the verses or anecdotes shared by Ghauth Ali Shah, which, after his departure to eternal abode, were collected and published in a book titled *Tadhkirat-al Ghouthiyya*. It is a masterpiece both in terms of literary flow as well as spiritual insight and charm.

Like Ibn Arabi and Ghauth al-Azam, *tawhid* is the major focus of Ghauth Ali Shah’s teachings. Like the Sufis of medieval era, Ghauth Ali Shah Qadir Qalandar taught his disciples through parables, riddles and stories that were palatable to all levels of intellectual and spiritual constitutions. A number of his anecdotes included women. He has openly recognized some spiritual women both from Muslim and Hindu faith. He did not marry and had homely life. He also liked travelling and kept visiting various parts of India as well as other Islamic countries. He had mentioned dealing with a Hindu yogi woman, who offered him to practice ‘*ban parasti* (a practice of keeping oneself celibate while having close intimacy and privacy with the member of opposite sex). Many his anecdotes indicate close interactions with women. His focus on *tawhid*

⁸¹ Qadiri, *Tadhkirah-i-Ghauthia*, 11.

⁸² Personal conversation with Baba Jan Sarkar on January 01, 2009.

negate and nullify gender differences. However, main postulates of his teachings reached Baba Jan Sarkar through his Sheikh, Baba Ji Fazl al-Rahman. As portrayed in the stories captured in *Tadhkirah-i- Ghauthia*, Ghauth Ali Shah's personality, his witty and cute remarks, his naughty questions to ritualists, his love for travel, his command over both Muslim and Hindu scriptures and his high spiritual vision on oneness of being seeming to have transferred into Baba Jan Sarkar. A close observation showed Ghauth Ali Shah and his teachings living fully in Baba Jan. An example of metaphorical teachings presented through stories by Baba Ji Ghauth Ali Shah Qadir Qalandar is placed as Annex. 2.

2.5. Ibn Arabi – “The Ocean without Shore”

Michel Chodkiewicz, an eminent writer, describes Ibn Arabi as an ocean without shore⁸³, a truly fitting title that this author has adapted too. He has proved to be truly an ocean of astute mystical knowledge with innumerable treasures of pearls flowing deep into its depth available only for the daring divers. Mohy al-Din (also written as Mohyiddin) Abu Abd-Allah Mohammad Tai Hatimi was born in July 1165 in Andalusia (current Spain), is the most dominant Sufi writer, known to his followers and admirers as al-Shaykh al-Akbar (the Greatest Master). He has written his name as ‘Ibn al-Arabi’ with the definite article ‘al’, however, later writers, for trying to distinguish him from his namesake Qadhi Abu Bakr ibn al-Arabi (d. 1148 CE), preferred referring to him as Ibn Arabi, a trend that is also used in this study. Ibn Arabi was fond of travelling and used it as a food for spiritual development. Leaving home at a young age, he travelled extensively in the Islamic world and chose to settle in Damascus, where he passed away to his eternal abode in 1240 CE.⁸⁴

⁸³ For details see Michel Chodkiewicz, *An Ocean without Shore: Ibn Arabi, The Book and the Law* (Albany: State University of New York Press, 1993).

⁸⁴ William C. Chittick “Ibn Arabi and His School,” in *Encyclopaedia of Islamic Spirituality*, ed. Seyyed Hossein Nasr (Lahore: Suhail Academy, 2000), 49.

Thousands of books have been written about him and his works, though, they were able to capture only a fraction of both his gnostic and literary capital. One feels at a loss of words to describe his contribution to the treasure of knowledge in the field of *tasawwuf*. If Sufis regard him as the greatest mystic and sage, philosophers respect him as the greatest metaphysical thinker. His impeccable and profound writing is unparalleled both in prose and poetry. Known as Muhy al-Din, also spelled as Muhyiddin (“the Revivifier of Religion”) among Muslims, he is equally admired as a great mystic, universal sage and philosopher by the Western, non-Muslim writers. The establishment of Muhyiddin Ibn Arabi Society in Europe with most eminent writers focusing on him as a sole subject of research is a significant indication of his influence in the West.

Ibn Arabi was born in Andalusia, current Spain, at the peak of Moorish (Muslim) culture of Andalusia, which was a melting pot of cross-civilizations influenced by all three Abrahamic religions. He was recognized for his extraordinary spiritual capabilities since his early age which was indicated by his meeting with Averroes (Ibn-Rushd), the great sage of the time, when he specifically asked to meet Ibn Arabi, who was only fifteen years old, after coming to know about his recent and impressive spiritual *fath* (opening/victory).⁸⁵

There have been eight hundred and fifty written works ascribed to him, out of which more than four hundred and fifty are considered genuinely written by him. It seems mind-boggling to figure out how he could accomplish writing over four to five hundred books including some masterpieces such as *Fusus al-Hikam* (“bezels of Wisdom”) and *Futuh al-Makkiyya* (*the Makkan Revelations*). These works are a unique combination of three strands of knowledge that is Islamic traditional sciences of Quran and *Hadith*, philosophical reasoning and mystical insight. Along with

⁸⁵ Claude Addas, *Quest for the Red Sulphur: The life of Ibn 'Arabi* (Lahore: Suhail Academy, 2000), 53-58.

his exquisite prose, he also wrote some of the finest poetry of Arabic in his *Diwan* and *Tarjuman al-Ashwaq* as well as inserted in his prose writings.⁸⁶ These extensive writings provide a beautiful exposition of the Unity of Existence of the Single and Indivisible Reality which transcends all existence as well as simultaneously manifests ‘Itself’ in all the images and existences of the world. Ibn Arabi constantly refers to the Quran and *Hadith* as if his entire corpus of works is a commentary of the same. Interestingly, although it is firmly rooted in the Islamic traditional sciences of Quran and *Hadith*, yet his work has a universal tone and message and openly declares that everyone has a unique path to the truth and thus no one should be looked down. For him, all religions contain part of the truth and thus one should not reject all other religions considering one’s own as the best.⁸⁷

Ibn Arabi has profoundly influenced the development of spiritual Islam in all parts of the world. However, his universal message and teachings were not accepted by more traditional followers of religion. His opponents have taken his universal teachings as anti-Islamic and have given legal decrees on his infidelity. Creating huge waves of contrasting opinions in the Islamic world, he has earned himself ever-admiring followers and equally vicious foes.⁸⁸ However, in the last eight hundred years, the heaven and the earth still have to witness another thinker or sage who could provide more powerful or meaningful answers to the secrets of mystical life.

2.5.1. Ibn Arabi’s Iconoclastic Views on Women

⁸⁶ Muhyiddin Ibn al-Arabi, *Tarjuman al-Ashwaq*: a collection of mystical odes, trans. Reynold A. Nicholson (London: Royal Asiatic Society, 1911).

⁸⁷ Chittick, “Ibn Arabi and his school”, 61-63.

⁸⁸ To directly access the invaluable materials produced and published by the Muhyuddin Ibn Arabi Society (MIAS), an internationally acclaimed research body, the website was used. Ibn Arabi’s summary introduction has been drawn from the MIAS website at <http://www.ibnarabisociety.org/ibnarabi.html>, accessed on June 2014.

Essentially coming out of his most significant thesis on *Wahdat al-Wajud* (Unity of Existence), the nature of all Existence is the same and thus calling human reality inhabited both in men and women as ‘one and the same’ and consequentially ‘equal’. Sounding so simple and logical, his ideas seem as radical and revolutionary today as they were eight hundred years ago for all those who prefer some sort of gender discrimination and patriarchal social system. He considers maleness and femaleness as ‘states’ of the essential human reality and have provided long explanation in *Futuhāt* to prove that the degree of male superiority over women as per the Quranic verse saying, ‘men have a degree over women’⁸⁹ is meant only at metaphysical level not entitling men any superiority at the physical plane that is this world. He proves his point of views with a *hadith* that "women and men are siblings (*shaqaiq*)" so they share in all treasures of God equally. Therefore, he believes women qualify to function and work in all walks of life just like men, including all high-level intellectual and spiritual spheres. Women are considered capable of achieving all ranks of *wilaya* (sainthood) including *Abdal*, *Qutb* and *Qalandar*. It is amazing to see him defending women far more strongly and successfully than any feminists of today by giving appropriate and valid arguments from the same religious sciences that are used against women. Ibn Arabi’s equal treatment of men and women become most difficult for theologians when he also considers women equally qualified to lead prayers as *imam* (prayer leader) both for men and women.⁹⁰ At this juncture, many of his great admirers seem not to have courage to support him since this is a most sensitive issue even in the twenty first century for religious scholars and theologians to agree with.

⁸⁹ The Holy Quran 2:228, Al-Baqrah and 4:34, Al-Nisa.

⁹⁰ For details see Souad Hakim, “Ibn 'Arabi's Twofold Perception of Woman as Human Being and Cosmic Principle,” in *The Journal of the Muhyiddin Ibn 'Arabi Society* XXXI, (2002): 1-29.

Ibn Arabi has propounded the term “*al-Insan al-Kamil*” “the perfect human being” also translated as the Perfect Man, giving an impression as if it is a station meant only for men. Technically, the perfect Human or Man is the one who has fully achieved all the potential that God has bestowed upon Adam at the time of his creation. Adam’s potential and his status as the vicegerent of God is what all his progeny must try to accomplish. Another indigestible idea for traditional followers of religion is Ibn Arabi’s recognition of women’s ability to attain all levels of human and gnostic perfection as successfully as a man including the station of “*Insan al-Kamil*”.⁹¹ In his views, it is open to both men and women and any one with adequate and apt spiritual powers could attain it despite any sexual identity. The word ‘*insan*’ shows that it is not only limited to men only, because a woman is as much of a human as a man is. He says: "Perfection is not barred to women. If woman is indeed one degree lower than man, this is a degree of coming into being (*ijad*) since she was created from him, and this does not detract from [her attainment of] perfection.”⁹²

Ibn Arabi has dwelled at great length on the myth of creation. He has quite an exciting view on creation of Eve out of Adam’s body. For him, it serves as a superiority for woman over man since she was created out of man and thus has all of the determinations of her original home as well as of her own independent self. As Hakim explains:

“Ibn Arabi considers the first human body as that of Adam, and in its origin - in so far as we imagine it - it resembles a sculpture that a potter would create out of clay and then fire in a kiln. From Adam's rib, God created the body of Eve, so it resembles in its origin a sculpture that a carpenter would chisel out of wood or stave. Ibn Arabi describes the ontological yearning between Adam and Eve, something which spread from them to every human couple in being, saying: ‘ - and God filled the place from which Eve was created with a hunger for her, for there cannot remain any void in being. When He filled it with air, he felt towards her a yearning as towards himself because she is

⁹¹ Chittick, “Ibn Arabi and his school”, 66-67.

⁹² Hakim, “Ibn 'Arabi's Twofold Perception of Woman as Human Being and Cosmic Principle”, 10.

a part of him, and she felt a yearning towards him because he is her homeland, from which she originated. So Eve's love is love of homeland, and Adam's love is love of himself.”⁹³

Ibn Arabi’s encounters with pious and spiritual women are mentioned in his biographical and autobiographical sketches with details. He openly wrote about his women teachers, associates and beloveds and admitted their high spiritual statuses, a trait quite uncommon in other writers. There are two fields of pious and spiritually elevated women mentioned in his works. One is *Fiqah* or *Hadith* and the other is spirituality or *tasawwuf*. He mentions with a lot of affection the characteristics of a saintly woman as a mother or spiritual guide as he saw in the person of Fatima bint al-Muthanna whom he met in Seville. He seems proud to have stayed in her *sohba* (company), served her as a son and learn from her as a disciple for two years at a young age in Seville. Confirming that he ‘served’ her meant that he accepted her as a Shaykh in whose company he remained longest. He calls her ‘mother’ and openly shares a number of spiritual exercises and gnostic secrets including the science of the letters that he has mentioned learning from her.⁹⁴ As Baba Jan Sarkar usually told while talking about women spiritual leaders whom he had met during his spiritual journey that if an eminent luminary of Sufism like Ibn Arabi could learn at the hands of a woman, why other Sufis and seekers of spiritual truth cannot accept women as Murshid or Shaykh in current times? Sufis set examples so that others could follow. What’s the point of considering him Shaykh al-Akbar in one breath and negating his example and his teachings in the next?

There are other women mentioned, however, we would only discuss two more here. One is his *hadith* teacher from whom he received ‘*ijaza* (certificate) for transmitting ahadith whom he calls “Shaykhat-al-Hejaz” (“Teacher of Hejaz”), “Fakhr-al-Nesa” (“Pride of all women). Further

⁹³ Hakim, “Ibn 'Arabi's Twofold Perception of Woman as Human Being and Cosmic Principle”, 16.

⁹⁴ Addas, *Quest for the Red Sulphur: The life of Ibn 'Arabi*, 87-88.

adding and qualifying that being a woman did not keep her from also being called “Fakhr-al-Rejal” (“Pride of men”). However, it was Makin-al-Din's daughter, Nizam, who was the *raison detre* behind the exquisite “*Tarjaman al-ashwaq*”.⁹⁵ He met Nizam in Makkah during the circumambulation of the Holy Kaaba, who seemed to be the replica of ‘Eve’ that Ibn Arabi mentions as the true reflection of one’s own self and a translucent niche where he could contemplate divine Beauty. However, he had to write an explanatory book to justify his verses and elucidate their metaphysical meanings, when his love poems for Nizam were taken as an expression of ordinary, carnal love.⁹⁶ Both Ibn Arabi’s love and an open expression of the same show that love and respect for a woman was not a lowly act unsuitable for a great Sufi, but a noble, honourable emotion that blessed a heart like his. A heart that was the dwelling of God. This topic can be discussed at length, however, the point emphasized here is that Ibn Arabi’s associations with and his open expression of praise, respect and love for women in itself is a proof of his unique and metaphysical position with regard to women. By loving women, he was acting upon the Sunnah of the Holy Prophetﷺ, as discussed below.

Another profound thought ignited by Ibn Arabi is that God can only be witnessed in a form being *al-Zahir*. This is yet another delicate issue that he raises in the last *Fiss* (wisdom) of prophets when he discusses the Holy Prophet Muhammadﷺ and his saying, “Made beloved to me from your world are women and perfume, and the coolness of my eyes is in prayer.”⁹⁷ Without going into the deeper details provided as explanation, just by making it a focus of his attention, Ibn Arabi brings forth the lovability of women by the Most Exalted of the prophets and thus challenges the entire

⁹⁵ Muhyiddin Ibn al-Arabi, *Tarjaman al-Ashwaq: a collection of mystical odes*, trans. by Reynold A. Nicholson (London: Royal Asiatic Society, 1911), 3.

⁹⁶ Addas, *Quest for the Red Sulphur: The life of Ibn 'Arabi*, 209-11.

⁹⁷ *Sunan al-Nasa'i*, English trans. Vol. 4, Book 36 [The Book of the Kind Treatment of Women], hadith 3391. The same is also mentioned in *Tabqat-i-Ahmad*

notion of debasement of women on any other basis. He presents various reasons including the above hadith to propose that the most perfect contemplation or witnessing of God was possible only in women.

Further, revealing other perspectives on gender, there are interesting dimensions discussed by him. For Ibn Arabi, the femaleness or femininity is not a physical set of attributes but rather a state of being that can be present in both men and women. Femininity meant receiving, submitting nurturing and being acted upon. Thus, all receptivity and submission wherever it is, especially in front of God, renders all existence female, whatever their physical characteristics they may have. Action, power, creation and giving are the masculine or male qualities, which need a receptive partner. Both need each other to express themselves. They complement and fulfil each other. They claim each other to run their roles in the universe. Therefore, Ibn Arabi presents a view of the universe functioning through a balance and harmony between its male and female aspects rather than a male dominated perspective.⁹⁸

As expressed above, there have been thousands of books written on Ibn Arabi and his profound gnostic ideas. Therefore, this study wanted to acknowledge his massive impact on Sufism and his immense contribution to ideas related to gender in Sufism. The modest attempt in the above section is not even a drop in that ocean of knowledge. In this section, it was only attempted to bring in a few key ideas of Ibn Arabi to help the readers understand the intrinsic linkage between him and Baba Jan Sarkar. This will also help to see how the similar ideas were echoed and practically lived and manifested in the life and teachings of Baba Jan Sarkar, which we see in detail in the next two chapters.

⁹⁸ For details of male-female, yin and yang aspects of the circle of existence, see Murata, *Tao of Islam*.

“Surely God's friends [men or women] – no fear shall be upon them, nor shall they sorrow”.

(The Holy Quran, 10:62, al-Yunus)

Chapter 3

Woman, Man, None or Both: The Supra-Gender Spiritual Realm

Farid al-Din Attar had to justify Bibi Ji Rabiah Basri's mention in *Tadhkirat al-Awliya*¹ by bringing evidence such as:

The Leader of the Apostles ﷺ has stated that 'God does not look at your outward forms'. Deeds are not measured by their form but by their intention. As the Holy Prophet ﷺ has stated, 'People will be assembled [on the last day] by their intentions'. If it is permissible to learn two-thirds of our religion from Ayesha, the Truthful, it is also permissible to accept religious benefit from one of her handmaids [Rabiah]. On the path of God, when a woman becomes a man, she cannot be called a woman. Similarly, Abbas Tusi has said that when on the judgement day, it would be called, 'O Men', the first person among the ranks of men would be Mary (A.S.)... The true meaning of this occurrence is that wherever these people [the Sufis] are; [in reality], they don't exist, *Tawhid* (Oneness) does. In Oneness, how could the existence of 'I' and 'you' remain² or 'men' or woman' could reach it?³

Attar had a few more arguments to properly justify Bibi Ji Rabiah's space in that galaxy of stars that he was studding in his book. This was a book written around twelfth century mainly for Sufi audience so that they could know about and learn from other eminent Sufis. Yet, he had to provide long explanation and justification to prove her eligibility for being placed among Sufis. One can imagine that if that was the case in a time when Sufism was at its peak in its classical form, how would a Sufi woman fare in twenty-first century? Nevertheless, while justifying Bibi Ji Rabiah's status, he also summed up the supra-gender station of Sufis validating it by the Muhammadan teachings.

Why do we call the Muhammadan teachings on Sufism supra-gender? We have answered this question in detail in chapter 1 section 1.6. Here, instead of repeating the definitional explanation, we would focus on whether the supra-gender identity, as explained in Chapter 1, is

¹ R. A. Nicholson, *Fariduddin Attar's Tadhkirat al-Awliya* (London: Luzac and Co., 1901).

² A similar idea of a Sufi's identity immersing in the Reality where a separate sense of being obliterates is beautifully depicted by Sa'd ud Din Mahmood Shabistari in *Gulshan-i-Raz*.

³ R. A. Nicholson, *Fariduddin Attar's Tadhkirat al-Awliya*, 59. (Translation mine)

only a theoretical or moral category that exists in doctrinal discussions or has any relevance for every-day life. Also, to see whether it is something buried under the dust of centuries or exists in current times. If yes, how such an identity has been used or practiced by men and women walking on the path of Sufism in current times.

As indicated in chapter one, Sufis have had mixed responses toward women.⁴ Overall, the Sufi world was more inclusive of women as indicated by various treatises written in and around medieval era. There were Sufis like Ibn Arabi who explained hermeneutically and propagated the feminine principle regarding the nature of God. However, patriarchal nature of societies where Sufis lived as well as stress on ‘leaving the world’ (and its profaneness), contributed toward some Sufis’ aversion to women as a representative of the ‘world’. It has been discussed in chapter one that one reason for women to be taken as the representative of ‘*nafs*’ and *dunya* was due to the language issues. Both these words are grammatically feminine, thus women, being biological female were taken to be as detestable as the ‘world’, another female.⁵ Many Sufis even instructed their disciples to keep away from women so that they do not get distracted during their training period. Some Sufis remained celibate to not engage in familial and social responsibilities. Even those who accepted women as ‘*murid*’ (devotee), did not give them a leadership role considering them not eligible to become a *Murshid/Sheikh*. When *futuwwat* teachings were mixed with Sufism, women and trans-gender did not have eligibility even to enter such systems. As noted by Ridgeon, the famous Sufi Shihab al-Din Suhrawardi's dislike of “the speculative, philosophical forms of Sufism and the more ecstatic variety may have caused him to actively promote his own sober version of Sufism through institutionalised *futuwwa*. It is noteworthy that this interpretation of

⁴ Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, 426-31.

⁵ Schimmel, *As Through a Veil*, 155.

Sufism is also reflected in his treatment of *futuwwa*, in which there is an uncompromising insistence on being scrupulous about matters pertaining to correct manners and courtesies.”⁶ He clearly banned women’s entry into *futuwwa* organizations, which also resulted banning their entry into Sufism.

Where women were allowed in Sufism, the condescending behaviour to their participation turned them into a marginal observer or just a blessing seeker.⁷ They were not even allowed to come near the graves of Sufi masters, who never issued such decrees themselves. This happened as the *gaddi nashins* (hereditary successors) did not necessarily carry the quality, ability and vision of their forefathers and were generally more interested in taking charge of the *silsilahs* for worldly reasons such as keeping the control in their hands, managing visitors of shrines, increasing the number of *murids* (followers/devotees), keep receiving and collecting voluntary gifts from devotees rather than practically investing in their own spiritual development and adopting the spiritual struggle of Sufis. Numerous factors worked against women’s active or leadership role in Sufism over centuries. Moreover, degeneration of Sufi practices regarding women had created a scholarly bias that resulted in either by ignoring women or in tokenism of mentioning them in appendixes in Sufic research. It is interesting to note that even writers like Annemarie Schimmel and Ather Abbas Rizivi mention women in the appendices of their otherwise monumental works, probably due to lack of information or supposed lack of interest of their audience.⁸ Even worse is the conviction of Western writers that out of the Western hemisphere, there are no Sufi traditions which give women a prominent or leadership role in the current era.⁹ The removal of women from

⁶ Lloyd Ridgeon, *Jawanmardi A Sufi Code of Honour* (Croydon: CPI Group Ltd. 2011), 27.

⁷ Cornell, *Early Sufi Women*, 19.

⁸ For example, see appendix on Sufi women in Schimmel’s *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* and Rizvi’s *A History of Sufism in India*.

⁹ Cornell, *Early Sufi Women*, 18-20.

Sufi circles and practices has already been explained in detail in chapter one under the analytical framework while discussing the *Futuwwa* movement and literature, which need not be discussed here again to avoid repetition. However, one can summarise that in the contemporary world, increasingly more socio-religious elements placed women's right, need and interest in a spiritual life at the lowest ladder as compared to men both in Sufi circles as well as in research about them.

In such a world, witnessing a Sufi Master like Baba Jan Sarkar leading a spiritual tradition that was inundated by women disciples along with men, while giving them equal opportunity, equal love and equal weightage looked out of this world at the first sight. Before we explore in detail Baba Jan's teachings on women and gender dimensions, it is pertinent to know his general teachings to understand his worldview. Following are few themes that try to encapsulate Baba Jan Sarkar's ideas and teachings by synthesizing them from his discourses. Nevertheless, it also needs to be acknowledged that at best it is but a partial synthesis of the major themes and concepts due to the impossibility of measuring the entire canvas of numerous and very deep issues that he covered. Along with the issues Baba Jan Sarkar raised and ideas he discussed during his daily and weekly *mahafil*, which ran close to half a century in Jhang, he also led and trained his disciples through spiritual exercises and practical 'homework' discussed later in this chapter.

This entire chapter draws on his discourses and individual conversations with the researcher that are the primary sources for this research. Since there is no collection of his *malfuzat*¹⁰(pl. of *malfuz*, derivative of *lafz* meaning word) available yet from any other source, therefore, the research is based on the direct narrations of anecdotal accounts, explanations in response to questions or interpretation of poetry sung in qawwalis or songs with mystical lens. Many of the

¹⁰ Muhammad Aslam, *Malfuzati Adab ki Tarikhi Ahmiyyat* (Lahore: Research Society of Pakistan, 1995), 9-11.

points or events described below were repeated various times in various *mahafil* over the years. Therefore, the dates mentioned are only meant to denote the time whence that specific point was recorded. It may have been repeated in an earlier or later *mehfil* as well with somewhat more or less detail. Wherever relevant, the given points and arguments have been substantiated with literature indicating their relevance to thoughts from Ibn Arabi and Ghauth Ali Shah, the two personalities that Baba Jan Sarkar mostly referred to.

3.1. A Glimpse into Baba Jan Sarkar's Teachings

As indicated by many Sufis and put forward simply by Sharib:

“The mystics of Islam, who are also known as Sufis, valid down a code of conduct for human happiness. What they said on different occasions reflects their anxiety for the masses and the classes. What they said was in the nature of friendly advice, suggestion and direction... Their sermons and sayings, their aphorisms, narratives and discourses give significant insight into the forces that shape and mould the evolution of human thought, human institutions, human actions and human behaviour”.¹¹

Like the Sufis of classical era, Baba Jan Sarkar used stories and poetry to explain a point and to reach more deeply to the minds of his disciples as per their potentials. He knew many languages such as Urdu, Persian, Punjabi, Pushto, Sindhi, Saraiki and English. He had a superb knowledge of Quran and hadith, though he always denied being a scholar. Thus, he used music and poetry from various languages in his *mehfil*. It was amazing to see some illiterate or nominally educated people sometimes listening to his talk given in Urdu, using Persian verses, Arabic verses, Punjabi proverbs and English explanations all mixed together. Everyone listened intently and seemed to understand. It was something other than words that was being emitted.

Baba Jan did not say things so that these could be used as a philosophy or cliché. He wanted his disciples to practice everything they learned. In order to understand his concepts of

¹¹ Z. H. Sharib, *The Reflections of the Mystics of Islam* (Southampton: Sharib Press, 1995), 7.

gender, or his definition of men and women, one needs to understand the overall doctrinal context in which he operated. One must acknowledge that he operated ‘in God’ – both as a concept as well as a way of life. Therefore, some recurring themes in his discourses that were not just persistent but also foundational in nature need to be summarized since his worldview stemmed from there.

3.1.1. *Tawhid*

Within everything that he talked about, he seemed constantly talking about one thing that was God and His Indestructible Oneness – that is *tawhid* (oneness of all things). He seemed so enamoured with the idea of *tawhid* that all his discourses about all other issues emanated from that standpoint. While listening to his conversations and later synthesizing his discourses as well as his dealings with his family, disciples and patients, the most obvious conclusion one could gain is that his entire self was revolving around God and his indestructible Oneness. Therefore, he had a constant, single-minded focus on *tawhid* and in one or the other way he would bring that aspect to fore for all his disciples to make them aware of the singularity hidden in the multiple layers of diversity. He did not do so in cold, dry or boring sermonic ways but in a very natural flow of talking about normal and mundane things. He seemed to be another Ibn Arabi in the garb of a medical doctor dealing with a very different audience than Ibn Arabi. Baba Jan’s audience was composed of a variety of people with mixed levels of educational, regional and social status. Thus, his conversation was not scholarly or bookish like a religious speaker or orator. His conveyance of *tawhid* was through simple, understandable, everyday ideas that could absorb equally successfully in the hearts of illiterate, blue collar workers and labourers as well as socially higher, upper class, more learned disciples belonging to business, medical, teaching or other well-paying vocations.

For example, the concept of *tawhid* as presented by Ibn Arabi in *Fusus al-Hikam* (Bezels of Wisdom) can be summarized that each of the selected prophets exhibited a specific divine aspect

that was revealed to him. Therefore, each prophet represented a certain mode of knowledge of God, which essentially meant experiencing the Same Reality of God in one certain way. Ibn Arabi further clarifies that each prophet therefore goes through a unique way and has a unique station (*maqam*) that is a specific dimension of the Absolute Reality, which in the end is the One and the Same. Thus, all prophets were routed differently toward the same destination.¹²

The above concept was explained by Baba Jan Sarkar with a simple example contextually more relevant to his audience. Every night, and specifically on each Friday, hundreds of people gathered to listen to his discourses. During one such *Mehfil-i-Pak* in April 2013, when a *qawwali* was being played on the cassette player, he abruptly switched it off. He asked one person if he had been to Faisalabad (a nearby city). When he answered in affirmative, he further asked whether he had visited the famous *ghanta-ghar chowk* (Clock-Tower Square) of Faisalabad. Then he asked the rest of the audience about the same place. Majority of the people answered in affirmative as that part of the city of Faisalabad is a historic, central place, and well known to local audience. To a few others, who had not seen that place, he asked the first person to explain the whereabouts and significance of the place. Now the entire audience had become very curious that why did Baba Jan Sarkar stop listening to a *qawwali* and started talking about the Clock-Tower of Faisalabad? It sounded a bit off the topic. The man explained that the Clock-Tower was a central place and had eight different bazars (marketplaces) around it out of which each specializes in selling a certain commodity. All bazars end or exit at the Clock-Tower. At this point Baba Jan explained that the concept of *tawhid* is just like that. In his words,

“Like these eight bazars, there are various ways to Allah. They all end at Allah because He is the centre of everything. However, in order to reach the centre, one needs to pass through the bazar and exit it. In each bazar, there is a special commodity being sold such as clothes, or crockery or jewellery. You can get that special commodity from a specific bazar but once you have passed

¹² Baba Jan’s explanation of Ibn Arabi, Nov. 10, 2010. For details see Ibn Arabi, *Fusus al-Hikam*.

through the bazar, you would find yourself exiting to the Clock-Tower, the centre of all eight bazars. You may have lost a friend at the beginning of your journey in the hustle bustle of the shopping. However, when you exited the bazar after buying whatever you had to, you might see him also at the Clock-Tower, though he came through a different bazar. Both of you are now together as both of you have found the centre of all the bazars.”¹³

Further during the discussion, he explained,

“All prophets of God are also like those bazars. They all seem to sell different commodities but eventually they all end at Allah. Therefore, whoever has chosen a path, must go through it sincerely to find the central place, which is the One, Eternal Reality.”¹⁴

This simple example that everyone could understand was so powerful that all present needed no further explanation. His most common utterance when he met his disciples was, “You and God are One. You are God individualized. Recognize yourself”. Explaining that sometimes he would talk about ‘*kheer*’, or rice pudding commonly cooked in each household of Pakistan. He would explain that once the milk and sugar are put together and cooked well, after a while they become one. Now if anyone wanted to see where and how did milk and sugar fare separately, they cannot. Because now sugar has turned into milk and the milk into sugar. That is how the one who is immersed in Allah becomes inseparable.¹⁵

What is God and how he operates in one’s life? A lot of Baba Jan’s time was spent in answering questions related to questions around this question. Advocating for the Unity of Being and convincing his disciples that God is operating through them via His attributes. Life, Knowledge, Intention, Power, Hearing, Sight and Speech – the seven prime qualities of God are at work in innumerable forms and ways.¹⁶ He said, “You have been cleverly cheated into thinking that you are other than God. Yes, may be that is true as far as your level of *abudiyyat* (slavehood) is concerned. However, even that level operates within God and not outside it. How can anyone

¹³ Baba Jan’s conversation to a spiritual gathering (*Mehfil-i Pak*) at *Astana-i Pak*, Jhang, April 24, 2013.

¹⁴ Baba Jan’s conversation, Jhang, April 24, 2013.

¹⁵ Baba Jan’s talk to a spiritual gathering (*Mehfil-i Pak*) at Madinah Sharif, Saudi Arabia, June 20, 2013.

¹⁶ Baba Jan’s talk to a spiritual gathering (*Mehfil-i Pak*) at Madinah Sharif, Saudi Arabia, June 19, 2013.

explain this Oneness to you if you do not feel it and see it? As Iqbal has stated, “How and what Khidhr¹⁷ would explain, if the fish asked him where the ocean was”.¹⁸

There are hundreds of quotes from him that run down like a landslide taking away all forms of duality. However, not everything could be put in this study. In a nutshell, he affirmed that there is only One existence in the universe and that is the Supreme Being, the Absolute, so he kept on reminding his disciples to always remember that they are not detached from That. Using his words, we conclude this section with a verse he liked and recited often, sometimes during discourses and sometimes when seeing off his disciples he would say, “*eho ei taar har welay chhick; hikko hik te hikko hik*” (always keep this chord moving; the One, and the One and the One).¹⁹

3.1.2. Ishq²⁰ (Love)

“Love is the cage in which a *faqir* imprisons God. Love is the only trap by which one could catch God. Therefore, *fuqara* (mystics) always throw that snare to catch God”, is what is noted in the diary of his daughter.²¹ *Ishq*, love, *pyar*, *prem*, *muhabbat* – different words to describe love could be counted a few dozen time in Baba Jan’s daily conversations. Sometimes he would only say, “*meray piaray, meray sonhray, muhabbat, muhabbat, aur bas muhabbat* (my dear one, my beautiful one, love, love and just love). Sometimes he would end his talk with a long call of “*prem*,

¹⁷ The Quranic figure of a saintly being – a friend of God - who is appointed eternally to lead people to God. He guides Prophet Moses (A.S.) through a mystical journey as per details provided in chapter Al-Kahaf of Holy Quran.

¹⁸ Iqbal’s stanza saying, “Wohi Asl-e-Makan-o-La Makan Hai; Makan Kya She Hai, Andaz-e-Beyan Hai; Khizar Kyunkar Bataye, Kya Bataye; Agar Mahi Kahe Darya Kahan Hai (He is the Reality of Space and Spacelessness; what is space, just His way of saying something; How and what Khizer would explain, if the fish asked where was the ocean), given in his book *Bal-i-Jibril*.

¹⁹ Punjabi couplet – poet unknown

²⁰ English has numerous words to describe love such as affection, infatuation, adoration, amour (romantic love), and ardour (intense devotion, burning heat). The last one comes a bit close to *ishq*. However, no exact substitute is available in English. Thus, it is translated as love.

²¹ Personal diary, Faseeha Youssuf, July 17, 1994.

prem, prem” (love, love, love).²² Talking about love, most of the times, his eyes filled with tears and it seemed as if the mere word ‘*ishq*’ stirred something in him. He had an unlimited treasure of anecdotes, stories and sayings of his predecessors to explain that love was the shortest route to God. Sometimes, at the annual gathering of *Urs* (death anniversary celebration of Sufis), he talked about love and its various aspects for days in diverse ways. He seemed high in passion and looked as if he wanted to cut open the breasts of his disciples and fill them with love. Looking at him, the flow of his words, constant and powerful engagement with the subject for days without showing any signs of dearth of passion or thoughts, one would be reminded of Ibn Arabi saying, "By God, I feel so much love that it seems as though the skies would be rent asunder, the stars fall and the mountains move away if I burdened them with it: such is my experience of love".²³

The famous *Hadith-i-Qudsi*²⁴ (divinely inspired saying) narrated by the Holy Prophet ﷺ as “*Kuntu kanzan makhfiyyan fa ahbabtuhu an u`rafa fa khalaqtuhu ‘l khalq*”. (I was a Hidden Treasure, I wanted to be known, so I created creation)²⁵. Here the word ‘*fa ahbantu*’, derived from ‘*hubba*’ (love), and literally meaning ‘I loved’ was always emphasized by Baba Jan Sarkar. He stressed that no word used by God and narrated by the Holy Prophet ﷺ was in vain and thus must not be ignored. The use of ‘I loved proves that God has created all creation with Love. This is enough proof that all creation was enveloped within Love, which is another aspect of Mercy. He would often remind his disciples, “remember, the Lord ﷻ of the two worlds has said that Allah is

²² These words were uttered by him thousands of times throughout the years of research. Almost in each Friday mehfil, he said it and therefore, no one date should be ascribed to a thought recurring constantly in his discourses.

²³ Claude Addas, “The experience and doctrine of love” in *Ibn Arabi*, at <http://www.ibnarabisociety.org/articles/addas1.html>, accessed on April 25, 2011.

²⁴ William Stoddart, *Sufism: The Mystical Doctrines and Methods of Islam* (Lahore: Suhail Academy, 1981), 48.

²⁵ It is not a canonical *hadith* that is part of *Sahih Ahadith*. It is considered part of the *Hadith-i-Qudsi*, an extra-Quranic, divinely inspired *hadith* that Sufis like Ibn Arabi and others have used to explain the idea of creation.

more merciful than a mother can ever be to her children.²⁶ Now, how was it possible that what he created with Love and Mercy would not be maintained by the same?²⁷ Mercy cannot be without Love as it gets nourishment from that. As indicated by Ibn Arabi, “How would we not love God because he loved us first and created us through Love. Even at the physical level, the act of procreation is an act of love”.²⁸

3.1.3. God is Love

Baba Jan Sarkar used the verse of Holy Bible repeatedly both in English and Urdu stressing repeatedly, “God is Love”²⁹. In Urdu he would say, *Muhabbat Khuda hai, Khuda hai Muhabbat* (Love is God and God is Love). He also stressed that God acts per one’s expectation of Him narrating, “*Ana inda zanni abdi bih*”.³⁰ Love like its nature has also many names. The highest form of love is named *Ishq* by Sufis. Baba Jan considered *Ishq* an ‘*ata*’ (a favour/gift) and often narrated this Punjabi verse, “*ishq karam da qatrah azli, ten men de was naheen; hikna dhoondendyan umar guzari, hikna de wich raheen*” (‘*ishq*, the drop of primordial boon, is not in control of me or you; in vain, one yearned to find it lifetime, and the other found it without seeking’). The use of *muhabbat* and *ishq* were both common in his diction. He explained *Muhabbat* as a somewhat moderate and sustained state that left some room for sobriety but *ishq* is an inflammable,

²⁶ *Sahih Bukhari* quotes, “Umar ibn Al-Khattab reported: Some prisoners of war were brought in front of the Prophet, peace and blessings be upon him, and a woman was among them who was breast-feeding. Whenever she found a child among the prisoners, she would take it to her chest and nurse it. The Prophet said to us, “Do you think this woman could throw her child in the fire?” We said, “No, not if she is able to stop it.” The Prophet said, “Allah is more merciful to His servants than a mother is to her child.” Source: *Sahih Bukhari* 5653, accessed from <http://www.dailyhadith.com>.

²⁷ Baba Jan Sarkar, March 25, 2014.

²⁸ Chittick, “Ibn Arabi and His School”, 77-78.

²⁹ ‘Whoever does not love does not know God, because God is love’. *John 4:8*.

³⁰ *Sahih Bukhari* quotes, “Allah the Exalted says: I am as my servant expects me and I am with him as he remembers me. If he remembers me in himself, then I will remember him in myself. If he mentions me in a gathering, then I will mention him in a greater gathering. When he draws near to me by the span of his hand, I draw near him by the length of a cubit. When he draws near me by the length of a cubit, I draw near him by the length of a fathom. When he comes to me walking, I will come to him running”. Source: *Sahih Bukhari*, 6970.

uncontrollable, unbeatable passion that sets aflame the entire world of *Ashiq* (the one influenced by *Ishq*). He would say, “*Ishq* is what when it comes, it snatches away *aql* (reason).” Both terms are also used interchangeably, but *ishq* carries the sense of fiery, invincible current turning all else into embers.

Explaining the value of love, he often shared the story of Farid al-Din Attar (1145-11220), the famous author of *Tadhkirat al-Awliya* when he had not yet embarked on the mystical way.

Baba Jan narrated:

“Once Attar went into wilderness with his prayer mat, water pitcher and a rosary to have a vigil. After a while, he saw two people, a man and a woman, coming to the same place, completely absorbed in their conversation. They sat close to each other and continued talking. He got curious and decided to first find out about the couple’s intentions and purpose for coming into such wilderness. He sneaked close by and tried listening to what they were saying. Hiding behind a small hillock, he could listen clearly their love-talk. It proved so sweet and fascinating that he got completely absorbed in that, forgetting all about his worship and prayer. In a while it started snowing. Neither the two love-birds, nor Attar noticed the snow-flakes. The two were engrossed in each other and Attar in sweetness of love. All three were buried in snow by dawn. When the prayer call was heard by the two lovers, they suddenly realized that it was time to go so they both tried getting up and saw themselves almost buried in snow. They laughed at their oblivion of surroundings and helped each other to get out of snow. Doing that they saw another mound of snow nearby with a cloth peeping out. Realizing that it was another person, they helped Attar come out of the heap. All three left to their homes but Attar to a new destination. His state changed and instead of dogmatic, ritualistic exercises to seek nearness to God, he realized the power of love. If an ordinary love can make people absorb in each other and create such intoxicating sweetness in their conversation that he could absorb in that talk for hours, how far sweeter would be the communication with God? It was then uttered the following couplet, “*kufr, kafir ra, wa din dindar ra; yak zarrah-i dard-e dil Attar ra*” (give infidelity to infidel, and faith to the faithful one; give a speck of the love’s pain to Attar).³¹

At this point, Baba Jan started crying. After a while, he again stressed that a bit of heartache out of pure love was far greater in value than obtuse following of a horde of rituals. He added, ‘*kisi ko yaad kar ke aah bhar lena ibadat hai*’³² (heaving a sigh while remembering someone is a kind of prayer). Another oft-repeated statement that he used to inculcate love was, ‘love begets love and

³¹ Baba Jan, public gathering, March 24, 2014.

³² This verse is from Qawwali, Khwaja ki Deewani, sung by Ghulam Farid Sabiri Qawwal, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E_OAnfc5h-A.

hatred begets hatred'. If you expect, need or want love from others, start giving it out first. It will come back to you manifold. Also, he would encourage, "*Muhabbat lenay ka naheen, denay ka naam hai*",³³(taking, that is not the name for love; it is giving).

An interesting way in which he explained the attributes of love was through short sentences structured so perfectly as if a proverb. Born and bred in a Pushtoon area of Balochistan, he could not speak Punjabi fluently when he came to Jhang but learned over time. His Punjabi was thus not perfect and had a clear tinge of Pushto accent, yet he managed to construct highly poignant Punjabi or Saraiki sentences. One of such sentences was about the quality of beloved. He would say this only when he wanted to explain the unconditionality of love through unquestioning submission and objection-free acceptance of the beloved, whether human or divine. One way to judge true love was that "*mehbub oh ae, jidhay bheray kam wi changay lagan*" (beloved is the one whose bad deeds look good) to the one who loves. This rule could be applied on the human or divine love to assess if one still had objections, criticism and consequent conflict with the beloved, it meant that love was still lacking in purity and depth. It could be infatuation, attraction, attachment or affinity but not yet love if objection remained. The beloved's turning away should increase love instead of lessening it because love is nurtured by its pure waters from within and does not depend only upon external showers.³⁴

Love is multi-layered. It has an innate capacity to bring forth that special ray, which is needed to erase a particular darkness. It changes forms and shades from being creative to nurturing and sustaining, from supporting and strengthening to pushing for wider horizons. Like a magical

³³ Faseeha, personal diary, July 25, 1996.

³⁴ As given by Ridgeon, ... 'The beloved's turning away from you should lead you to him. Anger either felt or expressed should have no part in loving friendship; otherwise love is lacking, and the relationship depends only on interest. Quoted in, *Jawanmardi A Sufi Code of Honour*, 16.

phoenix, it has healing tears. That is the crux of love that Baba Jan Sarkar taught - feeding itself on pain to produce the most calming, soothing and healing effects for everyone else around.

3.1.4. Beauty and Joy

Another common theme that was repeated innumerable times in his discourses was the sense of Beauty, which he called *Husn-i-Azal* (the Primordial Beauty). Love being an integral part of Mercy, the primordial Beauty has also overawed everything in the universe. All existence shines with Beauty and thus emanates joy. Looking at His Beauty in every form, every sound and every experience, though elevating, yet a truly an uphill task while going through spiritual training. Finding beauty in apparently non-beautiful, embracing non-beautiful - be it form, incident or just harsh words - was not just a thought given by him, but also a practice. Sometimes, he asked people to be in a non-beautiful or unpleasant situation purposefully so that they could develop super-fine faculties of perception to go beyond the normal standard or mark of beauty. One way of doing this was to ask rich, well-to-do disciples to travel in second or third-class in a train or by a low-cost public transport instead of their comfortable cars. If travelling by car, he advised them to take a route full of traffic congestion and chaos instead of the clearer, less congested one. While doing so, focus on the peace amidst chaos, comfort in the discomfort, and gratitude during unpleasant situations were cultivated.

When one believes, one is dealing with something or someone truly beautiful, one also feels joy in heart. Beauty creates and augments joy, so does Love. Therefore, each moment spent in Love with Beauty emanates Joy that rejuvenates the universe with God's primordial, Creative Love mothered by Mercy. Joy must be expressed and shared so that it could have its contagious effect on all receptive hearts. Therefore, every day without fail when he left for his clinic, he would stop at the door, turn back and look at everybody present. Then with a light smile, he would

announce, “*Allah Pak ko muskaratay huey chehray piaray lagtay hain* (God loves smiling faces). This is a sentence that his disciples and visitors had heard thousands of time from him daily. A simple statement that had the power to expunge clouds of depression and anxiety from minds.

3.1.5. Fundamental Role of Murshid-i-Pak (the Spiritual Master)

In the Sufi tradition Baba Jan Sarkar practices, Murshid-i-Pak (the spiritual master/teacher) had the central role to play. There are other names also used for that role such as *haadi* (guide), *Sheikh* (leader), *Guru* (hindi for trainer), *Shehenshah* (persian for the king of kings), *Huzoor* (Arabic for the one always immersed in Presence) and many others. However, Baba Jan preferred the word *Murshid-i-Pak* due to its long ranging connotation of being a guide, trainer and a close friend. “Murshid among his/her disciples is as a prophet is among his followers”³⁵, says an earlier Sufi. A Sufi master is a master in terms of having mastered the art of compassionate, unconditional Love. He always stressed that all other Sufis have expounded on the role of the spiritual guide, a master who could help you master yourself. Without him, one cannot be called to or walk on the path of *Ishq*. To be truly a man of God and strive for the destination no less than the Abode of God, ritual practice without a guide is not the path to follow. In a nutshell, God resides within man and man, by definition, is only the one who undertakes the perilous journey of *ishq*, which in total abolition of one’s false ego. The sword of *Ishq* strikes to kill you, and yes, it does kill – not the real you but the false you – the lower self, *nafs-e-ammara*. *Nafs* feels like being killed due to the pain the journey of *Ishq* inflicts on one. However, it is not killed but rather purified under the guidance of *Murshid-i-Pak*. It is then transformed into other higher stage of *Lawwamah*, *Mulhimmah* and *Mutmainnah*.

³⁵ Personal conversation with Baba Jan Sarkar, March 21, 2012

Often, Baba Jan Sarkar used lines from Persian, Urdu, Saraiki, Punjabi or Pushto Sufi poetry. He knew several verses and used lines at the right juncture to explain his point. He mixed the concepts of *wahdat al-wajud* and *wahdat al-shahud*³⁶, the seemingly competing concepts have been stressed as two different approaches by many writers.³⁷ However, Baba Jan explained that although they seem to differ in approach, essentially, they have no conflict. He explained these as two springs flowing out of the same river and thus should not be confused as conflicting. For him the apparent differences in jargon were meaningless and time-wasting details, unnecessary and unhealthy for the traveller of the spiritual path. When asked how, he answered, “both are the two faces of the same coin. Both want to inculcate a higher consciousness in man about his unique relationship with God. There is no need to get into conflicts or debates to prove one better from the other. *Shahud* is not separate from *wajud*, where one is, the other is present too. It is the *wahdat* (oneness) that you should focus on”. He used to quote from one of his Sufi friends who used to say, “*Dr Sahib, khed jaddon khedni ae te uchhi khed khedni ae*” (Dr Sahib, one should play the highest game, if one ever has to play any). He taught his disciples to set target nothing less than the throne of God, often repeating a line from a Persian verse, ‘*yazdan ba kamand awar, ae, himmat e mardanah*³⁸ (throw your lariat at God, O, valour of a man). But he also taught that it was only possible for the daring ones who jump into the whirlpool of *Ishq* - the primordial magnetic pull of God that attracts, engulfs and completely dissolves the *bashariyat* (lowliness) and *duyi* (duality) of human nature.³⁹

3.1.6. Forgiveness and Compassion

³⁶ For details of these concepts, see Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*

³⁷ For details see Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, 279-284.

³⁸ Explained in detail in chapter three, Baba Jan, October 23, 2013.

³⁹ Baba Jan, October 23-27, 2013.

Baba Jan Sarkar was a highly learned person in many ways and along with *tareeqah*, he had a thorough knowledge of *Shariah* (legal aspects) of Islam, which made his teachings more penetrating when he tried to show the contrast and uselessness of blind following of *Shariah*. He did not aim to be an *aalim* explaining the legal problems of religion, although with his vast knowledge of the Holy Quran, he could have done that much more wisely than any other man of his time. His objective was to show his disciples the real message hiding inside the simplicity or complexity of *Shariah*. His objective was to show the path to God, where only the stout-hearted, high flying falcons would be welcomed to sit on the arm of the King. Of course, to be that falcon meant crossing a number of barriers that keep the other birds close to the ground. He mainly used the Holy Quran and the examples of the Holy Prophet ﷺ to explain the details of his teachings. A most often reference was “And We have not sent you, [O Muhammad ﷺ], except as a mercy to [all] the worlds.” (Quran: 21:107). The depth and breadth of Muhammad ﷺ being the ‘mercy to all the worlds’ was explained in multiple ways so much so that even the most illiterate of his disciples knew that in full recognition of the Holy prophet’s ﷺ exemplary and prototypical role in bringing mercy and compassion to all the universes and all kinds of creations of God.⁴⁰ He would ask all his disciples to read the Quran along with a translation. He would buy copies of the Quran and gave as gifts to his guests. He often indicated chapters or verses of the Quran related to forgiveness, kindness and compassion and asked people to read and reflect upon regularly for a few days. When the period was over, he would ask them to share their feelings and learning from that experience. One set of verses that he many times asked the researcher to recite loudly with translation during

⁴⁰ Another often used verse was, "There hath come unto you a messenger, (one) of yourselves, unto whom aught that ye are overburdened is grievous, full of concern for you, for the believers full of pity, merciful" (Quran: 9:128)

big gatherings were verses 34-35 from Surah *Ha Mim Sajdah* (chapter 41) of the Holy Quran stating:

“The good deed and the evil deed are not alike. Repel the evil deed with one which is better, then lo! he, between whom and thee there was enmity (will become) as though he was a bosom friend. But none is granted it save those who are steadfast, and none is granted it save the owner of great happiness.⁴¹

There were many others (see footnotes for some) that he used to create space in his disciples’ hearts for the messages from the Quran on compassion, forgiveness, gratefulness, humility and generosity. However, the verses landed right into their hearts not just because he recited them from the Quran. Some of them knew these already very well, yet they never had any effect on their behavior. The impact was created due to his behavior and character where these verses were exhibited every day. The impact of Quran is better and easily transmitted through the Muhammadan character. Unconditional love, compassion, forgiveness, humility and generosity were some of his every day etiquettes not just themes that were presented during gatherings. No one who knew him was not amazed at Baba Jan’s ability to deal with difficult people and situations. Every day he received hundreds of calls in addition to hundred plus patients at hospital and similar number of guests at home. Never once he was seen telling anyone that he was too busy to listen to them. People called him on the phone at very odd times with very odd reasons such as in the middle of the night, before dawn, during showers, during driving, just after he had gone to bed or even when he was physically ill on bed rest. He took all calls as if he was waiting just for that person’s call. He would sometime listen for over an hour-long story with patience or just utter

⁴¹ To further explain his points, he would sometime indicate other verses such as, “Keep to forgiveness (O Muhammadﷺ), and enjoin kindness, and turn away from the ignorant” (verse 199, chapter 7); And let not those who possess dignity and ease among you swear not to give to the near of kin and to the needy, and to fugitives for the cause of Allah. Let them forgive and show indulgence. Yearn ye not that Allah may forgive you? Allah is Forgiving, Merciful (verse 22, chapter 24);

a single sentence in response to a call. However, his response always had the desired calming and nurturing effect on people. Once the researcher asked him why he doesn't switch off his phone at night or just not pick up calls in the middle of the night. He said, "why would someone call me at an odd time if he/she was not in some desperate need? Why can't I just pick up the phone and reassure that he/she was not alone at that moment of desperation?".⁴² His very frequent advice to his guests and patients was:

"Jis qadar naiki kar saktay ho karo, jitnay logon se kar saktay ho karo, jitnay tareeqon se kar saktay ho karo, aur jitnay arsay tak kar saktay ho karo." (Do good, as much as you can, with as many people as you can, in as many ways as you can, for as long as you can).⁴³

It is important to note that he defined *Neki* as a noble deed that must be done unconditionally, with no expectation of reward and without any discrimination. In fact, Baba Jan highly recommended doing good to those who apparently do not deserve it or have animosity against one as asked by the Quran in chapter 41 mentioned above.

3.1.7. Plurality, Inclusivity and Diversity

Baba Jan considered difference of opinion among common people or Sufis on certain issues of mutual interest as healthy. He used to say that 'difference of opinion is possible, and not dangerous, if it did not breed anger and hatred'. He gave room for difference of opinion between children and their parents, between a young person and an elder, among siblings or families, and between spouses. He would say, "*ikhtilaf to ho sakta hai, magar adab, ehteram aur khidmat mein kami naheen aani chahiay*" (difference of opinion is fine, however, there should be no decline in good manners, respect and care) among the concerned parties. Likewise, he had no issues with difference of opinion on various practical exhibits of Sufism where some Sufi traditions and

⁴² Personal Conversation with Baba Jan Sarkar (May 30, 2010)

⁴³ Baba Jan's younger son shared this quote while talking about Baba Jan. He mentioned that he heard him say this to many of his patients and guests who used to visit him in the clinic.

silsilahs preferred certain practices over others.⁴⁴ He gave practices to his disciples from various *silsilahs* including zikr, qawwali, dance, recitations or even silence. Beyond gender, plurality was also exhibited to see his disciples coming from various *fiqhs* (*Sunni, shiah, barelwi* and many *Ahl i- Hadees*). Slowly all became the same, non-conformist in any one *fiqh*. He never stopped anyone. Same was the case for social classes. From the poorest labour class to posh class, from illiterates to doctorate holders, Muslims and non-Muslims, Pakistanis and foreigners all were welcome alike and could sit with each other eating and drinking together. If all could not become fast friends, they could cultivate respectful relationships and overcome differences, if they had any in mind. His teachings and relationship with other religions and sects are further explained in the next section.

Baba Jan Sarkar invited, encouraged and allowed people of all *silsilahs* to sit in his *mehfil* or meet with him individually, disregarding where they had their *bayt*. He did not bind them to have a *bayt* with him to learn from him or seek blessings. In his weekly Friday night *mehfil*, many people of other *silsilahs* came whose Sheikhs had asked them to visit Baba Jan Sarkar, probably without any fear that their *murid* (disciple) would be plucked away by Baba Jan. As part of this research, a group of fifteen women of other *silsilahs* following other local *pirs* were asked to share why did they visit Baba Jan and how did they feel about it. Many of them said that they were pulled by his love. Four of them came because their earlier master had passed away so they were looking for continuity of spiritual guidance. And the rest were advised by their *pirs* to visit him as they had some questions that their *pirs* thought could best be answered by Baba Jan. None of them reported any reservations mentioned by their *pirs* for attending Baba Jan's *mehfil*. All of them

⁴⁴ This is a healthy trend and well known in classical period of Sufism. For example, Data Ganj Bakhsh, Ali Hujwiri in *Kashf al-Mahjub* has listed twelve different Sufi perspectives on description about the nature of ultimate reality. See also Ridgeon, *Jawanmardi A Sufi Code of Honour*, 16-17. However, with the general decline in Sufi teachings and practices, the intra-*silsilah* relationships became less open.

were unanimous in the opinion that after meeting Baba Jan, the respect and *adab* for their own *pir* increased since Baba Jan had explained and cultivated a new sense of *adab* in them for their *pir*. They were of the opinion that Baba Jan had given a new life and meaning to their relationship with their *pir*. He always told them to continue with whatever their *pir* had asked them to do as spiritual practice and visit him as frequently as was allowed by him. Furthermore, on all the annual Urs celebrations at Baba Jan's *Astana-i-Pak*, several local *pirs* were invited to attend. They were all given respectable and prominent positions to sit at the stage along with Baba Jan himself. Instead of delivering a talk, he always preferred them to address the gathering to honour their participation. He would give special instructions to the group of disciples appointed to look after the guests to treat them highly respectfully throughout the Urs celebration. On a couple of occasions when his chair was higher than others, he refused to sit on that and asked to change it to a normal one. A few *pirs* had asked their sons to take *bayt* with Baba Jan Sarkar.

He never charged his fee to any of the neighbouring shopkeepers nor any of the *maulvi sahib* (a local religious leader). His clinic was situated in the older part of city where the roads were too small and congested. Shopkeepers started hushing the rickshaw drives away from their shops when they parked their rickshaws close to their shops to wait for potential customers. This was hurting rickshaw driver's daily income badly. One of them came and told Baba Jan. He called his staff and told them to allow rickshaw drivers for parking their vehicles along the wall of his clinic for as long as they needed to. If other shopkeepers tried to push them away, he told his staff to support these drives, since they were all blue-collar labourers making ends meet. He had instructed his staff to send water or '*sharbat*' (sweetened, flavoured drink) for them while they

waited outside during summers. Rickshaw drivers were deeply touched as they did not expect such kindness during all the pressure they were getting from all other shop keepers to leave that space.⁴⁵

3.1.8. Interfaith Harmony

Baba Jan's close, affectionate and frequent engagement with people of other religions deserve another independent study. Here, only a cursory introduction is being provided. He had Sikh, Christian and Hindu disciples and devotees. Along with his love for the Holy Quran and *ahadees*, he often quoted from the Holy Bible too. As a child he had been asked to go through Hindu and Christian scriptures, thus he knew them well. He asked the researcher to do the same. In his opinion, once one has gone through the earlier scriptures, the message of the glorious Quran became clearer and more impactful for the reader. He uttered the name of other scriptures with respect and affection. It was a unique thing to see his affection for and understanding of those scriptures and his open and frequent use of pertinent verses was something highly powerful. He encouraged Muslims and non-Muslims to read each other's scriptures to help have a deeper understanding of the continuous divine message, remove biases against each other and to see some parallel and universal themes propagated by all.

Some of the verses from the Holy Bible shared in gatherings were: "*seek ye first the kingdom of heaven/God and His righteousness in you, and all the other things shall be added unto you*" (Matthew 6:33); and "love is patient, love is kind. It does not envy, it does not boast, it is not proud. It does not dishonour others, it is not self-seeking, it is not easily angered, it keeps no record of wrongs" (Corinthians 13:4-5). From Hindu yogic tradition, he used to warn disciples about the *kaam, karodh, lobh, moh, ahankar* (lust, anger, greed, attachment, conceit) as

⁴⁵ Baba Jan's younger son shared this after Baba Jan's passing away. He said that some rickshaw drivers came and shared the entire incident with him.

the five major thieves that are always after the hard-earned spiritual wealth of the seekers of higher goals. Thus, he used these to augment the Sufi message of self-purification before moving forward for any substantial gain in the spiritual realm. His choice of messages from the other religions and mystic traditions were always pertinent and suitable to simultaneously break the barriers between what people considered opposite and show the universality of goodness that has been bestowed upon the humanity from the time immemorial through various scriptures.

He invited Sikh group for publicly conducting *Shabad Kirtan*⁴⁶ (Sikh devotional singing of their religious book *Guru Granth Sahib*) at his place during an open *mehfil*. All his disciples sat respectfully throughout the singing along with himself. He openly played Hindu *bhajans* (Hindu devotional songs) and Christian hymns in his *mehfil* through a cassette player. He played various movies based on stories related to Krishna, Bhagwat Purana, Ramayana and Buddha for all his disciples. He encouraged his disciples to visit the sacred places of other religions, wherever allowed, with utmost respect and love.

Along with inter-faith, his light of love spread equally for intra-faith harmony. Within Jhang, he used to invite two separate groups of *maulvis* (religious zealots) to conduct their *naat-khwani* - songs in praise of the Holy Prophetﷺ each year, though they were not his devotees. His next-door neighbours were *shias* with whom he had exemplary relations for over forty years. Many of his devotees were also from Shia community, though slowly they became less enthusiastic about observing typical Shia rituals. All his life, he never charged a single rupee to any of his Shia neighbours, especially during the month of *muharram*, his hospital services were available free of charge to all *shia* patients. On the way to his medical practice, there were dozens of shopkeepers

⁴⁶ *Kirtan* is the Sikh prayer.

in the bazar, with whom he had cordial relationships, disregarding whether they believed in Sufism or not. Some were staunch *Wahhabis* and wholly opposed all Sufi practices. However, they were all called ‘friends’ and were treated like that.

3.2. In the World yet not of the World: Views on Gender, Trans-Gender and Supra-Gender

The above few points try to capture only a fraction of Baba Jan’s views on some key themes for providing adequate contextualization for a discussion on gender. In a nutshell, his views on gender are what we have seen in chapter one while discussing the Prophetic tradition on gender being determined by *talab* (the prime goal of one’s life) instead of biologically determined sex. Here we see the practical exhibits of the supra-gender role (as indicated in chapter 1). We will attempt to see how the definition provided by the Holy Prophet has been explained and practically adopted by Baba Jan Sarkar for himself and for those he led.

Baba Jan Sarkar considered all things, entities and people as different facets of the eternal Beauty and Presence. A frequent question that Baba Jan used to ask from participants both in gatherings or individually was, “Who are you”? This basic, simple question seems to formulate all the identity debate for him. Gender is essentially about identity that mandates one’s prerogatives and social roles. His questioning of the very identity generated interesting answers. Mostly people answered with their name, work identity (teacher, mason, doctor.) or their family identities. He would then try to cut through various layers of identity that a person accumulates over years. He used the same question to initiate reflection and discussion on various key themes including gender. “You are not this body; this body is yours”, he would frequently assert. ‘The body is your horse and you are the rider, not the ride’, he would further emphasize. He would in one way or the other kept pointing out to his disciples that he/she was what entered the body to make it a living

being. Otherwise, despite giving birth to a complete body, “if ‘you’ had not come into inhabit it, people would have said, oh, there is a still birth”. So, you are what inhabits the body, what makes it move [its limbs] and make it talk and think and do all kind of things. You are the driver [of this vehicle], not the vehicle itself”.⁴⁷

In this way, he made people realize that ‘they’ are something other than the body they are inhabiting. The above question, some interviewees mentioned, was a very jolting one for them to suddenly being reminded of something so precious hidden inside their bodies. A couple of women told that for the very first time in life they felt comfortable about their bodies. They always felt a sort of impurity about the body but the feeling has changed “knowing that it is hiding God inside.”⁴⁸ Answering a question on this topic, he said, “You are a man, she is a woman. Common people think like that and assume themselves so. Yes, yes, maybe it is so at one level, but it is not the whole truth. This body is the house of God”.⁴⁹ The manhood and the womanhood is an ‘attitude’ that is not dependent upon a certain type if body was generally the conclusion. He emphasised that the name, vocation or ethnicity that a person carries, all belong to the body. The family members too. Sometimes, when someone would mention his father’s name to introduce himself, Baba Jan would stress that the person he mentioned is the father of his body, “Who is the father of yourself, your inner self, your true self”? Your parents did not fashion you, they only helped create the body.”⁵⁰

At other occasions, he said, ‘if you cut open a Hindu or a Muslim and compare their anatomical structures, there is nothing in their bodies to tell you what made one Hindu and the

⁴⁷ Baba Jan, various conversations, October 23-27, 2013.

⁴⁸ Interview with a woman devotee, October 24, 2013.

⁴⁹ Baba Jan, Conversations, October 23-27, 2013

⁵⁰ Baba Jan Sarkar, Conversations, October 23-27, 2013.

other Muslim. They are exactly the same. The identity is in one's mind".⁵¹ Thus, his attack was on the thoughts and ideas that people use to identify themselves with. Caste, creed or gender and all other socially constructed identities including gender were thus constantly under attack, which made people think more deeply about themselves.

During conversations, Baba Jan often recited a line of the Persian verse, "*Yazdan ba kamand awar, ae himmat e mardanah*" (throw your lariat at God, O valour of a man). *Himmat e mardanah*⁵² is the proverbial phrase used in Urdu or Persian that marks the proverbial, stereotypical valour related to manliness and honour of a man. He would say this often while addressing women. He also used other verses containing words man, manliness or manhood while talking to women. For him, the word '*mard*' (man) denoted a certain character and attributes exhibited by a perfect individual living in the supra-gender realm crossing all borders of duality or opposites. Another of his favourite couplet was by the 19th century Punjabi Sufi poet, Mian Muhammad Bakhsh:

Mard uneenday, mard taneenday, mard karendai leeran
*Mardan de hath karaj saray, mor denday taqdeeran*⁵³
(Men weave, men build, and men also rip apart;
Men have command over all tasks, they reverse destinies).

And when he would do so, he would also explain the definition of '*mard*' (man). He would always qualify that "here the word man also include woman, since it did not denote the biologically ordained men identified by male physical characteristics such as moustaches and beard. These are the men defined by the Holy Prophetﷺ". One of the oft-quoted tradition "*Al talib ud dunya*

⁵¹ Baba Jan Sarkar, Conversations, October 23-27, 2013.

⁵² Similarly, he used another phrase saying: "*in dono se aagay chal, ae himmat e mardanah*" (go beyond both [opposites], O manly courage")

⁵³ This verse has been written and used with a slight modification in the written '*kalam*' of Mian Muhammad Bakhsh, such as the edition produced by Prof. Saeed Ahmad (2015). However, I have used the version which Baba Jan used to recite instead of what is found in books.

muannisun, wa talib ul uqba mukhannisun wa talib ul maula muzakkirun” of the Holy Prophet ﷺ⁵⁴ that has been explained in detail chapter one classifies people based on their spiritual endeavours, translated by Baba Jan as, “*talib-i-dunya aurat hai, talib-i-uqba hijra hai aur talib-i-maula mard hai*” (seeker of this world is a woman; seeker of the hereafter is a eunuch; and seeker of the Lord is a man).⁵⁵

Once the author shared the following couplet of Sultan Haq Bahau:

*Jain dil ishq khareed nah keeta, soi khusray mard zananay Hu,
Khansay khusray har koi aakhay, kaun aakhay mardanay Hu,
Galiyan de wich phiran arbelay, jiyon jangal dhor deewanay Hu,
Mardan te namardan di kal tadan powsi, jaddan aashiq banehsan gaanay Hu,*
(The hearts which did not buy *Ishq* belong to the eunuch, the male who is female;
They will be called eunuchs by all, who would call them men;
Disordered, they wander in the streets like confused beasts in a forest;
The distinction between men and eunuchs will only be made when *Ashiq* (*the lovers*) would be
wearing wedding bracelets”)⁵⁶.

Baba Jan explained that this is an indication to the above *hadith* (tradition) of the Holy Prophet ﷺ distinguishing between the male and female and the eunuchs. Following the tradition, Baba Jan also gives the title ‘man’ only to the chronically loving soul, who gets the Divine Bride as the reward. Only *Talib-e-Maula* is truly a man, regardless of residing in female or a male body. Thus, it’s not the physical shape but the spiritual stature that gives you the rank of ‘*mard*’, the man of God.⁵⁷ It was left for all of the listeners to assess as to how many men were roaming around in the garb of women and vice versa.

He would sometimes ask a participant of the *mehfil* to bring the Holy Quran and ask him or her to read a certain verse or set of verses. Then he would explain how those verses needed to

⁵⁴ Annemarie Schimmel quotes this as a saying of Chishti Sufi Jama al-Din Hanswi in *As Through a Veil*, 155, instead of a hadith. However, it has been used and quoted as a hadith by many Sufis including Sultan Haq Bahoo. For detailed explanation, please see chapter one. Baba Jan believed it to be a hadith.

⁵⁵ Explanation of Baba Jan Sarkar, October 26, 2013

⁵⁶ Translation mine

⁵⁷ Personal conversation with Baba Jan Sarkar, October 27, 2013.

be inculcated in life to walk on the spiritual path. For example, explaining who was a ‘muzakkir’⁵⁸ - A man of God, whom the Holy Prophetﷺ has declared a man, he used further verses from the Holy Quran. Using the sacred references, for him, the men were those who reflected in the “creation of the heavens and the earth” and the apparent differences He created in things to look at them as ‘symbols’ of a deeper meaning for “men of understanding” who “remember God standing, sitting and reclining” (Surah Al-Imran 3:191), and “Men whom neither merchandise nor sale beguileth from remembrance of Allah and constancy in prayer and paying to the poor their due” (Surah an-Nur 24:37). His further indications of a real man loved by Allah was from another verse from the same chapter indicating, “Those who spend (freely), whether in prosperity, or in adversity; who restrain anger, and pardon (all) men; for Allah loves those who do good” (3:134, Al-Imran). None of the above and other references contain any indication of criteria of preference or superiority based on sex or gender.

3.2.1. What is Awrat (woman)?

When asked, what is a woman, Baba Jan promptly said, “*parday mein reh kar tarpanay wali hasti*”⁵⁹ (the one who torments by being veiled). Alluding to the Akbarian concept of ‘dhat’ being hidden and thus veiled to protect and shield its Beauty from common people⁶⁰, which inflicts great pain and distress to the heart of the seekers. Thus, at the physical level, if the male or female bodies were insignificant for gaining any spiritual favour, the tables were further turned when it came to the inner meaning. As indicated at another place in this thesis, a common title to describe women in Urdu is ‘*mastoorat*’. Literally, the one who hides is *mastoor* (veiled), and metaphorically, It is the One who has bewildered the entire universe by hiding as if “*saaf chhuptay bhi nahin, samnay*

⁵⁸ On these terms, detailed discussion has been provided in chapter three.

⁵⁹ Personal conversation with Baba Jan Sarkar, October 27, 2013.

⁶⁰ Personal conversation with Baba Jan on January October 27, 2013.

aatay bhi nahin (neither completely hiding, nor showing itself clearly). Thus, it was a matter of pride for women, the *mastoorat* (the veiled ones), to be regarded under similar taxonomy.

3.2.2. Woman: Half of a Man or Double?

Hearing a question regarding whether and why Bibi Ji Rabiah Basri was considered half a *qalandar*, he smiled and said, “No. She is not half; she is one and a half *qalandar* in herself. She is the mother of *qalanadars*”. Then he smiled more broadly and continued, “She is more than a *qalanadar*, and higher than any terminology could show her achievements. It is a misunderstanding and perhaps also a kind of bias against women’s spiritual achievements that some writers had, thus such things have gone into literature”.⁶¹

Later, repeatedly he considered Rabiah as an equal of any other *qalandar* and confirmed that within the spiritual realm, the question of gender and its interference with spiritual achievements was from the male or female characteristics adopted by men and women. And thus, if a woman attained a spiritual station, she would be as eligible to all spiritual fruits of that station as a man would at that level. Like a female pilot, or a female surgeon, or a female diver, once the person went through required training and attained a certificate of being a pilot, or a doctor or a diver, he/she would be equally eligible to do the respective job and earn the prescribed salary. A female pilot will not fly the airplane lower than the altitude where a male pilot will.

Like his Sufi predecessors, he used the term *mard* (plural *mardan* in Persian meaning men) to indicate the highest spiritual station that could be attained whereby the individual becomes so immersed with his beloved that two would become one. *Himmat e mardanan* (Urdu and Persian term meaning the courage of a man) indicated that kind of *himmat* (valour) that is

⁶¹ This was one of the first few questions the author asked Baba Jan as far back as in 1996. Later the same was asked by other people as well and he always maintained that Bibi Ji Rabiah Basri was even higher than a *qalandar*.

not just fearless but also inexorable enjoyed during the peak of youth. Like a young and brave heart would go after its desire relentlessly, he would ask his disciples to send trap only on God and nothing less that Most Desirable Entity should one set one's eyes on.⁶²

A story that Baba Jan often related was of the famous Sufi Abul Hasan Ali Kharqani. When someone went to meet him, his wife scolded the guest and abused her husband as well. When the same person saw Kharqani in a forest, he was amazed to see him riding on a lion and having a snake as a whip. The Sufi said, '*agar woh nah hota to yeh bhi nah hota* (if that did not happen, then this would not have happened as well). He repeatedly asked spouses to practise patience and tolerance if the other partner was like Kharqani's wife.⁶³ However, his teachings were both for men and women highlighting the virtue of patience and tolerance for an undesirable spouse. The point that was missed by Schimmel while mentioning this incident was that she looked at it as if this was used to depict women in Sufi literature. However, according to Baba Jan, this story serves for Sufis, either men or women to help them assess if they had a bit of Kharqani's wife in them. If they wanted to be like Kharqani, then they could not choose to be like his wife. Thus, the two set of personalities, the virtue of patience and dealing with abuse with love is the essence of this story for the seekers of the truth. He emphasised that dealing with abuse with unconditional love is a:

“Sunnah of our Holy Prophetﷺ. When people talk about Sunnah, they focus more on marrying four women and other things that they like. Why they don't talk about this and adopt this? If you want to be a true Muhammadan, you have to bless the abuser because Muhammad is equal to *muhabbat* (love).”⁶⁴

From the discourses and conversations, he had, it is difficult to give a verdict whether Baba Jan believed in gender equality or not, as is understood by modern gender debate. While trying to

⁶² Various conversations around these themes throughout 2009-2016.

⁶³ Personal Conversation with Baba Jan Sarkar, September 12, 2011. Also, the same incident is mentioned by Schimmel. For details see, Schimmel, *My Soul is a Woman*, 428.

⁶⁴ Personal Conversation with Baba Jan Sarkar, September 12, 2011.

analyse further, it seems like an irrelevant question for him. He did not deal with gender issues as gender issues. He dealt with them as spiritual perspectives. His thoughts started where gender analysis ended. The rules of a noble, spiritual and high-quality life were the same for both genders. It was not that he taught women and not men to practice sacrifice. It was also not that he told men and not women to lead and live a good life. For example, referring to his *Murshid-i-Pak*, he would say that “inside the house the man must be looked after by woman and outside the house, the woman has to be looked after by man.”

3.2.3. Husband – a *Majazi Khuda*?

A woman asked whether there is a *hadith* granting the man a rank of ‘*majazi khuda*’ (metaphorical God) for his wife. He said, “I am not a religious scholar. I don’t remember all *ahadith* by heart. It’s better to check this with a scholar.” When she showed concern over why would such a *hadith* exists. He answered,

“Apparently it means a husband is almost like a God for his wife. She should worship him, if allowed by religion. This is the part that people understand and promote as it benefits men. However, there is another meaning of this *hadith*. If the husband is *majazi khuda* (metaphorical God), the wife is the *majazi makhluq* (metaphorical creation). If he wants submission from her like God then he should accept that being his *majazi makhluq*, she deserves the same unconditional love and protection that God provides to His *makhluq*. He must fulfil her needs and desires just like God. If he can play that role, only then he should attempt to be a *majazi khuda*”.⁶⁵

3.2.4. *Jawanmardi* (Young-Manliness)

A synthesis of Baba Jan’s explanations on *jawanmardi*, given at various occasions and explained in personal conversations are as follows. For him, *Jawani* meant “eternal youth”⁶⁶, which was not possible at physical level. All bodies must transform from their tiny, small frames to their full

⁶⁵ Personal conversation with Baba Jan on January 11, 2010.

⁶⁶ Personal conversation with Baba Jan on January 11, 2010.

growth and then dwindle back to weakness and decay. Thus, for him, *jawan* was someone who was eternally young inwardly and had the same valour, perseverance and passion for his or her objectives as a young boy would have for his desires. He explained that since during the rising adolescence, the passions were at their height which boosted fearlessness, incessant craving and many a times even recklessness in a person for achieving his desire at any cost. The calculating faculty of rational mind to assess what was the price of a daring act is much weaker at that stage. Moreover, the augmentation of physical beauty of the bodily features, strength and posture is also most attractive at that stage. However, for an ordinary person, all of that happens at the physical level and they spend that energy and beauty in pursuit of their emotional or at best intellectual goals. The same attributes when used in the spiritual realm become priceless as each ounce of vigour and strength is utilized in the way of God.

A seeker of the truth is as attracted to God's beauty as a young man could be to the fancy of his heart. The indefatigability of the young age for seeking union with one's sweetheart remains intact throughout life at all ages when the effort is the search for the Divine Beloved.⁶⁷ Further, as indicated by Ibn Arabi, the divinity could appear as a handsome young man, as it did for him when he had his first *fath*. Thus, it is a symbol for divine Beauty and Majesty combined.⁶⁸

The famous Hadith on '*la fata illa Ali* (there is no young man save Ali), was explained in a unique way by him, though not in one single sitting. Thus, the summary of what he explained at various occasions is presented in the following. When Hazrat Ali was called a '*fata*', it was obvious that he would grow old and would not remain a young lad all his life and might become weaker in his physical strength. However, the saying of the Holy Prophet ﷺ holds forever and confirms that

⁶⁷ These thoughts were briefly touched upon by Baba Jan in a few conversations such as on January 12, 2010. However, the phrasing is added by the researcher.

⁶⁸ Addas, *Quest for the Red Sulphur: The life of Ibn'Arabi*, 25.

he will eternally remain a '*fata*' (a young man). It also means that whether Ali's chronological age would decline but his youthful manliness will not. He will remain as active, as powerful, as handsome and as chivalrous as a young man is at the peak of his youthfulness. How is it possible for someone at a physical level? It means that the hadith is about his spiritual or inner youthfulness that would not decay. So "being a '*fata*' is a state of the heart and not of body."⁶⁹ That way, it has nothing to do with someone being young or old or being male or female. Baba Jan's explanation is thus totally opposite to what traditional *futuwwat* concepts where women were simply not allowed because of their gender.⁷⁰

One way to keep that inner youthfulness and strength maintained is by using it for the benefit of others. Baba Jan explained that "physical energy gets dispensed by using. On the contrary, spiritual energy gets increased by using". Thus, it works under a reverse rule. Just like love begets love, spiritual energy begets more spiritual energy, power and strength only when used. Its "increase happens both in the person who spent it and the one who received it."⁷¹ Thus, it is a positive-sum activity. That is why, once a *salik* (traveller of the spiritual path) attains the status of '*fata*' at spiritual level, he or she would never become old. The same way that the Sindhi poet Sachal had said: '*Sachal, ishq Buddha nah theenda, bhawen chitti ho jaye darhee*' (O Sachal, true love never gets old even if the beard gets white).⁷²

However, not all young people walking on the spiritual path are '*fata*'. They might be young in age but they may be as tired, as weak and as timid in their spiritual health as a very old

⁶⁹ Personal conversation with Baba Jan on January 10, 2010.

⁷⁰ Personal conversation with Baba Jan on January 10, 2010.

⁷¹ Personal conversation with Baba Jan on January 10, 2010.

⁷² Personal conversation with Baba Jan on January 10, 2010.

person is at the physical level. Therefore, the word *mard*, *mardangi* and *jawanmardi* are all spiritual terminologies, which must always be used at that level.

3.2.5. The Reversal of Roles – When Men are Women and Women are Men

In Pakistani society, women are told to be humble, speak softly, sacrifice their desires, preferences and resources whenever needed and tolerate things to their utmost, especially after getting married. They are taught to be submissive in front of their husbands and in-laws. By nature and also by convention, they are supposed to be most compassionate and caring toward their children. Baba Jan explained them in this way:

“Are these not the qualities that a seeker of the truth needs to have? Whoever has humility, compassion, patience, tolerance [and] sacrifices self-interest is the true *jawanmard*. A man is not who can kill someone when he is insulted, but the one who can control his anger like Ali [the companion of the Holy Prophetﷺ] did. A man is not who beats his wife when she uses foul language, but the one who forgives and smiles back at her like the dervish [Kharraqani] I told you about. A man is not who has an excessive sexual desire but the one who has self-restraint like [Prophet] Youssuf. A man is not who is happy to know about the approaching death of his enemy but the one who sends him a doctor to treat him like Salahuddin Ayyubi.”⁷³

For him, the set of characteristics taught specially to women in our society was what was required for the students of *tasawwuf* whether men or women. The apparently feminine qualities are what make a spiritual wayfarer a truly spiritual person. However, if women had those characteristics, they would be ‘men’ as per the definition of the Holy Prophetﷺ. Likewise, if men did not have these characteristics, they would in fact be spiritually weak and undermined.⁷⁴

He also used to narrate the creation story in a very dramatic and romantic way. In a humorous style, he would make a sad face and put his head down to depict how Adam (A.S.) was sitting depressed one day when God asked him the reason for his depression. He did not tell God

⁷³ Personal conversation with Baba Jan, October 24, 2013.

⁷⁴ Further explanations shared in the above-mentioned sitting.

immediately but slowly divulged the depression was due to his loneliness. He was put to sleep and something was taken out of his body fashioned into separate existence. Next when he woke up, there was a beautiful being sitting next to him. He was amazed. That thing looked attractive and felt very close to his heart. He fell in love the moment he saw her. All his sadness disappeared. They were introduced and given to each other. He felt fulfilled only when she was with him and she felt happy only when he was near him. Because, they were truly a part of each other.⁷⁵ Through this story he would explain that since an Eve has been taken out of Adam, he became less than his original, complete self. Now in order to become complete again, each son of Adam needs to take one Eve back into himself [his heart]. Likewise, Eve came out of him so she is not complete as well. Each daughter of Eve, therefore, must find a way to enter back into her Adam's heart. Only then she would feel complete. Adam needs to love, protect and embrace Eve and she needs to immerse in him to fulfil him. Both are the essential missing part of each other.

3.2.6. Transcending Gender Boundaries through Language

Figuratively speaking, Baba Jan exercised a trans-boundary trade. He took one gender from within a set of respective boundaries and moved to the other side, both by words and actions. Urdu has gendered nouns while aligning verbs per gender. However, he did not use that system. "My lovely son or my brave boy,"⁷⁶ was Baba Jan's common address to all of his disciples disregarding gender. He spoke to and referred to all his disciples and even his family members by the masculine gender. For example, the question framed by him to both a male and a female disciple about where he or she was going was the same saying, "*aap kidher jata hai*",⁷⁷ in which the verb *jata* should have been '*jati*' for a woman per the standard grammatical rules. He was raised in Balochistan

⁷⁵ Various conversations in 2011, 2012 and 2013 with Baba Jan Sarkar.

⁷⁶ Personal observation of the author.

⁷⁷ Researcher's observation throughout the research period.

among *pathans* where Urdu was spoken like that since Pashto does not have the distinction of feminine and masculine gender unlike Urdu. He used that playfully and when anybody asked him why he used male gender for women too, he would normally blame his poor Urdu skills. However, it was not hard to discern that his use of masculine gender to all his disciples was due to a spiritual reason and not because he could not understand the grammatical requirements. Since all seekers of Allah have been defined as ‘men’ by the Holy Prophetﷺ, thus he preferred to call them as such as per that definition. Also, a *fata* (a brave boy) is the one who has the eternal youth due to ever-increasing spiritual strength, thus all men and women, old and young were ‘brave boys’.

Sometimes during gathering when men and women would be sitting in separate groups, he would point out to men and say, “all of these are women”, pointing out to their worldliness and sometimes, pointing out to women’s group, he would say, “and those are all men”, indicating their desire to seek God. Mainly his purpose was to help both men and women undermine their biological and sexual identity so that both could see that they could be each other. Being men or women was a changeable quality and thus he always tried to ensure that both genders understand that. No one is superior to the other as far as they are attached to their physical and mental states. Supremacy was only accessible through purity of mind that was the vehicle to take one beyond the entrenchment of gender in which society puts ones in.

Men of God would always refrain from ostentatiousness. Baba Jan used to narrate, quite poetically, “*Pehlay hai sajawat, phir hoti hai dikhawat, phir aati hai itrahat*” (first is adornment, then follows display [and] then comes conceit). These three strengthen the false notions of ego. The same message he also gave in another construction of rhyming words as, “*Pehlay zebayesh, phir numayesh, phir satayesh* (first, decoration, then ostentation and then admiration [occur]).

Once someone doesn't get the appreciation after all effort, it creates dissatisfaction and frustration. This in turn will force the person to get into more adornment and showing off, thus creating a vision cycle. He stressed:

“And any of this can be present both in men or women. It is not that only women like to display their beauty. Men also do, if not beauty, then their wealth or other possessions. For example, where a woman likes to show off her make-up, new gold bangles or a gold ring, I see many male patients showing off their expensive watch, or new shoes or a new car. Some people like to show off their good deeds. For example, sometimes people want to show-off their religious activities such as praying all night or giving money to poor people. Once a lady was advised to give away money in charity. She promptly said, ‘who is better than me in charity. I take care of orphans, poor people and give money to my relatives.’ First, she did not like the advice. Second, she could not keep her good deeds to herself. So, the desire to show off whatever one appreciates in oneself to gain more appreciation and recognition from others is equally present in both women and men. They just show off different things. The ego works in both the same way”.⁷⁸

“Embellishment of body or homes, pretentious talk and behavior, and intentional exhibition of physical beauty, wealth, status or power to gain praise or material benefits is highly injurious to spiritual health”, as they keep the person attached to the material world, he added when further inquired about aspects of ego and how they affect spiritual life.⁷⁹ Amir Khusrau (1253-1325), the originator of *qawwali* (devotional, spiritual music) and poet of seven languages had already mentioned the effects of exchanging glances with the beloved, and falling prey to the gaze of Grace (*nigah-e-karam*) in his famous *ghazal* saying “*chhaap tilak sab chheeni re mosay nena milayi ke*” (all my adornments taken away by just a glance of yours).⁸⁰ Thus, it is only natural to wash and get cleared of all external, artificial and formal exhibition of ostentatiousness under the heavy shower of love. Moreover, it also means a woman (seeker of the world) must get rid of ‘external embellishments’, which, in reality, means the focus on worldly or exoteric qualities. Thus, when a

⁷⁸ Baba Jan conversation with a group of men and women devotees, April 25, 2011

⁷⁹ Personal Conversation with Baba Jan, April 26, 2011.

⁸⁰ A famous verse from Amir Khusrau (1253-1325), who was a Sufi and a devotee of Hazrat Nizam ud Din Awliya of Delhi. He was a unique blend of a great musician, poet and a political dignitary who served as the chief advisor of several kings. He passed away after six months of his *shaykh*.

‘woman’ (seeker of the world) walks toward her Beloved (the Reality), her exoteric tilt melts away. Stage by stage, she moves beyond ‘*sifat*’ (qualities) to revolve around ‘*dhat* (the Essence)’⁸¹

The overall essence of the discussion around this topic was that in itself, masculine and feminine is neither good nor bad, neither higher nor lower than each other. They are the two mutually dependent, intrinsic and essential qualities that are complementary and harmonizing to each other. They are needed to complete each other. He referred to the Quranic verse⁸² explaining that women and men are a garment for each other. A garment means something to wear, adopt, use. It can also mean that they need to adopt each other’s qualities. “Women need to borrow masculine qualities such as bravery, courage, rational decision-making, while men need to borrow feminine qualities such as humility, submission, forgiveness, patience and service with love. In actuality, none of these qualities are masculine or feminine. They are just a set of dispositions that anyone can adopt or forgo. However, they have come to be known as that. This is only to explain things to the seekers of Truth. “The first stage toward becoming *al-Insan* (the Human) is to gain from each other and forgo what your ego loves”.⁸³ Being a garment also means protecting and honouring each other while adorning and adding to each other’s beauty and grace.

3.2.7. Baba Jan Sarkar’s Teachings about Trans-Gender Persons

He respected and appreciated trans-genders, unlike the general trend in Pakistani society that is extremely biased against *Hijras* and place them at the lowest ladder of social status.⁸⁴ Even if they earn more than many other ‘*kammis*’ (a derogatory word used for blue collared workers belonging

⁸¹ Personal Conversation with Baba Jan Sarkar, April 26, 2011.

⁸² *The Holy Quran*, 2: 187, Surah Al-Baqrah, “They are your garment and you, a garment for them”.

⁸³ Personal Conversation with Baba Jan Sarkar, April 25, 2011.

⁸⁴ A definition of *hijra* is: “...eunuch or hermaphrodite. The word *hijra* implies impotent and an inability to perform a male sexual role”... in Rehan, N.I. Chaudhary, and S.K. Shah, “Socio-sexual Behaviour of *Hijras* of Lahore,” *Journal of Pakistan Medical Association* 59, no. 6 (2009): 380-4, accessed May 25, 2012, [http:// www.jpma.org.pk/full_article_text.php?article_id=1719](http://www.jpma.org.pk/full_article_text.php?article_id=1719)

to so-called lower castes such as sweepers, barbers, cobblers, etc., they have never earned respect against any of the 'complete' male or female workers from any of these classes. A *hijra* stands much lower to the poorest woman of *kammis*. Baba Jan had forbidden his disciples to call them by the common derogatory terms like *hijra* or *khusra* that are given by the society. He would rather call them, '*Allah ke ji*' (a thing/life of Allah) without suspecting them to be either real or non-real *hijras*. He kept engaged with a few *hijras* of Jhang and would let them dance if they wished so in *mehfil* performing on a *qawwali* music occasionally. He always rewarded them with lots of money when they performed and sometimes cry while they danced. During the dance, he would stand up and shower money on them saying 'look at God's beauty in them, not at them'. He said that his *Murshid-i-Pak* had taught him to deeply respect them as God had kept them special. He would always stop driving if he would see them begging on the roads and would never leave without giving them some charity.

One trans-gender known by the name Baji Shajar⁸⁵ has been a regular visitor for the past thirty years and comes regularly once or twice a month to collect charity from Baba Jan Sarkar and later from his family and disciples. She says that the love and respect she received from Baba Jan and his disciples was unique. She mentioned that Baba Jan also looked after her '*guru* (mentor) *hijra* named Bijli. Once in 1970s, when she and Bijli went for Umrah, Baba Jan also went, and they met there. He took great care of them there. His caring and respectful behaviour had a big impact on Shajar.

Shajar, now in her fifties is suffering from diabetes and high blood pressure, would come and meet with all members of Baba Jan family and all disciples present. She earns more by

⁸⁵ A pseudo name is used for this sketch. All information provided in this sketch has been directly elicited from Shajar through various conversations over the years in 2011, 2012, 2013 and 2015.

collecting money from people she knew than dancing due to her poor health. However, she still talks about her old days and likes to present herself as a good dancer. Baba Jan allowed Shajar to dance when she suddenly appeared during a *mehfil* on Nov. 1, 2014 and wanted to perform on a *qawwali* in front of the gathering. She started breathing heavily after a few minutes and was just making a hard effort to move. As an observer, the researcher noticed that the dance did not seem pleasant or enjoyable in any way, still Baba Jan was getting up again and again and showered money on her. Looking at him, men and women present did the same. He also told her to take it easy and not tire herself too much. During the dance, many times, he would say loudly, “look who is dancing”. Shajar went away crying with happiness collecting more than ten thousand rupees in a few minutes, worth months of begging. Later when asked, Baba Jan explained that Shajar was permitted to dance mainly to boost her self-respect. She considered herself a great dancer, without realizing that it is hard for her now. However, by appreciating and giving money, he tried to enrich her heart not her purse. “A dervish focuses on who is dancing, what entity is making the body move, instead of focusing on body movements. If you are trapped in the bodily act, you fall. If you are engaged in the dance of soul, you soar higher.” He also said, “a *hijra* is not the one who is born deficient of sexual faculty. That is given by nature. It is he [she] who has no control over sexual desire. That [person] can be living in a healthy and complete body of a male or female.”⁸⁶

A synthesis of his conversations given at various occasions regarding *hijras* is as follows. A *hijra* is someone who delays a pleasure while thinking about and craving for the same in the hereafter. He is the one who spends money, time, effort not to buy God but his bounties such as beautiful women, good food, palaces and gardens – all the things that he shuns in this life while keeping his mind obsessed with those. *Hijras* are people who run after the “*makhluq*’ (creation)

⁸⁶ Personal conversation with Baba Jan Sarkar, November 1, 2014.

and not the '*khaliq*' (creator)." This way, he provided a clear explanation of the hadith mentioned above.

Like *Hijras*, prostitutes are also at the lowest ladder of social prestige. The mere word *tawaaif* (prostitute) is considered the most offensive derogatory term that one can throw on a woman. In a conservative area like Jhang the word prostitute is not even uttered in normal household. However, quite fearlessly, Baba Jan talked about them openly and respectfully. His main advice was not to look down on anyone due to their apparent condition. He narrated dozens of incidents of prostitutes being favoured by God despite their work that is so much abhorred by so-called honourable people. Honour was not in looking down on someone due to their vocation. True honour is contained in honouring the one that others consider devoid of honour. Giving love and respect to those that the rest of the society shuns away was his advice to and expectation from his disciples. He considered it the true Muhammadan way.⁸⁷

According to Baba Jan Sarkar, the true seeker of the Truth is who moves from the form to the formless and vice versa, all under the continuum of Absolute Being, the same is true in the question of gender. From gendered, limited, imprisoned identities of being men and women who can be only 'this or that' to a vaster, deeper and holistic identity, which is outwardly singularly gendered and inwardly supra-gender in the sense of going beyond the limitation of the biological or social roles determined by narrow definitions. It cannot be claimed that he originated most of

⁸⁷ Baba Jan often mentioned an incident of a prostitute who gave water to a thirsty dog in her shoe and was forgiven by Allah for that act of kindness. He also narrated similar acts of kindness, compassion and dedication from the lives of prostitutes in his discourses. Also, the tradition narrated about the Prophet ﷺ when he stood in the sun for a long time listening to a woman known as a lunatic and thus avoided by the entire community. The Holy Prophet left the discussion in the mosque with his companions and heard her apparently meaningless talk. When one of them asked him why he had to listen to a lunatic woman, he said, "nobody listens to this woman in the entire Madinah, should I be the same too?" Thus, using examples from the Holy Prophet's ﷺ life, Baba Jan taught the higher and more noble conduct that a Muhammadan should have.

the teachings he delivered. However, it can be confidently asserted that he practiced and exhibited a model of true Sufi life living the Qadiri and Akbari teachings to the core and also giving a laboratory to others to train themselves at *Astana-i-Pak* to learn and practice the same in their life. Thus, Baba Jan Sarkar sounded equally iconoclastic given the socio-religious settings in which he operated. If the great mystics such as Ibn Arabi or Ghauth Ali Shah wanted to see how their teachings have been faring in today's world, they would be perfectly at home with Baba Jan seeing him practically demonstrating what they propagated, practiced and lived.

سُنائے خاک سے تیری نمود ہے، لیکن تری ہر شت میں ہے گو کبھی ورتابی
جمال اپنا الرخواب میں بھی تُو دیکھے ہزار ہوش سے خوشتر تری شکر خوابی

It is heard that you came out of clay,
yet, your essence contains the light of heavenly bodies
if you see your true beauty even in a dream
that sleep would be far superior than keeping a long vigil

Poet: Baba Ji Allama Muhammad Iqbal

Translation: Author

Chapter 4

The Sober Drunk – Women, Love and Discipline

If Baba Jan Sarkar's life is encapsulated in one word, it is 'love'. This sounds like a cliché, and probably not fit to be used in an academic study. However, there is no other way to synthesize the analysis of conversations and narrations heard throughout the years of this study. Using the metaphor where Sufi poets have considered love as wine⁸⁸, those who love must get drunk. The narratives show that with Baba Jan's wine, taking one sip was enough to yearn for full inebriation. His love was so powerfully magnetic that it pulled and strongly attached hundreds of loving hearts to him. The Holy Prophetﷺ had stated that God loves humans much more than their mothers.⁸⁹ Since *Murshid-i-Pak* is the representative of godly love, Baba Jan Sarkar loved and cared for his disciples' many times more than a mother. While analysing data, it was surprising to see each one of the interviewees sharing a feeling as if Baba Jan loved her or him the most. They were all unanimous in believing that they had never seen or felt so much loved by anyone else in their life including their parents, siblings or life partners. They all reported that His love and care evoked such passion, devotion and gentleness in response that was unknown to them as if he had placed a new intensely loving heart in them that ached for more. In this chapter, the analysis of observations and conversations both with women and men is presented wherever a comparison was required to see dynamics of the spiritual master and tradition with both genders. However, a more extensive

⁸⁸ Wine as a metaphor of love and its effects as the metaphor for loss of egoistic control have been used extensively by Sufi poets. This tongue in cheek method to use apparently unholy and forbidden words for holy and noble feelings and experiences has been extremely popular across the globe in Arabic, Persian, Urdu and various other languages. The most famous qawwalis sung by Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan (*yeh jo halka halka suroor hai*); Aziz Mian (*mein sharabi*); Bahauddin (*mujhay hosh nahin*) are just a few examples of popularity and acceptance of this method. The researcher purposefully has used this metaphor since it has been used by Baba Jan Sarkar to explain some beautiful and deep messages of Sufi teachings.

⁸⁹ *Sahih Bukhari* hadith No. 5653, quotes Umar ibn Al-Khattab for a long *hadith* mentioned in the last chapter ending at "Allah is more merciful to His servants than a mother is to her child."

and deeper analysis is presented for women and their case studies to fulfil the lacuna in scholarship regarding the same.

4.1. The Path of Love or the Paths of Love?

All the research participants were walking on the path of love, however, that path had different tracks, peculiar and suitable for their specific spiritual and emotional constitution as far as their own personal spiritual development was concerned. When asked as to which the best way is to seek nearness to God, he said that there are very many ways to seek nearness to God. Although He is not far, however, if someone thinks so and wants to find Him, “*tau jitnay dil, utnay rastay*”⁹⁰(as many ways as there are hearts) seeking Him, he said smilingly. This reminds one of Bibi Ji Rabiah Basri who said that the “ways to God are as many as the believers.”⁹¹ Thus, all disciples, and here we are talking about women, had their own peculiar ways.

If this study was not based on hundreds of conversations and interview sessions over the course of years, it would have been impossible to understand how so many people, both men and women, could have such deep and intense love for their spiritual mentor. Their hearts were so immersed in and gilded by the light of love that each one of them glittered more beautifully than the other. By mere mental judgement, it was not possible to decide whom he loved the most and who amongst them loved him the most. When love reaches a certain level, it is beyond assessment. Thus, all of them achieved a state where their love had turned them into love itself.

All the research participants showed some common traits like dedication, commitment, trust in their spiritual master and compassion and humility. However, their inner paths toward spiritual accomplishments were different from each other. This chapter includes a few examples

⁹⁰ A personal conversation with Baba Jan Sarkar, 24 March 2009.

⁹¹ Smith, *The Life and Work of Rabia and other Women Mystics in Islam*, 32.

of such diversity and detailed description of select women's case studies are also provided to explain the point. Baba Jan gave women more time, more attention and more freedom than he did to most of his men disciples. He acknowledged and openly appreciated the additional effort women had to make to be on this path and thus responded keenly to support their spiritual needs and aspirations. Baba Jan had established a system where women can freely come, attend his spiritual gatherings and even stay at his place. To make it safe and convenient for them, he integrated them into his family life where all the women visiting him could freely interact with the women of his family (wives, daughters, sisters). Through, it meant having no privacy and his own time, he allowed women disciples to stay in his house. They ate, interacted and slept in the same rooms where his female family members did. This worked as a tremendous enabling factor for women to access Astana Pak and him freely. First, they felt 'safe'. Second, they felt honoured to be welcomed as a family guest and live under the same roof as the women of his family did. Third, living with his family meant seeing him in his real, personal life without any barrier, which was a learning *par excellence*.

His *Astana Pak* looked like an enormous family, or rather a global family-home. All visitors were welcomed inside the house at the sitting area. They could mix and mingle with his family members. Women were attended by women and men by his male family members. He encouraged women to bring their family members with them on visits so that they could meet him and see the environment. He did this to make their family members feel comfortable about the place and person their children or siblings were attending. It worked both ways. When the family of a woman or a man disciple met Baba Jan Sarkar, their trust enhanced in the path their loved one was following and thus brought more space and freedom for the disciple to walk on the path more freely and spend time with Baba Jan. However, women who did not have any family member to

accompany them for any reason, were also welcomed. There was no compulsion for them to necessarily bring a chaperon. Nevertheless, most of his disciples had introduced their parents, spouses and siblings to him which had created cordial relationships among his family and disciples.

4.2. Baba Jan Sarkar's Audience

There were women and men of all ages from young toddlers to old ones in their seventies. Some had graduate and higher degrees including doctorates. There were professors, heads of departments, university and school teachers, doctors, nurses, other professionals and educated housewives and businessmen. They were observed sitting next to illiterate men and women, farmers, plumbers, drivers, labourers and shoe makers. There was no discrimination either in the seating arrangement nor in the food served to them. All but those who had a medical need, used to sit on the floor next to each other eating the same dish, drinking from the same jug. Majority of women was married, who visited along with their husbands and children. But, unmarried, divorced and widowed women were also regular visitors. A good majority of the younger women from 20s to 40s were well educated. However, there was a wide range of middle-aged to older women, who either had little or no education. A small proportion of his disciples, both men and women, lived outside Pakistan such as in Saudi Arabia, England, UAE, Denmark, and USA. As noted above, disciples belonged to various socio-economic classes from blue collared labourers to high-salaried professionals. Thus, a truly mixed audience came to attend his *Mehfil-i-Pak*.

A striking feature of *Mehfil-i-Pak* was that Baba Jan was sought alike by highly educated, doctorate degree holders and illiterates; rich, socially esteemed and poor trying to meet ends; devout worshippers and nominal adherents of religion; men, women and children. What made him appeal alike to this diverse audience? The conversations with women and men revealed that the common thread binding all the above diverse and sometimes opposite audience was of love - his

deeply touching, very special and uniquely fitting love for each seeker. He was equally accessible and affectionate in his response to them disregarding their socio-economic status, religious, or sectarian affiliations, and gender identity and paid full attention whether they came to seek his blessings for worldly needs such as money, jobs or children or spiritual gains such as peace and *ma'rifat* (spiritual knowledge). On Friday evenings, on average 200-300 people from the nearby slums came only to have *Niaz Pak*⁹² served after *Isha* (night) prayer. Most of them were women and children, who were served the same food that was cooked for his devotees and family. The arrangement of Friday *Mehfil* and *Niaz Pak* had started around 1976 and continued throughout Baba Jan's life until June 2016.⁹³

4.3. Reasons for *Bayt*

Baba Jan believed *bayt* could be done in many ways. However, he generally conducted it through a formal proclamation of certain statements by holding both hands of the aspirant *murid* (the initiate). He conducted *bayt* exactly in the same manner both for men and women. There were various reasons described by women and men to associate themselves with Baba Jan Sarkar, or more precisely, to ask him for *bayt*. Below is an attempt to have a grasp of some main reasons.

Many women came with the head of the family such as their husbands or fathers, since they were already a devotee. Following their footsteps, they also wanted to do *bayt*, initially, to get his blessings but slowly became more passionate about following his teachings and inculcating his spiritual values. Younger men who came with their elders had similar reasons, but mature men had a mind of their own. They would ask for *bayt* only if they wanted to, disregarding any family

⁹² Devotional, free food distributed to celebrate, invoke or share blessings

⁹³ The *Mehfil-i-Pak* has continued without any break at his shrine even after his physical departure under the leadership of his sons – Bhaai Jan Abdul Rauf and Bhaai Jan Abdul Quddus. Like all great *Awliya Allah*, his *faiz* (blessings and benediction) continues to flow continually without fail. Both his sons are very dedicated and along with other family members and devotees are serving with love and sincerity to all who come to visit.

inclinations. There were families who visited him regularly, however, their sons or some male members did not have their *bayt* with Baba Jan due to his unconventional ways. Spouses of some disciples did not have *bayt* at all with anyone or would choose another spiritual master. There was no compulsion that spouses of his disciples must have *bayt* with him.

Some of the visitors included men and women, who preferred to see more expression of *sharia*-based activities and thus could not adopt Baba Jan's teachings, which they felt did not have enough stress on *sharia*. They criticized him for various things such as giving women too much freedom, not participating in congregational prayers and not forcing his disciples to do the five-times ritual prayers. They also did not like use of music in *Mehfil* especially playing *bhajans* and other 'non-Muslim' stuff. However, the most irritating part for such people, per the conversations with their mothers and sisters, was the pronounced and active role of women at *Astana-i-Pak*, which they did not approve of. They could simply not accept men and women sitting together in *mehfil*, openly asking questions about spiritual matters and women having Baba Jan's attention. One businessman from Faisalabad who came to visit him on insistence of his wife said to her, "*utho chlain, hamaray paas in khurafat ke liay waqt nahin hai* (let's leave, we don't have time for such absurdities) and never returned.

However, there were many more who did. Women and men had a wide range of reasons to seek *bayt* with him. Baba Jan did not accept people for *bayt* quickly. Whenever someone requested, he would ask him or her to take more time and reconsider the decision. He would also advise the seeker to look around his home town, meet other spiritual leaders and ensure to check if he may find someone better than him. Sometimes people had to wait for years until he agreed.

Apart from those who became devotees through some family connection, many came through their friends or got to know about him by word of mouth. Baba Jan never advertised

himself. He never allowed to actively seek disciples by any kind of invitation. He actively denied placing posters outside his *Astana* for advertising purpose to invite people for *Urs*, although, this was a trend in Jhang and other cities. When the internet became common, someone asked him to have a website about him, which he declined. He preferred the traditional ways and did not believe in having large number of disciples as a mark of spiritual success.

A major category of his disciples was of those who were looking for a genuine Sufi master purely for their spiritual training and had been searching for years⁹⁴. Once they met Baba Jan, their search ended. Similarly, some of those seekers were directed by the sub-conscious mind or unseen messengers where through a dream or a spiritual unveiling, his name or face was revealed to them. Many men and women were directed by other living *Pirs* or Sufis who advised some of them to go to Baba Jan. Some local *Pirs* had asked their sons and families to seek *bayt* with Baba Jan Sarkar instead of themselves. Still more were those who had the same direction from a deceased Sufi master in a vision. For example, one man came looking for him after he was advised by Baba Ji Bu Ali Qalandar (1209-1324 CE) when he went to India to visit his shrine in late sixties. While at the shrine, Baba Ji Bu Ali Qalandar appeared to him in a vision and instructed him to return home and look for a Sufi master named Dr Muhammad Youssuf Shaheen and showed him his face.⁹⁵ Another interesting category was those who sort of bumped into him at an airport or a wedding or a shop and would request to speak to him or ask him to pray for them. The researcher witnessed these numerous times while travelling with Baba Jan Sarkar that passing through an airport or other places, someone would come and request to talk to him.

⁹⁴ The author of this thesis is also one of them.

⁹⁵ Nov. 14, 2012. He said the person came looking for him in his medical college. Baba Jan was very young at that time and the person who was sent by Bu Ali Qalandar was much older than him. He insisted on *bayt* as was the instruction from the Qalandar.

A profound experience was at Makkah, inside the holy Mosque in front of the *Ka'bah*, when the author was accompanying Baba Jan and his group in June 2014. On his return from the circumambulation area next to *Ka'bah*, a woman came over to Baba Jan. She neither knew Urdu nor English but was insisting to talk to him. With the help of an Arabic translator, she explained that his pull was so strong that she had to leave what she was doing (probably the circumambulation) and follow him. After some discussion through the translator, she asked to take his picture in her camera and then left. Another interesting incident shared by the wife of a doctor and a senior-level government official from Quetta. Her husband had been interested in parapsychology for a long time. He had an innate capacity to deal with beings of unseen world. She had seen various instances of unseen entities moving in her house, putting things from here to there and playing with her children. One day in a gathering of those unseen beings, one of the *djinn*s (genie) advised her husband to look for Dr Muhamad Youssuf Shaheen and request him for *bayt*. He also gave some more indications on how to find Baba Jan. When the doctor was asked, he said, he acted upon the advice immediately and travelled from Quetta to Punjab to look for Baba Jan.⁹⁶

Another route that women had toward Baba Jan was of tribulation. Loss of loved ones, conflicts among family members, desire to have a baby, or sickness became a blessing in disguise when it brought them to him. For men, it was mostly monetary loss, need for an employment, or disappointment in a love affair. They came to ask him for his blessings to get them out of trouble or fulfil their need and realized that there was something bigger available than just a prayer-making service. Some of the peculiar cases include a lady who came to get her cousin saved from death sentence due to committing a murder; a family came to save their son suffering from blood cancer; a woman who came to get his son back who had disappeared; a man from Saudi Arabia who needed

⁹⁶ The study does not mention any further details of the person or details of his location for the sake of anonymity.

help against unseen entities who did not let him sleep; a man from Karachi who had received a death waning and was being chased by his political opponents; a family whose daughter was possessed by an evil spirit; a number of men and women who were suffering from some disease; a few *Wahhabi* (Muslim sect who do not believe in the sanctity of Sufism) men who came to convince him of his wrong ways; and a local gangster who was used and paid by some local group to kill Baba Jan for being a heretic and a lover of women. Thus, one can see a long range of incidents, reasons and chances that brought people in touch with him. However, this is not an exhaustive list. These are just some of the cases mentioned who came and then could not return as the same person. They either became his friends or his devotees.

4.4. Baba Jan's Jhang – ‘*Majma al-Bahrain*’

Jhang, is a small city of Southern Punjab, can be easily named *majma al-bahrain* (the confluence of two oceans). Love and hate, fertility and salinity, filthy rich land lords and hand to mouth farmers, Mai Hir and Sultan Haq Bahu of the Love clan and sectarian based hate-mongers live side by side in Baba Jan's Jhang. There are so many paradoxes. One wonders at this mix of opposites as Southern Punjab is teeming with great Sufi masters spread all over Jhang, Multan, Bahawalpur and Uch Sharif. Particularly, Hazrat Sultan Haq Bahu's shrine is situated in district Jhang. However, along with the sweet and love-filled couplets of Bahu, the air of Jhang also throngs with slogans of hatred and bigotry. There have been unbridged schisms between Shias and Sunnis that have been the reason for the city's sectarian violence since 1980s. The land-owning upper class, also active in politics, has not been able to care for and address the issues of Jhang's common man.⁹⁷ In the recent past, Jhang has been more famous for militant groups like Lashkar-i-Jhangvi,

⁹⁷ Hamza Hasan, "From the Pulpit to Ak-47: Sectarian Conflict in Jhang, Pakistan", *Pakistan Journal of History and Culture*, Vol. XXXII, No.2 (2011), -7-87; and Tahir Kamran, "Contextualizing Sectarian Militancy in Pakistan: A Case Study of Jhang." *Journal of Islamic Studies*, Vol. 20, No. 1 (2009): 55–85.

and Sipah-i-Sahabah and religio-spiritual leader-cum-politician like Tahir ul-Qadiri belong to Jhang.

In such a complex milieu, Baba Jan held his spiritual gatherings for almost half a century. He had an open-door policy. Anybody could come, any time. The *mehfil* was open not just to all sects and all classes but also to all religions. Along with his regular mehfil for the seekers of Reality, he happily included other groups, which were not a part of his spiritual audience. Young and mature, educated and uneducated, urban and rural, rich and poor, simple and fashionable, all kinds of women and men were included in the audience when he played movies, songs or documentaries about other religions. Uneducated farmers of Jhang and doctoral degree holders all watched and listened to whatever he played with utmost respect. Baba Jan used to say often, “*Jhang ne is faqir ko bohat piyar diya hai*” (Jhang has given this *faqir* a lot of love). When asked why did he show movies and documentaries to an audience that might not understand their significance or might create an issue for him. He answered in his characteristic simple way, “*kyunkeh Allah aik hai. Hum to bas itna hi janta hai. Yehi hum dekhta hai. Yehi hum dikhata hai*”⁹⁸ (Because, God is one. This is all we know. This is what we see and this is what we show). Truth is so simple and so powerful. A heart full of such wisdom becomes fearless. He proved that. Living and hosting gatherings of hundreds of people every week playing the songs of love, oneness and compassion amidst the pools of hatred and violence, he had created an oasis of peace and love. “*I feel I have entered another country, a celestial one, as soon as I enter the gate of Astana-i-Pak*”, echoed one devotee.⁹⁹

4.5. Women and Men and the Idea of Love

⁹⁸ A personal conversation with Baba Jan.

⁹⁹ A personal conversation with Baba Jan.

In that oasis, whoever entered, fell in love with the idea and expression of love. The idea that was given life and turned into a desirable ideal through his behavior and character. Love is dangerous. It attracts, and it detracts too. Baba Jan's charismatic pull that served as the only reason for his disciples, both for men and women, was a curious case to observe in this regard. If women are stereotyped to be sentimental by nature and could fall prey to their emotional needs of love, what was the case with men? Listening to thousands of conversations between Baba Jan and his men disciples, out of which 250 were analysed for the sake of this research, there are strong indications of similarity in the expression of their love for Baba Jan. Both men and women looked at him as their most beloved entity.

The analysis shows that the net of love that a *faqir* casts on Allah to catch Him¹⁰⁰ worked obviously more effectively for His creation. The observations regarding how men responded to Baba Jan's charming ways showed similar results. For instance, a young man who looked in early twenties requested him for *bayt*, when Baba Jan asked why he wanted to do, he promptly replied, “*khyunkeh, mujhay aap se muhabbat ho gayi hai*” (because, I have fallen in love with you). One of Baba Jan's wife, who was sitting at the back heard this and later told Baba Jan, “how sweet the boy sounded. I fell in love with the way he said to you that he loved you. What else could justify a *bayt* than this?”¹⁰¹ Another man from Faisalabad, in his fifties, married, with children, with a long white beard got up and started dancing on a *qawwali* when the *qawwal* sang, ‘*mein aggay sonhray yaar de nachan*’ (I dance in front of my charming beloved)¹⁰². Many other older men,

¹⁰⁰ Referring to a quote by Baba Jan mentioned in chapter three under the theme of *ishq*.

¹⁰¹ Narrated by Mummy Ji, Baba Jan's youngest wife, Feb. 2010 (date missing)

¹⁰² The researcher witnessed this at an *Urs* celebration in Faisalabad and also in Jhang many times when mature, well educated, white-bearded, serious looking men were beside themselves and danced in front or around Baba Jan. There were fewer women who had the tendency to become ecstatic. Baba Jan didn't prefer this but didn't stop people either. To teach people gain more spiritual depth to absorb blessings, he used to say, “*jo zara si pi ke behak gaya, usay mekaday se nikal do*” (the one who becomes unsober after a few sips, should be shown the way out of the tavern).

including a very short, petite man in his sixties, always kissed Baba Jan on both his cheeks while tears flowing from his eyes. A young man from Faisalabad, in his thirties, would always place his head in Baba Jan's lap for a minute or two before saying good bye. Baba Jan would sit quietly, stroking his hair as if he was a young child in the lap of a mother, while his eyes closed. These gestures are mentioned to indicate that the expression and intensity of love was not much different among the two sexes. In front of Baba Jan, young or old, men or women, they all behaved more like innocent children craving for their mother's love. They did not seem to behave as a man or a woman. They all looked the same.

Out of many things unbelievable or unsolvable, one was Baba Jan's dedication toward people's telephone calls. A constant ringing of telephone bell at *Astana-i-Pak* was a usual observation until three or four in the morning. He responded to each one of telephone calls, without fail. He spoke so sweetly and keenly with each one of them as if he was waiting for that precise call. It felt like a meditation in itself to listen to those calls. He refused to switch off his phone at night even when some of his family members suggested so for the sake of his health.

Baba Jan had a set routine of having a light snack or drinking a cup of milk around 0300 am. When that time came, he would send someone to check guest rooms to look for those who were awake and call them to share that snack or have a glass of milk along with him. After that, he would isolate himself for '*tanhaai*' (solitude) in his room. He used to go to sleep after the call for morning prayer until around ten in the morning.

Watching how he conducted *bayt* ceremony with men and women was very interesting. He did it in many ways but a general, common pattern was by holding both hands of the aspirant murid and reciting certain statements that the other person repeated. There was no difference in those statements apart from use of name of Bibi Ji Fatimah for women and Hazrat Ali for men. Women

and men got similar *adhkar* (sing. *dhikr* – invocations) and similar exercises such as fasting for 90 days from gossip; blaming people; getting angry etc. later, as per their progress, their spiritual exercises were changed. Upon arrival, both (men and women) either hugged him and kissed his hands or face or forehead. He kissed them back on their foreheads. All present, whether men or women, were invited to have food with him. All present sat together in *mehfil*, in a mixed manner when it was inside his house. During the Friday gatherings, because of a larger gathering of over 500 people, they sat in a big hall built for that purpose, with a wooden partition between men and women. On certain occasions, over a 1000 people attended the Friday *mehfil*. Both men and women could ask questions openly during gatherings. They all could call him on his land line or cell number anytime of the day or night without any restriction for advice. There was never any discrimination observed that he placed among men and women in accessing, inquiring or sharing his life.

4.6. Women’s Transformative Journeys as Devotees

A conclusion shared by women disciples collectively and strongly was that they had progressed from one state to another in a profound manner. There were interesting and enlightening reactions about their spiritual states. All women recognized to have changed for better. They were courageous enough to admit their personal and emotional issues, narrow mindedness and insecurities with which they came. They were unanimous in acknowledging that becoming a disciple on the spiritual path helped them learn to deal with their emotional or psychological weaknesses. Let us have a look at a few cases of transformation.

A primary school teacher started visiting Baba Jan in late seventies as a patient and later became a disciple. She regularly visited him in the hospital almost daily until 2016. Although suffering from multiple medical issues, one did not see her complain. She had no advanced

academic degree but slowly gained a lot of knowledge and spiritual depth from Baba Jan Sarkar. Her long association and dedication served her well and she advanced in spiritual learning. Once someone was talking about the heat and the need for rain. She was sitting nearby. Baba Jan said to her why don't you try to bring rain. She agreed to do so. She told later that people should be ready for rain in the evening. It was scratching hot but rained exactly at the time she had indicated. When it suddenly rained at the given time, Baba Jan smiled broadly and said, "This blow was definitely struck by her".

There are other women such as '*pari*, (lit. fairy), who came to *Astana-i-Pak* just to pass time well and got fully immersed. She met with Baba Jan Sarkar in 1997. Her husband has been going to Baba Jan for a couple of years already but never told her. He thought she wouldn't understand. She had three children when she sensed that her husband started coming very late. She would wait from him for hours every night but he would neither tell her where he was nor would pick up her phone. She suspected he was getting interested in another woman. Some nights, when the power went off for long hours, she would become very afraid and along with her three children would sit in the lawn wrapping all three in a big shawl along with her and kept waiting for him trembling in pitch black darkness. When she insisted to him that if it is another woman, she would not mind if only he admitted, he divulged. She was relieved that it was some Baba and not another woman who had been giving company to her husband. Those days, the cell phone had not arrived yet. He gave her Baba Jan's land line number so that in case of an emergency, she could call him. One night again in sheer fear, she called him on the landline. Baba Jan Sarkar himself picked up the call. She asked about her husband and said to him, "you have stolen my husband away from me". He laughed and said, 'do not worry, I will return him to you after refining'. However, more than the words, it was something about Baba Jan Sarkar's voice that touched her the most. He

spoke so sweetly and sounded so genuinely sincere, as if she knew him more than her husband. She started asking her husband as to what happens there and requested him to take her to meet with Baba Jan too.

Belonging to a rich natal family from Rawalpindi and married to a doctor, she had a comparatively posh lifestyle and modern outlook. She did not observe purdah nor even covered her head. He declined her request saying you are too modern to adjust in that environment. Women who had seen around Baba Jan had a very simple outlook and wore plain, simple dresses. While she loved to keep herself updated with current fashion and make up. He said if you want to go there, you will have to change your style. Now she declined, saying, 'I wouldn't like to go looking like someone I am not'. The case was closed but not the curiosity. Her thirst to see Baba Jan increased. Finally, she could convince her husband to take her pleading that she also wanted to spend time in an enjoyable way rather than waiting for him alone. She came to save her love and herself found a new love. Without noticing, she became part of the daily mehfil. She did not like household chores and in a few months found herself making tea and cooking huge pots for hundreds of people. Her subtle transition was not noticeable even to herself until her natal family told her that she had become 'weird'. However, she refused to learn any deep mystical philosophy and asked Baba Jan not to give her nay difficult exercises. She adopted only one thing and that was unconditional love. She was given the tile of *pari* (female fairy) by Baba Jan and her husband was *parizad* (male fairy). She said she was not interested in knowledge. She felt so much love in hear heart that she only wanted to gain that further. Baba Jan gave her special attention. Over the years, she was completely transformed into a very loving, caring and compassionate person. Her dealing with her relatives who criticize her, her family and everyone else around was based on unconditional love. Training her in use of loving compassion, she was given a tough assignment

of consoling a man whose son had been kidnapped. He was completely devastated. In consultation of her husband, she led and conducted that duty religiously over many months. Not only the devastated father was comforted but in a few months the boy returned home safely. Her high spiritual vision and unparalleled love is exhibited in her behaviour. No one can remain untouched by her innocent and sweet communication. She is an amazing embodiment of Baba Jan's message of love¹⁰³.

One of Baba Jan's sister from Lahore also achieved prominent spiritual status. A simple but graceful lady she is, who has been conducting the Mehfil-i-Pak for over forty years at her place and continues to do so. A mother of five, she had to lose her young daughter suddenly and later her husband too. However, none of these losses took away her strength and serenity. Along with many fine qualities such as patience, humility, serenity, generosity, a unique character she has is her preference to speak in the masculine gender, using most of the words and phrases used by Baba Jan Sarkar. One can see that she has tried to wrap herself in his shadow and thus has entered the supra-gender realm in a unique way where even her language and behaviour has been transformed. Another sister, Baibo Ji, who spent most of her life in Saudi Arabia has a class of her own. Her wonderful sense of humour and positivity had earned her a special place. She is immersed in Baba Jan's love so much that one can clearly see her reflecting the same. Likewise, his eldest sister is nothing more than love and sweetness bundled into one. Being the next to Baba Jan, she had innumerable memories from childhood and is always willing to share stories and songs that she used to sing along with Baba Jan. With a severe and chronic case of arthritis, she can hardly move but none has ever heard a word of complaint. Her talk is always "rehmat" and so is she. A sister

¹⁰³ Multiple conversations with Pari between 2008-2016.

who has served the academia all her life and was initially not inclined toward spiritual teachings has completely transformed over the years.

Another gifted woman from Jhang is who has known Baba Jan since the time he moved to Jhang in 1967. She and her husband were daily visitors and among the first few friends and disciples of Baba Jan Sarkar in Jhang. She was the one who recognised Baba Jan's magnetism and felt there was something special in his eyes beyond this world. She shared this with her husband and a couple of other friends who had met him too. She was included in all the gatherings of that small group that included her husband and three other men. She was even part of the night vigils and gatherings Baba Jan Sarkar had at a nearby graveyard late at night. She is among the women who were also given the *dastar* (turban). Although, she is a great speaker and a regular visitor at *Aastana-i-Pak*, she did not feel the need to adopt a masculine communication style. She speaks using the feminine gender for herself. It shows that Baba Jan did not force a certain communication style to break gender barriers. He left it to each individual to adopt his teachings and way of life according to their own choice and preference.

Another prominent woman disciple is a well-known lady doctor of Jhang. Belonging to a wealthy and well-known family of Jhang had to face many challenges when she started visiting Baba Jan as some members of her family resisted vehemently. However, she continued to visit. Her transformation was visible from a snooty, highly embellished lifestyle to a more mellow one taking care of each patient with love and compassion.

Devoted, quiet and smiling is Devi J. She started talking to Baba Jan when her brother, who was a medical student, became mentally unstable. While consulting many doctors and *Pirs*, he was also taken to Baba Jan. More than medical treatment, the family saw returning their brother from a severe mental disorder to a normal life. Over a few years, Baba Jan convinced him back to

join his studies. He is now a successful doctor. However, that transformation brought the entire family close to Baba Jan. Devi Ji did not know a single thing about Sufism and could hardly understand Baba Jan's conversation. Initially, for many months, she was noticed saying, "I don't understand a thing but come to see Baba Jan. That is enough for me". She was a soft-hearted, emotionally fragile woman who could not tolerate any harsh word from anyone. Over the years, she gained amazing strength. She took responsibility of cleaning up the meditation place. Many a times, her husband and children also started helping her. It was a huge space and she had never worked so hard at home. She told the researcher, "I believe cleaning this place is helpful in cleaning my heart. When I light the lamps, I believe that one day it will help light a lamp inside my heart"¹⁰⁴. The entire family of Devi Ji, including her husband, sisters and brothers, even their children excel in *adab* (spiritual etiquettes) and devotion.

A newcomer, in her mid-30s, mother of three girls aged around seven, ten, twelve years, who entered his *bayt* during the time of this research, shared why she came.

"I noticed changes in my husband's behaviour. He became more kind to us but also a bit aloof. He would sit alone at night quietly with closed eyes. He has started listening to qawwalis, which he never did earlier. I got curious. I asked him, but he did not tell me. After a few months passed, I asked again and then he told me about Baba Jan. then I got worried. What if this was a fake Baba trying to tell my husband false things. So now I insisted to meet him. Next Friday when my husband returned, he said Baba Jan had asked him to bring over his family some time. So, he had to bring us. Me and three girls. When I entered the area where mehfil-i-Pak is conducted, I felt something sweet. And when I met him, all my doubts were resolved. Now each Friday, I and girls keep keenly waiting for him to come home and bring us to Jhang"¹⁰⁵.

In a matter of months, she became an enthusiastic devotee, running around at *Astana-i-Pak*, helping in many chores and trying to learn things from other disciples that Baba Jan said or liked. In a couple of years, her name was changed. Everyone started calling her with her new name, which she loved taking it as an indication of spiritual advancement. When she first came, she had

¹⁰⁴ Various discussion with the devotee named Devi between 2013-2016

¹⁰⁵ Personal Conversation, devotee R, June 15, 2013.

doubts about the entire realm of *tasawwuf* but quickly she understood the system, significance of *Murshid*, importance of *mehfil*, devotional music, and had transformed into a new person.

Looking at the above case, one can analyse it in different ways. It is possible that she became influenced by the environment of *Astana-i-Pak*, exuding so much love. All her outward actions showed her interest in the path. She kept roaming around Baba Jan whether her husband was around or not. She started cooking a small, sugar-free meal sometimes for him. She worked in the *langar* (alms-kitchen) and washed dishes for the Friday gathering. All these changes happened over a few months. This also shows that love spreads quickly.

One of the women in her mid-30s, visiting from USA, told that she got involved in a business conflict which turned into a legal issue for her. When she told her mother, she advised to get blessings and prayers of a spiritual person to help her get out of trouble. They were told by a family friend about a famous *Pir* in Multan (three hours away from Jhang, a famous city of Punjab). Along with her family members, when she went to visit him, Pir Sahib declined to see her. They were told that *Pir* Sahib has veiled himself from women and does not talk to any woman. The young lady felt very disappointed. Finally, when one of her brothers recommended to go to Baba Jan, she was determined that if he would not speak to her, she would never again go to any so-called spiritual person. For her meeting Baba Jan was a pleasant surprise when he met the entire family warmly. He laughed at the news that another *Pir* Sahib observes *purdah* (veil) from women but advised them not to judge that person negatively.¹⁰⁶

The study acknowledges that not all women and men came to find God or for higher purposes. Reasons for *bayt* have been discussed elsewhere in this chapter. Where most people tried

¹⁰⁶ Conversations with the devotee between 2013-2014

to gain a higher vision from Baba Jan, some did not. They came to see him as a routine and did not seem to have changed much over the years. Their negative worldview and relationship with the people stayed the same. A couple of them were found under the impression that they have achieved something higher. Baba Jan constantly warned against these traps of ego. Once a person boasted of having a high spiritual achievement, Baba Jan said, “If someone had achieved or witnessed something special, he or she will not go boasting about it.”¹⁰⁷ People with true spiritual attainment, tend to be humbled by the experience and prefer to keep it to themselves. It is only an amateur or self-aggrandizer who would say something like this. Doubting their own states was also seen in a couple of women. After having a *kashf* (personal revelation) or a noble dream or some other achievement, a few women were always sounded unsure. They would question, “how come it happened to me. I am the lowest of the low, perhaps I am just under an impression.”¹⁰⁸ Women used to share their dreams more than men. However, it was difficult to ascertain their depth or credibility. As captured by psychologists:

“Experiences beyond ego are inherently difficult to research. They leave no evidence other than the reported memory of the one who had them. Scepticism is certainly warranted regarding the reality of this type of encounter. Not infrequently, I have an experience and later, when the feeling has subsided, even I doubt its validity. My ego dismisses it as unreliable and ultimately useless.”¹⁰⁹

Interestingly, there are many illiterate or little educated women with extremely high and deep understanding of spiritual life. Instead of their words, their actions and deeds speak of their achievement in supra-gender realm with a great focus on their spiritual states not indulging into vain talk or unnecessary discussions. They seem doing chores, sweeping, scrubbing, washing dishes or clothes but are one with the one. They are the secret super-heroes of Baba Jan’s world.

¹⁰⁷ Personal Conversation with Baba Jan, April 06, 2011

¹⁰⁸ Interview with a devotee, 21 Feb. 2015

¹⁰⁹ Jennifer Clements and Maine Vinalhaven, “Organic Inquiry: Toward Research in Partnership with Spirit”, *The Journal of Transpersonal Psychology*, Vol. 36, No. 1 (2004), 32.

When women were asked why they think some Sufis do not let women come near them, gave interesting answers including the following. Some, not fully mature Sufis may be afraid of their own weakness for attraction toward women and thus might take women as a threat against their spiritual earning. Others, who do not have personal fears, may have social ones. If a Sufi is too closely involved with women, many would suspect his intentions and might tarnish his and his visitors' reputation. So why take risk? Third, there have been instances where fake *Pirs* have abused innocent, devotional women for their own personal desires, thus many women and their families feel insecure to go to *Pirs* where they would be expected to spend too much time at his house or perform an active role.¹¹⁰

In recognition of the above challenges, having a spiritual mentor, who was not defeated by any of the above was a great boon. Baba Jan Sarkar dealt with women as if they were not women. He did not discriminate in favour or against them. He just created a space where they could operate and interact with him and each other openly. He gave the same freedom to men. However, witnessing this equality was a remarkable sight. He had an unbelievable ability to pay his fullest attention to each disciple. However, he helped and supported those more who were falling prey to conceitedness, ego-boosting or self-negation. He gave special attention to those under any of these spiritual sicknesses without pinpointing. Noticeably, everyone could see the positive difference that the person accomplished.

There were so many women shining with spiritual light that it would take hundreds of pages to mention each one of them. Some very young in age but mature in spiritual understanding and some old and highly well versed with spiritual knowledge. Age was not a mark of spiritual

¹¹⁰ Various discussion with a number of devotees around this topic in 2011.

maturity. Youngsters excelled too. A young girl from Jhang was an example where she looked after Maan Ji lovingly and visited her daily after Baba Jan, which was a huge support for Maan Ji. When her father suddenly passed away, she dealt with it so calmly that everyone was amazed at her patience and grace. Another young teacher of a local private school along with her sister and brothers visited Baba Jan daily in his clinic. She has gained very deep understanding of spiritual life and is a mentor for her siblings and friends. Likewise, some children seemed to excel in spiritual light and maturity more than adults.

Overall, the study findings indicate that most, if not all, women who regularly came to attend *mehfil i pak* transformed into more mature, wiser, calmer, more patient and tolerant persons. They learned and adopted forgiveness and managed their routine life responsibilities more lovingly and hence enjoyed life better. Their relationships with their husbands, children, families and professional colleagues became healthy and supportive. They practically adopted spiritual insights that resulted in a happier and more enjoyable and contented life. This was a common impact that an overwhelming majority shared.

4.7. Women's Role at *Astana-i-Pak*

The following section provides an overview and analysis of women's role at *Astana-i-Pak*. However, in order to do so there are two juxtapositions considered. First, the cognizance of women's role vis-à-vis men's role at *Astana-i-Pak*. Second, an attempt is made to analyse their role with regard to the role that is mentioned and captured by various writers about medieval Sufi women, since they have been mostly captured by medieval as well as modern writers. A juxtaposition will help in understanding how far these two roles have been different or similar.

“A food fit for elephants cannot be given to ants”¹¹¹ was stated by Hasan Basri for talks fit for Rabiah and not for others. Likewise, not all hearts are capable to deal with love and its pain, intoxication and resultant transformation. The earliest and most valuable account of Sufi women by al-Sulami gives a good detail of their role in the medieval times. Below, there is an attempt to see how the also, writers like Schimmel, Cornell and Helminski¹¹² have made excellent attempts to paint a picture in front of us of the role that can be discerned from the accounts of early writers of Sufism and their mention of women Sufis. Since this is not a place to focus on the historical role of Sufi women, the following section focuses on the role of women played at *Astana-i-Pak*. Wherever possible, it is compared to women’s historical role mentioned by medieval writers.

4.7.1. *Khidmat* (Service)

Astana-i-Pak thronged with women at all times, especially during annual *Urs* celebrations that occurred a few times in a year namely in January, March, April, July and October in connection with death anniversary celebrations of a number of great Sufis. The main and most majestic ceremony was held in commemoration with the *Urs* of Ghauth al-Azam Sarkar in October each year. Three to four thousand people attended this annual celebration. Hundreds of people came and stayed at *Astana-i-Pak* a few days prior to the *Urs* from other cities and countries. Therefore, it required an immense amount of effort and organization to appropriately handle the mammoth celebrations. Guests’ boarding and lodging, three meals and constant flow of teas and snacks that seemed to go around the whole time as guests kept on arriving in bunches from various destinations throughout day and night. There were organizing committees formed before *Urs Pak* where devotees volunteered to perform certain duties. A couple of senior devotees would be made in-

¹¹¹ Smith, *The Life and Work of Rabia and other Women Mystics in Islam*, 32.

¹¹² For details see, Schimmel, *My Soul is a Woman*; Smith, *The Life and Work of Rabia and other Women Mystics in Islam*; and Helminski, *Women of Sufism*.

charge of each duty such as cooking, cleaning, washing, serving, picking up plates and glasses etc. *Urs* was a tremendous experience for everyone; those who came and those who hosted. Men and women worked tirelessly with indefatigable energies. Even young kids seem to be filled with energy and helped in chores. However, bulk of the work fell on women. They were the major force in cooking, serving food, picking up the dishes after each serving, washing dishes, cleaning and sweeping and providing water, *sharbat* (home-made, sweetened drink), tea. Making arrangements for boarding and lodging was another big challenge. Again, women both from Baba Jan's family and devotees who were nominated for that duty together helped in providing required arrangements for each guest. During the *Urs* time, it seemed night never fell at *Astana-i-Pak*. It thronged with people and activities round the clock. However, due to prior planning and duties assigned for each task to a group of people, the management of this gigantic event was done with peace and grace. It seemed things was moved by some invisible hand.

Baba Jan's family supported him in his role tremendously. His younger son and daughter-in-law would go to pick up guests from the bus station, any time of day or night. Initially when the *mehfil* started taking place at his house in 1970s, it was his wives who cooked, served and managed the entire activities. Later his daughters supported their mothers and after they were married off, slowly some female servants were hired. They started helping in cooking and serving foods to guests any time they arrived round the year. All four of Baba Jan's daughters are highly elevated in spiritual thinking. Married and with children, three of them are engaged with teaching profession. As his legacy, both his sons took up the role of serving, guiding and supporting Baba Jan's guests without fail. Their devotion, dedication, affection and respect along with high spiritual insights and guidance are priceless gifts for all who visit them. None of Baba Jan's children consider him a father in the ordinary sense. They all accepted him as their Murshid-i-Pak and were

the keen attendees of the *mehfil-i-pak* since their childhood. Same is the case for Baba Jan's eleven sisters and their children. They all cherished him as their most precious treasure and wherever opportunity came, they tried to provide their utmost services.

Women demonstrated great *futuwwat* characteristics during such gatherings where they were required to accomplish unusual amount of work. Observations conducted in the kitchen area showed small and sweet sacrifices. If one woman would ask the other to stop washing dishes and let her do it, the one who would comply, would go and start doing another. They would help each other, look after if someone's was not well and serve the guests. Women who came from other cities also helped in chores. They assisted those who were part of the management committees. When women were asked if they felt tired after so much work, in the entire analysis of responses, there was not even one with a positive response to that question.

If we compare our Sufi women with medieval women's experiences and expressions, we can see that Cornell has placed women's voices under a "theology of servitude", as they all share an extreme sense of submission and service to God.¹¹³ Silvers have doubts about such expressions, however, she agrees that women's domestic obligations and social gender roles can impact their psychologies and hence their religious life and expression. She also challenges the idea of declaring a clear current of spirituality that could be specifically ascribed to women. She thinks that the descriptions of women given by men writers have a possibility of exaggeration and male biases. Men writers' portrayal of pious women with excessive portrayal of submission to their husbands can be an unknown bias to portray women's piety through that lens.¹¹⁴

¹¹³ Cornell, *Early Sufi Women*,

¹¹⁴ Laury Silvers, "Early Pious, Mystic Sufi Women," in *The Cambridge Companion to Sufism*, ed. Lloyd Ridgeon (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2014), 29

The word used by al-Sulami in his treatise on early Sufi women¹¹⁵ for their services is ‘*mutabbidat*’ – the serving women. At *Astana-i-Pak*, there was no separate category for that, all devotees considered them as servants of their spiritual mentor and Sarkar Ghauth Pak. Most of the women were keen to help and support even if they did not do so at home because serving Baba Jan’s guests were considered an auspicious and honourable. Each one looked forward to being honoured with a ‘duty’. These devout and dedicated women selflessly helped, looked after, and served their fraternity and anybody needing human care and love. They were all called by one word, ‘friend’. Interestingly, what al-Sulami considered for women, was also applicable to men at *Astana-i-Pak*. Men were also *mutabbidat* since they worked in all domains such as kitchen, cooking, cleaning, and washing and cleaning toilets. Women were not singled out for that. However, it also looked that due to their social role of being a provider and supporter at home, women worked more happily in kitchen and in doing traditional activities that looked more natural to them.

Dakake highlights the medieval authors like Ibn Jawzi and al-Sulami that they have shared men and women Sufi’s vision of God, which they relayed in human terms. Such anthropomorphic visions automatically depicted God as a male lover and protector or guardian, ideal male roles that any women would expect in her worldly partner; and men sharing feelings of love and intimacy for the Divine bride, veiled from them whom they wanted to unveil and see. Dakake has found a language of ‘domesticity’ for women Sufis with their calling to God as the masculine object of their feminine and womanly desires and longing.¹¹⁶

¹¹⁵ Cornell, *Early Sufi Women*, 62.

¹¹⁶ Maria Massi Dakake, “Guest of the inmost heart: Conceptions of the divine beloved among early Sufi women”, in *Comparative Islamic Studies*, Vol. 3, No. 1, 2007, 72.

All women participants showed a tinge of love in their own way and idealized their spiritual journey, however, all did not look at this as a feminine –masculine relationship. Most used Cornel’s language of servitude and others used domesticity in their expression. However, this should be seen in comparison with men. The interviews clarified that men also used similar expression and diction. They also used words like Baba Jan’s *dasi* (maid servant).

The medieval Sufi language is full of fear and regret too due to excessive emphasis on the hereafter and a self-assumed ill preparation to face God which made them cry and wail for the fear of punishment. All of the above analyses presented by worthy authors seem not fully relevant with the Sufi women of twenty-first century. Among all the interviewees, not even one shared any of the fear-based emotions to God or the hereafter. In fact, all participants showed positive feelings such as trust and serenity toward the afterlife. They had different reasons for their peacefulness. Some shared their full conviction that due to Baba Jan’s spiritual intermediary communion with God and the angels, their journey would be helped. Others believed completely what Baba Jan taught. ‘God is love. God is one’s fast friend’. God has dealt with them in this life with love. How can he be anything but love in the next life? There was no reason to worry about when such a Great Friend is already there to look after them. Still, others believed that the hereafter depended upon a believer’s life spent in this world. Therefore, trying to use this life by being good to people and helping and loving others directly invested in a good life in the hereafter. While, those who had travelled a bit far in the field of *tawhid*, had a totally different view. Their trust in their spiritual guide’s support for their after-life journey and God’s boundless love and mercy showed a complete contrast with what is captured by medieval writers about Sufis’ reaction to these issues.¹¹⁷

¹¹⁷ Various interviews with devotees in 2009, 2011 and 2012. Especially, after the demise of Baba Jan’s two wives, one after another, these issues were discussed at length in 2009 and 2011. In 2012, Baba Ji iffat Ara Begum also passed away which once again prompted people to talk about the next life.

4.7.2. Role of Women as Mothers

The role of the mothers has been more highlighted in literature dealing with Sufi women than any other. It may have been just natural for women to love, nurture and guide their children. It seems that at times the role of mothers is the only one accepted for women Sufis. Looking at our Sufi women, this was an important and significant role, however, it did not specify to women only. Baba Jan was looked at as a mother by many. His love was the only yardstick to measure how far any love was sincere, even a mother's. However, all women with children or younger siblings seemed more concerned for the training and well-being of their children. They posed questions to Baba Jan Sarkar and senior devotees on how to train children for spiritual life from a young life. Baba Jan had instructed all mothers very clearly that until their children grow older and let them sit in a spiritual gathering, their sole and main responsibility was their children. All mothers with young children were allowed to visit and sit through *mehfil*, however, if a child cried or needed them, they were instructed to give the child priority, not the *Mehfil-i-Pak*. Therefore, mothers felt encouraged to visit him along with children. They did not have to ignore the child for the sake of any activity, no matter how greatly spiritual it was.

Bigger children could play outside in the courtyard when their parents were busy in any activity. For them, it was like a great picnic spot to come to *Astana-i-Pak* to meet with their friends and play. Baba Jan's three wives gained status of mothers for all devotees. Many women shared their issues with them before sharing it with Baba Jan and received brilliant advice. However, they did it naturally without turning themselves into a special category. They were accessible 24/7 to devotees and all served and cared for devotees.

4.8. Women's Challenging, Supporting and Leading Roles

Medieval history books on Sufism contain incidents where Sufi women challenged their contemporary Sufi men as high as stature as Bayazid Bestami and Dhu an-Nun al-Misri by questioning and reprimanding them.¹¹⁸ At *Astana-i-Pak*, the Sufi women not just presented, but rather embodied the Sufi teachings of humility, submission, simplicity and devotion through their practical deeds and words. They were not afraid of their Sufi brothers and sometimes scolded them bravely when there was a need to do so. As narrated, the famous Sufi master Sufiyan Thawri used to visit Bibi Ji Rabiah Basri almost daily for discussion and learning. Once he said, “I seek God’s protection from the world”. Bibi Ji Rabiah wept on hearing that and when he asked why, she refuted his claim of protection and said that he sought true protection he would not have been so indulged in the world.¹¹⁹

In a similar vein, senior women devotees, especially those who had been granted *khilafat* had a role of challenging as well as supporting their male counterparts. It was obvious in a few instances that when a senior woman Sufis like Baba Ji Iffat Ara Begum or Mama Ji spoke to a man, difficult conversations became easy as the man disciple’s respect for these senior spiritual women was commendable. Men also supported women. Senior men disciples guided younger women. Baba Jan Sarkar sometimes asked the seniors from both genders to sit with juniors so that they could share their life experiences for latter’s benefit. A few select men and women were asked to sit for an answer-question session each Friday after *Mehfil-i-Pak* in front of the public gathering. There was a complete equality of status for spiritual leadership and guidance provided by both men and women.¹²⁰

¹¹⁸ Helminski, *Women of Sufism*, 11

¹¹⁹ Smith, *Rabia, The Life and Work of Rabia*, 45

¹²⁰ Personal observations during 2009-2016

4.9. Case Studies of Eminent Women Sufis

Below are presented short case studies of three Sufi women to provide a detailed and extensive description of their spiritual journey. The current study did not dwell on the genuineness of their experiences. The below given short case studies of a select number of devotees are based on what was observed, heard or perceived from conversations and other activities at *Astana-i-Pak*. The case studies are based on an analysis of narratives, without passing judgement on the contents of narratives. The direct quotes are used only for verbatim translations, otherwise collection of facts from various sources at various points in time are presented as author's analysis. Women's identity is not revealed. Baba Jan used to call them by names that were used at *Astana-i-Pak*. In the following short case studies, either pseudo names selected by researcher are used or a name granted by Baba Jan for them not known to people outside the circle. It is pertinent here to describe a few cases of women devotees and the transformation in their life after *bayt*.

4.9.1. Baba Ji – Iffat Ara Begum

Tall as a cypress tree, beautiful as a flower, Iffat Ara, a young woman from Gujarat, Punjab, had never even heard of *tasawwuf* or *faqr* until she joined University of Punjab in 1977.¹²¹ She had an outlook on life that was common to the girls of her age. She loved make-up, fashionable clothes and dressing up. She was bright, hardworking and highly disciplined to her studies. Therefore, she stood out amongst all, in all senses of the word. A beauty with brains, she was highly charming with her superior intelligence and wholesome elegance. At five feet and nine inches, she was unusually tall for the girls in the campus. Another girl from Toba Tek Singh, fondly known as

¹²¹ This life sketch, as a short case study has been prepared on the basis of numerous personal discussions directly held with Baba Ji Iffat Ara Begum until 2011 when she passed away and later with her children, family and friends. All of these conversations and discussions are the primary sources for this sketch.

Baibo, had also joined the Department of Geography. Her elder sister saw Iffat Ara Begum and liked her mannerism a lot. She advised Baibo to make friendship with this decent and well-mannered girl and to learn from her good manners.¹²² A third girl named Shamim was also in the hostel and soon this troika became inseparable. When any of the girls' families visited hostel, all three friends met with each other's family. Fate had its own plan at play. Once Baibo's elder brother and his family went to meet her in the hostel. Baibo was not around. Seeing that, Iffat Ara attended the family. It was summer time and the guests must have been thirsty. She helped them settle down comfortably and quickly brought cold-drinks to serve them. Apparently, it was a mark of good etiquettes, however, her gesture was appreciated at a higher level. Unknowingly, she was chosen for a great honour. It was no other than Baba Jan Sarkar, Dr Muhammad Youssuf Shaheen Shah, who was hosted and entertained by Iffat Ara that day. Moses went to search for fire and met God. She offered a cold drink to her friend's brother and quenched thirst of a Friend of God, though she had no clue.

However, something had clicked in her heart as she could feel that her friend's brother had extra-ordinary vibes, so she asked Baibo. When Baibo said, he is a *Faqir*, Iffat Ara was shocked and could not believe. She did not know what Baibo meant. Innocently, she asked, "Do you mean he is a beggar?"¹²³ In her vocabulary, *faqir* was a poor man begging in the streets. That was all she knew about the path that she had been chosen to tread upon. Later, both girls started visiting each other's families in their home towns and soon Iffat Ara learned about Baba Jan's spiritual stature. She saw herself as a seeker and requested for *bayt* in 1978 along with her sister in law, Billo, and was accepted.

¹²² Various conversations with Jan Poh, elder sister of Baibo Ji, 2012

¹²³ In common people's vocabulary, beggars are also called *faqir*, since they are poor and have no means to live. This was mentioned by Baba Ji Iffat Ara Begum in a personal conversation, 28 October, 2010 at *Astana-i-Pak*, Jhang.

Once chosen, the travellers of spiritual path have to go through many trials. For Bibi Ji Rabiah Basri, it was her slavery. For Iffat Ara, it was her marriage. During her master studies, she was forced by her family to get married as was the custom of the time to marry girls off as soon as a good proposal was in hand. Her marriage proved to be her biggest test and it was already indicated to be so when first a harsh, dark wind blew, and tons of insects swarmed the guests. The food could not be distributed properly, and the entire arrangements were in disarray. Later, she came to know that her husband had already fallen prey to some bad company and thus liked to stay out of home with no sense of responsibility toward her, his parents, unmarried sisters or later for their three children. There were many other ills too that he suffered from.

Along with her three children, Iffat Ara Begum had to look after all members her mother and father-in-law (who was affected by old age dementia in his last years) and unmarried sisters-in-law. To support the family, she started teaching in a local school. In her meagre salary, she tried managing but mostly remained hand to mouth. Her husband would take away all the money or any valuables that he could lay his hands at. Her spiritual training would not let her share the situation with anyone outside. It was beneath her character to discuss her marital issues with others. She turned only to God. Her challenging marital life and her new-born spiritual life were walking in parallel. She saved former through the latter. She took each word of Baba Jan Sarkar as the final guidance. He advised patience, tolerance, service and love. She abided wholeheartedly exemplifying “*Adab pehla qarina hai, muhababt ke qarinon mein*”.¹²⁴

At one point in life she did not know the meaning of the word *faqir*. And soon when she accepted *bayt*, she proved a dry log ready to catch fire. She was a keen learner. It was amazing for

¹²⁴ Respect is the first step toward love – an oft quoted Urdu verse.

everyone to see her absorbing the spiritual teachings so fast.¹²⁵ She absorbed teachings deeply and learned the *adaab* (appropriate manners for spiritual conduct) quickly. Nobody could surpass her in obedience and following Murshid-i-Pak's instructions with utmost attention and care. She excelled in respect and *adab* so much that she became a model for others. She could not visit for weekly *Mehfil-i-Pak* on Fridays. However, hundreds of miles away at her home, she would keep standing for hours in respect of *Mehfil-i-Pak* being conducted at Jhang on Fridays. Nobody asked her to do so, except an inner voice that kept telling her to do so. Obedience and submission did not mean, she closed her mind. She was a bright person who asked relevant questions that helped all others. Being the eldest daughter in the family, she had a prominent role at her natal home. Being a professional teacher also gave her some authoritative traits. However, with years under Baba Jan's guidance, she become more and more mellow and humble in conduct toward her family and colleagues at school. Gradually, the entire universe was becoming dearer because of the teachings she received from Baba Jan.

She had reserved a special seat for Baba Jan in her house in one of the rooms where she paid her respects every morning before going to school. She taught the same to her children. This was one of the ways of teaching them presence of *Murshid-i-Pak* in their life and home. Around 1991, wave of a new change occurred to her. She decided to forgo all her coloured clothes. She chose to wear dresses only in white colour once she heard Baba Jan talk about simplicity and abandoning extravagant ways. He preferred white colour for his clothes too and frequently wore white. She wanted to follow his preference, without him directly asking her to do so. This was a tremendous change. At school, she wore white. But when she came home, a thought crossed her

¹²⁵ Multiple conversations with Baba Jan's other disciples who saw her arrival and initial training. Baba Jan's wives, daughters, sisters and a few other women disciples who had witnessed this transformation had shared similar accounts about arrival of a university girl and her turning into a sage.

mind that it was fine to wear coloured clothes at home. She changed back into her normal clothes. In the morning while preparing breakfast for children, when she turned her back to stove, her dupatta caught fire. Before she could realize, the fire reached the back of her shirt and very quickly to the rest of her clothes. She was alone, and the fire got really nasty. She understood the message. How could she think of having two different faces for work and for home? If she had committed to herself for leaving colourful clothes for the sake of simplicity and prudence, how could she wear one again? God does not like people who do not fulfil their commitments. She kept questioning herself and kept trying to put out the fire. Burnt quite a bit, she decided not to share with anyone the incident. Quietly, she changed into white clothes, deciding to observe her secret resolution forever.

She thought it was a divine message to train her for keeping all her promises and commitments with utmost resolve. She decided to keep the burns to herself. Why should she share a message from her beloved with anyone else? The burns turned into blisters all over her back. She tried putting on some medicine on her own, but she could not reach all properly. She kept quiet. In a couple of days, the burning was intolerable. She needed a doctor to cut the blisters, now becoming too painful to let her work at school or at home. That night, after everyone had gone to sleep, she asked her twelve years old eldest daughter to sterilise the scissors by the kitchen stove, cut the blisters where she could not reach herself and apply ointment. She narrated this incident during the travel to Karachi,¹²⁶ while discussing how a lover needs to keep the secrets sent by the Beloved even if in the form of tribulations, lest someone say a negative thing about Him or His gifts.

¹²⁶ Personal conversation during a train travel to Karachi with Baba Jan Sarkar, when discussing personal feelings, emotions and delicate feelings that a woman goes through while on the spiritual journey, January 2009.

Beautiful, she always was. Now a new grace accompanied her when she started wearing only white. Some people criticized though. Her family insisted, especially at the wedding of her younger brother for her to wear normal, wedding-style, coloured clothes. She declined. Her *dastarbandi* (receiving the turban from Murshid-i-Pak as a symbol or an indication of spiritual succession) occurred in 1993. After that, her training became more rigorous. Constant occupation with spiritual lessons both conceptual and practical were intensified, which cannot be described here. After years of strenuous exercises and spiritual training, Baba Jan Sarkar blessed her with the title Baba Ji in 1996. She was no more to be called by her name without this honorific title. It was a strange title though. Baba Ji is generally used for old men as a respectful address in Pakistan. She could have been called Bibi Ji, a more conventional title for showing respect and honour for women. However, to demonstrate that the true meaning of being a ‘man’ of God is not limited by the bounds of body, it was an example set by Baba Jan Sarkar.

When asked how she felt when she was given the title, Baba Ji Iffat Ara Begum said, “I cried profusely”. On further probing she said, “*Baba Ji ban’na kon sa aasan hota hai. jan jikhon ka kaam hai*” (it isn’t easy to become a Baba Ji, it is a daring task”.¹²⁷ She could see what was coming. Love, *sabr* (patience), *tawakkul* (trust) and *ijz* (humility) were increasing day by day in her life. Baba Jan emanated love for everyone around him. She wanted to replicate the same. She became love for her in-laws. Her love changed people. Her mother-in-law and all her sisters-in-law respected and loved her a lot. One of them, who remained unmarried, helped her a great deal in household chores. She slowly picked all her personal tasks and would wash, iron her clothes and look after the children with great love.

¹²⁷ Conversation with Baba Ji Iffat Ara Begum, October 25, 2009.

Baba Jan Sarkar said in one of their meetings, “Trust in Allah. There is no power other than Him to harm you or protect you. Believe it”.¹²⁸ Iffat Ara Begum believed instantly. Her faith in Allah’s protection and power had become so strong that it amazed everybody around her. One day, someone came running to her school with a news that her youngest son had fallen down the second floor of her house. She remembered Baba Jan’s statement and felt as calm as the gentle breeze. Without panicking she said, “*jo de sakta hai, who bacha bhi sakta hai*”¹²⁹ (the One who could give [him to me], can save [him] too). With no panic, no worry, she continued working and went home at the usual time to see that the child, though injured, but was doing alright.¹³⁰

Because of being married into family that did not understand the spiritual world, and a job as a school teacher, she did not have the social freedom to visit Baba Jan Sarkar frequently. After long intervals, she would come along with her kids and sister-in-law to meet Baba Jan Sarkar for a couple of days, get her *sabaq* (lesson) and return. Her heart ached for frequent communication. She mentioned it to Baba Jan Sarkar, he agreed. There were no cell phones at that time. Landlines were not common and also highly expensive. She could neither afford, nor manage to call him from a public call office. When she got too distressed about not being able to communicate with him, Baba Jan had other ways to guide and support her. He opened the doors of *kashf* (personal revelation) for her eldest daughter. She was around twelve years. A happy-go-lucky child, she had the honour of becoming an emissary of spiritual messages sent from Baba Jan. In a spiritual trance, she could see things clearly with her eyes wide open, which nobody else could see. She would describe those details to her mother while being an observer, which Baba Ji Iffat Ara Begum used

¹²⁸ Conversation with Baba Ji Iffat Ara Begum, October 25, 2009.

¹²⁹ Conversation with Baba Ji Iffat Ara Begum, March 24, 2010.

¹³⁰ The incident was narrated both by Baba Ji Iffat Ara Begum and a couple of her school colleagues who were there with her when the news came. They felt utterly surprised to see her calm response. Discussions during *Urs* celebrations when women gathered in big numbers and used to chitchat among themselves after attending *Mehfil-i-Pak*.

to write down for deciphering and understanding the message. She knew they were meant for her to learn and understand the secrets of spiritual life. After observing these spiritual flights, her daughter used to feel extremely exhausted as if she was travelling bodily and needed long spells of rest. Baba Ji understood that this was a mean to communicate to her the spiritual secrets and messages of Baba Jan. Respecting the privacy and sacred nature of that communication, the messages received by Baba Ji, cannot be placed in this research. However, a short excerpt from her daughter's notes, is shared below to give a glimpse of her experiences:

“I saw that a few of us are walking in a desert. I can clearly remember Mama [Baba Ji], my younger sister, brother and Phupho [aunt]. Although it was a desert, it was unbelievably far more beautiful than a desert of this world. When I look upon, there are two sides of that desert. On one side, there is a gathering of Pure Souls and on the other side, there was empty desert but extremely beautiful. Suddenly, I see a heavenly steed...[Baba Jan Sarkar] was riding on the steed...

Some of Baba Ji's training exercises were with *dhikr* and some were with *tasawwur* (contemplation). She shared some but has kept many to herself where she knew she was not allowed to share in public. Once she was instructed by Baba Jan Sarkar to recite a *dhikr* while she was standing in the courtyard. When Baba Jan went in his room, she right away started standing in the same place without losing a moment. After a while, sun came out and temperature rose. She started sweating profusely since she was standing out in the open. She neither moved nor stopped. Baba Jan was in his bedroom, apparently taking a nap. Thus, she stood there in scorching sun for hours until Baba Jan inquired about her and called her in. Her seriousness for her *sabaq* (spiritual lesson) and training was exemplary and respected by all her spiritual siblings.

She always tried to discipline her children strictly about managing their life and every day needs. Sometimes, when children asked for anything more than what was enough to get by, she would decline their demands even for a new pencil box or some other small thing. Her eldest daughter narrated that once she was asking for a new set of markers to make some drawings in her

copy. Baba Ji declined saying it was not necessary to have a new set when she had her regular pencils for homework. She felt sad but did not insist. Next morning, her daughter found a new set of markers in her school bag. She was utterly surprised and asked her younger sister if it belonged to her. When her sister denied, she told her mother. She checked with others. But no one had placed it in her school bag. Moreover, sometimes, they would find boxes on their roof, nicely packed with freshly baked sweets, which were not available even in nearby bakeries in the city. They felt surprised and scared and asked Baba Jan. He told them to enjoy it without fear. His verdict turned the potentially fearsome event into a gift. She stated that finding such small ‘gifts’ from the unseen world was a frequent phenomenon and so the children got used to it. Whenever, any such thing happened, they knew Baba Jan had sent it for them.

Baba Ji’s daughters also mentioned seeing some strange beings floating in the air near the roof of the room where they used to sleep in summers. When one of the girls asked those people who they were, they answered that they were ‘friends’ and were sent by Baba Jan for ensuring their safety. They also told the girls not to be afraid of them. When the girls mentioned this to Baba Ji, she, as always, advised them not to share anything with anyone. She had decided to have her spiritual mentor as the only confidant in her life.¹³¹

As per Baba Ji’s own account, her tumultuous marriage was a painful experience for her. She was a head teacher of a school and a respectable member of society. If it was not for Baba Jan, she would have made very different decisions. However, Baba Jan had asked her to forgive her

¹³¹ This collection of various incidents and feelings occurred through a long number of discussions with Baba Ji Iffat Ara Begum in 2008, 2009, 2010 and 2011 at various places. Her daughters and sisters-in-law were also consulted after she passed away in 2012.

husband's behaviour and causing embarrassment to family, so she did. God knew everything and was helping her manage too. She kept on working and supporting her in-laws.¹³²

After she received spiritual *khilafat* from Baba Jan in 1996, her colleagues, relatives, students and their parents started visiting her more frequently for advice, discussions and prayers. Baba Jan had instructed everyone at *Astana-i-Pak* to call her Baba Ji and not by her name. Soon, she was known as Baba Ji to her spiritual siblings. Her reputation as a spiritual woman had grown over the years. Slowly, all her close family members accepted her spiritual life. Most of her close family members had their *bayt* with Baba Jan. Baba Ji was asked to lead a spiritual gathering at her home every month. Her spiritual leadership was established more firmly through her role of a mentor and a leader. She did not conduct *bayt* as she thought her spiritual mentor was present to do so. Growing in age, she also grew in gracefulness and a glowing beauty. Elegance and a majestic aura were her hallmark. She seemed to be an icon of perfection with impeccable life in all areas including spiritual, family and professional fields. She continued spreading light of spirituality to people of Gujarat until her death in 2012.

Hafiz Hayat, a sixteenth/seventeenth century Sufi of Gujarat, Punjab kept waiting for four/five hundred years for the arrival of a noble soul to join him company. Only that noble soul was wrapped in the body of a woman. Baba Ji Iffat Ara Begum sneaked into Hafiz Hayat's neighbourhood through his most favourite route, i.e. education. She was appointed as the principal of a highly reputed school built on the land donated by Hafiz Hayat many hundred years ago for the cause of education. A university, a school and other educational institution have been developed so far on that piece of land. When Baba Ji Iffat Ara Begum passed away in 2012, her

¹³² Same as above.

children asked Baba Jan Sarkar about her last abode. He indicated the place near the shrine of Hafiz Hayat. Apparently, it was a strange decision as the shrine was run by a government department and for many years, no burial had happened there. However, the decree had arrived. The government administration not even agreed but supported the entire burial process. Torrential rains came down before her burial as if the heavens were shedding tears along with people of Gujarat. Despite that, thousands of people gathered to bid farewell to this *dervish-i-kamil* (perfect *dervish*), who had enlightened thousands of minds with the light of academic knowledge and hearts of people of Gujarat with the light of spirituality received from her *Murshid-i-Pak*. Her shrine is the spring of spiritual blessings for those who visit.

4.9.2. Sitara

Sitara,¹³³ was mentioned by Baba Jan Sarkar, his family and his oldest devotees as an example of spiritual transformation. According to his older devotees, who had seen her and the changes she went through, it was a case of '*qalandari nazar*' (the glance of a Qalandar), the proverbial life-changing glance of a Sufi that has been mentioned in books. The account of Sitara is based on the information shared by Baba Jan's wife, daughter and two other devotees who had seen her. Baba Jan also shared some details. Sitara belonged to a very rich family of a nearby city. However, she had no contact with Baba Jan and never visited him at his place in Jhang. She met him in Lahore at the house of another devotee, where one of her friends had pulled her. She was a very liberal woman, termed as a social butterfly by her friends, who remained out of home for days or weeks to spend time independently with her friends. The person who brought her told Baba Jan that Sitara's family is very concerned and wanted Sitara to change her ways as due to her liberal and

¹³³ As per the ethical standards observed in this study, her real name is not mentioned observing the principle of anonymity.

excessively independent lifestyle, the entire family's reputation was becoming tarnished. From the point of view of normal social standards of Pakistani society in 1980s, a woman's mobility without a chaperon and her stay out of home without family's permission were huge issues for her family. Thus, her friend asked Baba Jan to advise Sitara and pray for her.

Baba Jan did not say anything to her. He just welcomed them in the *mehfil*, looked at her and continued with his usual discussion answering questions that people were asking. Sitara listened quietly and before leaving went to see Baba Jan to pay her farewell respects. Baba Jan looked directly in her eyes and she left. Next time, she asked her friend to take her to his *mehfil* again. This time, after attending the *mehfil*, she wanted to have *bayt*. Baba Jan told her that *bayt* was a sacred promise and one needed to abide to spiritual practices, which might be difficult for her. She insisted and promised to abide by anything that was required. Baba Jan accepted her request for *bayt*, gave her asked her to keep herself secluded in her house and gave her a *sabaq* (a lesson/spiritual exercise), that no one else knew. She took his advice and returned home. From that day onward, nobody ever saw her outside again. She kept communication with Baba Jan through letters. Her seclusion became permanent as she enjoyed it so much that she made a special room for her meditational exercises in the basement of her house. Baba Jan sometimes would talk about Sitara's fast spiritual progress and the beautiful solitude that she was blessed with. A solitude that was full of company from spiritual beings. Baba Jan visited her only through the spiritual realm so there was no need to meet physically. Soon, she would send a letter sharing details of those spiritual meetings and her spiritual states.

Whenever Baba Jan passed through her city for his onward travels to Lahore, she would immediately send a letter informing him that she had sensed his scent in the air when he passed by. Never once she was wrong about his presence in her city. Baba Jan never tried to meet her as

well. He said, ‘Sitara’ was blessed by a ‘*qalandari* glance’¹³⁴ that changed her life. She did not need physical means any more to connect with him. In the end, it is a journey to explore one’s own self. She was receiving the guidance required to delve into herself and find her Reality. Sitara was never seen by anyone. Only a couple of her close family members could see her. She kept herself in seclusion until the news of her passing away arrived around 2006.

4.9.3. Zaadi: Maan Ji¹³⁵

Baba Jan Sarkar having three wives was a rather unsettling fact initially that demanded addressing. It was beyond researcher’s comprehension in her first few meetings that how can three women be happily living in the same house with one husband. Out of the three wives of Baba Jan Sarkar, the middle one, Zahida, was affectionately called ‘Zadi’ or ‘Zadini’ by Baba Jan Sarkar. Others called her Mama Ji but in the later years, she was granted the title of Maan Ji by Baba Jan, thus the same is used for her in this profile. Maan Ji was placed in the middle with one older and one younger wife of Baba Jan Sarkar. Between these two, how did she feel? The same question, in a mellowed way was put to her. However, it proved difficult to get an answer to any question close to that topic. She always had a broad, beautiful smile in response. Because there were three of them, it was important to talk to all three, i.e. Bari Ammi (eldest wife), Mama Ji (middle one) and Mummy Ji (youngest one). She did not feel separate from the other too.

Similar question was put to the youngest wife as to how she felt about sharing her husband with two other wives. She laughed aloud and said, “I wish there were two more. There is so much

¹³⁴ It is the proverbial glance of a *faqir* that could change the destiny of the one who receives it. It works like a bolt of lightning and takes away veils of duality that people are burdened with. Sufi poetry and stories talk about this. Sufis endowed with the station of Qalandar have it such as Ala al-Din Sabir of Kalyar, Lal Shahbaz Qalandar of Sehwan and many other *majzubs*. *Tadhkirat al-Awliya* is full of incidents of such life-changing glance of Sufis. All disciples felt extra-ordinarily strong and peculiar effect of Baba Jan Sarkar’s glance if he looked into their eyes directly.

¹³⁵ The study uses her real name as it was clearly allowed by Baba Jan Sarkar and happily accepted by Maan Ji.

work here. How could one wife ever deal with it? He is not just a husband. He is our spiritual master. He is the king of the spiritual world. We are honoured to be of some service to him”.¹³⁶ Slowly, Mama Ji, became more comfortable and shared a lot of her feelings and experiences openly. Once she shared:

“In my early childhood, I used to see a lot of dreams. Once I dreamt that I am standing at a square and am distributing *rotis* (Pakistani bread). There were huge baskets of *rotis* and I was giving away those. After I got married I realized that my dream was true. I have been distributing, sharing and giving away food constantly since then. This marriage [with Baba Jan] was for some other noble purpose”.¹³⁷

In her early childhood, Maan Ji was severely burnt by accidentally falling into a huge pan of boiling milk. She recovered but soon developed psoriasis that remained with her entire life. Each year, especially during summers, there was a rough and intense spell that would cover her entire skin with huge patches of disease and would peel off entire patches out of her skin. She would also get fever and intense itchiness. It was a painful sight for all who saw her in that condition. However, never once anyone heard her complain. She would smile back each time someone asked how she was. “*Rehmat hai*” (God’s Mercy is present) was her usual answer. Her parents knew Baba Jan as a doctor and used to consult him. They took her to him during a severe spell of psoriasis. He examined and gave some medicine. It worked a little, but the disease would always return after a few months. Counselling and preparing her for her long ordeal, he told her that she was visited by a very loyal friend. The disease may never leave her and may keep on recurring. She should know this and be prepared to manage it without letting it win over her plans in life. Maan Ji and her parents had already realized that she had a serious condition that could affect her future. However, God had other plans. Her father suddenly passed away leaving her mother alone. Maan Ji had only

¹³⁶ Personal conversation with Mummy Ji, February 2009.

¹³⁷ Personal conversation with Mummy Ji, February 2009.

one sibling, a younger sister, who had already gotten married. Her mother was extremely worried about Maan Ji. Knowing the situation, Baba Jan offered his proposal to her mother for Maan Ji. She was pleasantly surprised. He was a doctor and knew fully well the nature and seriousness of her condition. It was unbelievable to receive such a good '*rishta*' (proposal). She discussed with her brothers, who all agreed. It was 1970 and the trend of multiple marriages was quite common in the society.¹³⁸ Thus, Maan Ji's maternal uncles agreed and made all the arrangements.

Maan Ji arrived at Baba Jan's house where he already had one wife and three young children. He had already sought permission from his first wife. Of course, it was still natural for her not to be very happy with this. But both wives were surprised to see that Baba Jan leaving for his nightly vigil along with his friends while both were at home. Soon, it was clear that he did not marry her for any worldly reason. He spoke to both separately and together too. He told Maan Ji to respect the elder one in all decisions.¹³⁹ He told the older one to provide love and care to the younger one as she had recently lost her father. Both understood his sincere intentions. Both tried to comply.

Maan Ji immediately realized her husband's uniqueness. He was totally different from anyone that she could imagine. She sensed his talk was different and he was more interested in her wellbeing than his. He used to go out after his clinic hours late night and would come back around morning prayer time. She became curious about his night vigils. He shared a bit about his circle of friends, who had been keen to learn from him about his spiritual insights. She requested him to share his activities and teachings that he used to hold at a friend's house. She requested him to do that at his own place. She offered to entertain all guests with utmost care if he brought them home

¹³⁸ Multiple discussions with Maan Ji on her marriage with Baba Jan Sarkar in 2008, 2009, 2011, 2012, and 2015

¹³⁹ Multiple discussions with Maan Ji on her marriage with Baba Jan Sarkar in 2008, 2009 and 2010

so that his family members could also benefit from his spiritual insights. He agreed and that is when the Friday *Mehfil-i-Pak* was initiated at his home in 1973.

There was another leap of faith waiting for her to take. She sensed her husband's preoccupation in something and discovered that there was another challenge coming in his life. There was another lady she came to know about. Those days Baba Jan Sarkar used to pay visits at the shrine Hazrat Sultan Haq Bahu every Thursday. She asked him to take her with him when he would next go to visit the shrine of Sultan Haq Bahu. He took her. Outside his shrine, she found a place in the sun and started praying for her husband to be happy and get whatever he wanted. When asked the reason, she said, "I knew it must be another spiritual endeavour. There must be a spiritual secret behind it as I had come to know him very well. He was not an ordinary man falling for women just like that. I had seen it in my marriage. I knew it would be the same".¹⁴⁰

She permitted rather encouraged him to marry the lady if he wished so. He wasn't willing until he was fully sure that she was truly comfortable with the idea. To prepare herself for the endeavour, she also prepared herself to go and ask the lady's parents' permission. It was a strange ordeal. She was fully ready to support him and yet something deep inside was not. She went with a proposal for marriage for her beloved husband. Love must have been smiling. Her request was accepted. The date was fixed for wedding. She prepared the *bari* (clothes, gifts given by the groom's family to the bride's family in Punjab) for the new bride. Moreover, she also offered her jewellery for the new wife. She wasn't sure whether she was doing all that to convince him or herself of her acceptance of the situation. On the day of the wedding, she went and helped the new bride in getting ready for her big day. Holding her hand, she brought her home beautifully prepared

¹⁴⁰ Personal Conversation with Maan Ji, November 26, 2010.

to be the wife of her husband. When asked for her reasons for doing all that, she said, “If he wanted to marry another woman, how could I say no? I loved him too much to deny anything”.

She did not know completely yet had a feeling that it was all happening for a spiritual reason. However, after helping and supporting her husband in the endeavour, it was not as easy as she had assumed to manage the situation at some level. Despite all her generous efforts, she found the incident painful. Despite trying to control, she found herself crying. She would “keep awake and keep standing whole night waiting for Baba Jan. I just could not sit down. Then I realized that it was his body that was missing. He was with me already. Within my heart and soul, not separate”.¹⁴¹

The new bride also had her set of realizations of Baba Jan’s spiritual life. Soon the three ladies were sitting at the same platform. He loved all three of them but did not belong to any one of them. Was this a painful realization? No, instead, it helped them all deal with an apparently odd situation. This realization made them love him and respect each other more. The natural jealousy, if there was any, withered away. Why fight with each other for someone who had enough love for the entire world? No woman or any other person could possess him entirely. He was strange, unusual, unique. Always ready to share himself with ever more people. He was their husband, but his affectionate and gentle ways also provided for a brother and a father in him. He was too big to be kept by any one of them, too strong to be tied with the weak string of a worldly relation.¹⁴²

There was yet another significant jolt coming for her. The youngest wife, Mummy Ji, suddenly became very sick. First, her right knee and soon her entire leg swelled so much that she

¹⁴¹ Maan Ji spoke about these feelings and also shared her diaries with the researches of those years. The researcher had ample opportunities to observe her daily routine as well as have discussions with her, which took place throughout 2008-2016.

¹⁴² Multiple conversations with three ladies mentioned in this sketch over 2008-2011.

was unable to move. Baba Jan examined and diagnosed severe infection. The leg was full of pus that needed to get pumped out. Mummy Ji did not agree to go to another doctor. He had to treat her himself. He needed nursing assistant. Maan Ji again offered her help. Together, they took out pus from her knee, buckets of pus came out. He was a doctor. She was not. But she gave her complete support to him and Mummy Ji, who had soon become bed-ridden. She helped Mummy Ji in taking bath, combing her hair and cooking food that she could eat happily. For years, it was her routine to look after Mummy Ji. But, now it was different. She did not find any difficulty, any negative feeling. She had started understanding the journey better now – not just her husband's but also of the three women married to him. It was all part of a bigger voyage that none of the three ladies knew, they had to traverse together. Without noticing, the three became one for the love of the one who brought them together. If one did not know, they looked and behaved like three sisters. They all invested all their energies and love in serving, supporting and looking after Baba Jan, his children, family and his innumerable guests.

Adding further to the layers of challenges, along with six of their children, three more kids came to stay with them. Baba Jan's eldest wife (who was his first cousin as well), had three step-siblings. When their mother passed away, they did not have anyone to look after them. The three kids were brought from village to Baba Jan's house. One of them was very sick. He needed extra care. Maan Ji took his responsibility. It was rationally inconceivable to see a woman affectionately cleaning the diarrhoea-ridden clothes of the step-brother of a co-wife of her husband. What made her go to this extent? We know about women like Mother Theresa. She was the one like that within that household. She had accepted Baba Jan as her spiritual master and was using each opportunity offered by life to gradually nullify her ego and walk on the path of selflessness.

Maan Ji's story cannot be justly done with if her other loving counterparts are not mentioned as she did not consider herself a separate entity. She saw herself as an integral part of the bigger household and sincerely respected and loved Baba Jan's other two wives. His eldest wife, Bari Ammi (Elder Mother) was the one most stern among the three, however, for a good reason. A strict disciplinarian, she was not afraid of giving a good scolding to anyone whom she would find wasting any resources by leaving tap water running wastefully during dishwashing or leaving the fans running when leaving a room. She would tell off her daughters and devotees alike saying, "He [Baba Jan] works all day for all of us and never takes leave. Think about him. Don't waste things".¹⁴³ However, the same stern mother was the first one to get up each morning and start preparing breakfast for everyone at home. All the guests, servants and even those who came to collect garbage or drop a guest were offered delicious hot breakfast sitting next to her set on a small table with a *pirhi* (local low stool used for sitting in Punjab) ready to welcome. She loved to keep a buffalo for milk and offered hot or cold milk to all at night. On one hand, she was scolding people not to waste resources but on the other, she was offering food and care generously, and both acts were for the sake of Baba Jan.

During the course of this research, the three were sometimes observed having interesting sisterly fights. Bari Ammi was found saying sternly to Mummy Ji, "I had kept milk for you at night. Now, I saw it still there. Why you did not drink"? Mummy Ji tried to think of an answer. Then Bari Ammi further said, "You have bone issues. You need to drink milk. Next time, if you would not drink, I would come and make you do it. You better take care of yourself".¹⁴⁴ It was not difficult to see the care behind this motherly scolding. Once the author observed her crying in the

¹⁴³ Personal conversations and observations during stay at Astana Pak, 2008

¹⁴⁴ Personal conversations and observations during stay at Astana Pak, 2009

kitchen while cooking something. When asked, she said, “Zahda is very unwell. It’s been so many days. I can’t see her like this anymore”.¹⁴⁵ Under the garb of strictness, she had a heart of gold. Baba Jan’s third wife, Mummy Ji, being bed-ridden due to her joint issues, was always available for a good, wise chat with the devotees. She went through a long and tough span of physical illness, but she was always found smiling. Her advices to the young women devotees were always based on noble and wise words. Her smiling beautiful face was an essential part of the welcoming, peaceful environment of the lounge where she used to sit all day through. She added to the peace and friendliness of the ambience.

Maan Ji believed that whatever occurred in her life was meant for her spiritual development. She was placed in between two wives, so she believed that she always had to go for the middle way, the way of patience, humility and conciliation. She suffered all her life from multiple diseases but never complained. She believed her body was a temple of God. If it was sick, it means God wanted her to go further inside the temple and pray.

When young, Maan Ji used to cook huge pots of rice or hundreds of *rotis* singlehandedly for guests. Based on her spiritual strength, her stamina to serve Baba Jan’s family and guests was unbelievably immense. She used to stitch clothes for all children at home herself. She stitched and prepared some dowry items for Baba Jan’s daughters and all sisters who got married after her marriage. When Baba Jan’s parents were unwell, she went to look after them in a nearby city. She taught the Holy Quran to all the children at home including the brothers and sisters of other wives. She was like a goddess with dozens of hands. In addition to all of those family responsibilities, she would stay up all night until Baba Jan went to sleep. Even in her sleep, if he would call her, she

¹⁴⁵ Personal conversations and observations during stay at Astana Pak, 2009

would respond as if she was waiting for his call in her sleep. When the other two wives passed away one after another, Maan Ji became even closer to Baba Jan. She helped in managing activities at Astana-i-Pak quite tediously. Baba Jan used to give her money for herself that she always spent on his guests. All women devotees looked up to her and trusted her advice. Her mellow ways and wise words were sought by a number of women needing help of any sort. She commanded their trust and was equally relevant both for discussing high ideas of spiritual life and mundane issues of every-day life. Wisdom and grace oozed out of her and thus her advice, blessings and prayers were sought by both men and women.

After he departed, it seemed impossible for Maan Ji to live without Bab Jan's physical presence. They had shared almost half a century together. She kept saying "I cannot understand, why did he leave me behind?" She became more and more unwell day by day. After one year and one month's separation and longing, her soul soared toward the realm where her beloved husband and *Murshid* was already dwelling. Just a moment before her death, she said, "*ji meri sarkar, ji meray shehenshah*" (yes, my Lord, yes, my king) as if she saw Baba Jan in front of her eyes. This was the last tribute of a devotee to her spiritual mentor whom she saw and lovingly called immersed in his love. With a sweet smile, she left this world, keenly flying back to her beloved. She was given space for her eternal abode next to Baba Jan Sarkar, an honour as well as an acknowledgement of her truly selfless and mystical companionship.

شراب کُنن پھر پلا ساقیا
وہی جام کروش میں لا ساقیا!
مجھے عشق کے پر لگا کر اڑا
مری حال گنونا کر اڑا

Serve me the old wine O cup-bearer

Let the same chalice again take rounds

Grant me the wings of love and let me take off

Turn my dust into fireflies and let it fly

Poet: Baba Ji Allama Muhammad Iqbal

Translation: Author

Conclusion

The current study looks at a living Sufi tradition and the Sufi master who led it in Jhang, Punjab, Pakistan to understand the Sufi teachings and their role in determining women's role, participation, status and challenges in the Sufi world of twenty-first century. Furthermore, the gender definitions, roles, perceptions and transformations, alongside the personal and experiential aspects of women's spiritual journeys in a living Sufi tradition, are the focus of this research, whereby it tries to fulfil the scholarship gap on this important subject. It describes the experiential side of women's role in the spiritual world through their narratives via a field study that uses qualitative research approach and narrative inquiry to collect insiders' views and anecdotal accounts of women walking the Sufi path.

The study first provides an overview of Sufism vis-à-vis gender and introduces some foundational concepts. It establishes that although Islam has been identified by the most, particularly in the non-Islamic cultures, as a religion of discrimination and inequity among men and women, the realm of *tasawwuf* offers a supra-gender field well beyond restrictions based on the difference of sex or gender. Since the advent of Islam, from the house of the Holy Prophetﷺ, women's role in the spiritual realm has been well recognized. Later, in the medieval times, Bibi Ji Rabiah Basri and many other Sufi women have been preserved both in the pages of history and the hearts of Sufis. Nevertheless, there has less information available on women Sufis generally and in modern times. Various reasons could have contributed to the lack of information on women's role in Sufism such as restrictions on accessing women to seek information about their lives due to cultural practices of seclusion and concealment of women from public life. Moreover, the potential biases of writers to mention women either partially or in appendixes considering them not equally worthy of note as men could be another reason.

The research starts by studying concept of gender from a Sufi perspective. The fixed, limited and biased way of thinking caused through gender is a strong trap of ego to hide the Inner Reality that Sufis believe to be Genderless and residing both in men and women with equal potential to manifest 'Itself'. Hence the definition of gender and its divisions based on worldly roles and status also change in *tasawwuf*. After a conceptual discussion of the Sufi definitions of the feminine and masculine, the study provides an overview of both the universal feminine principal discussed by Sufis alongside an analysis of the supra-gender understanding of life practically adopted and practiced by the women and men. It shows that the *Sufis* themselves have used the voice of a woman to describe the passion of love and pangs of separation from their Inner Reality. Many *Sufi* poets in the sub-continent, particularly those who used folklores to express their message, used the voice of women figures like *Heer*, *Sohni* and *Sassi*. They chose to convey the vital values of *tasawwuf* such as dedication, steadfastness, selflessness, humility and purity through the voice of a woman. This was not only easier and more relevant for masses to understand but was also a way to admire and honour the traits that are generally associated with women. Moreover, the priority for choosing the voice of a woman instead of a man and the terminology related to their ornaments, clothes, house-hold chores and utensils as well as their feelings and emotions also negated the false conception of women being inferior to men in relation to God or in other ways. On the contrary, the *Sufis* proved through their stories, songs, language and diction that what are generally considered womanly traits such as humility, patience, steadfastness, forgiveness, forbearance, selfless service and passion, make them superior in the spiritual world. Without adopting these values, no one can move forward in the spiritual journey.

Further, this study tries to establish that when somewhat modern writers mentioned Sufi women, they granted them ranks as per their own assessments based on their misjudgements of

Sufi criteria for spiritual achievement. The deep-rooted biases and misunderstandings around women enhanced the trends for undermining Sufi women and reducing their accomplishments. The study tries to answer and fulfil that lacuna to show that in what ways and how far in current times women have been involved in, guided and trained through a Sufi tradition to transform their lives under the guidance of a contemporary Sufi master.

Seeking detailed and specific answers to the research questions with regard to women's role in Sufism in current times, a living Sufi *silsilah*/tradition in the twenty-first century was selected where women were participating and had significant leadership roles to play. As explained in the methodology section given in chapter one, a Sufi tradition of current times was selected purposively that was headed and led by a living Sufi master, Baba Jan Sarkar, Dr Muhammad Youssuf Shaheen Shah (1936-2016), leader of the Qadiri-Qalandari *Silsilah*, based in Jhang, Punjab, Pakistan. He accepted to be studied for his role and other contours of the spiritual tradition that he initiated around 1967 in Jhang and continued to share his teachings and guide men and women devotees for around forty-nine years until 2016, when he passed away to the eternal world.

The study has provided analysis of Baba Jan Sarkar's teachings mainly on gender, however trying to capture his major and key teachings to provide an overall picture of his Sufi worldview. The study traces the connection of Baba Jan's teachings founded directly on the message of the Holy Quran and the teachings of the Holy Prophet Muhammad ﷺ. The linkage and relationship of his Sufi teachings with the pioneers and most distinguished Sufis of his *silsilah* such as Sarkar Ghauth al-Azam, Ibn Arabi and Ghauth Ali Shah Qadir Qalandar have been explained in chapter two. The study closely traces the interesting ways in which Baba Jan practically adopted their teachings in his life and helped do the same for his devotees to practice the same. The study has provided detailed descriptive accounts of the key historical events related to the life and teachings

of the three key figures including Baba Jan Sarkar, Baba ji Fazl al-Rahman and Baba Ji Ghauth Ali Shah being the most recent and renowned leaders of the spiritual tradition, their spiritual riches and insights which, being penned for the first time in the history of the tradition, makes a fresh contribution to Sufi *tadhkirah* and *malfuzat* literature. The study thus tries to trigger interest in further analysis and research with regard to the history of the tradition. By tracing Baba Jan's childhood events, his arduous spiritual training, his teachings, and his role and relationship with his disciples, another angle that the study has addressed is the suggestive lack in Sufi literature of high-calibre, charismatic Sufi masters in current times. As this study shows, Baba Jan Sarkar exhibited highly charismatic, unconventional and unique traits as a spiritual teacher. Though a product of current times, a cursory look at his eloquent discourses and teachings and every-day life reminds one of the eminent Sufis that one meets only in the books of history.

The current study determines a strong and active role of women in the selected Sufi tradition. Women were integrated and equally guided and trained by Baba Jan Sarkar as their *Murshid-i-Pak* in the same manner as he did with men disciples. There was no difference in the teachings, doctrines and methods used by Baba Jan Sarkar for men and women. Women were considered eligible for achieving the status of a *khalifah* (spiritual successor/leader). The study suggests that gender roles changed both for men and women. Men were found working in the kitchen along with women. Women were found sitting in *mehfil* alongside men. Men were found sweeping the floor, washing the carpets, tidying up things after gatherings. Women were seen asking questions, sharing stories, spending time with the spiritual master. They could stay longer than men until all their questions were dealt with. Some of them were asked to lead discussions among themselves. A selected few women were asked to lead discussions, answer questions and represent Baba Jan Sarkar in mixed gatherings of hundreds of people. Baba Jan's guidance and

inspirational teachings, most of all, his own conduct was the biggest reason for both men and women to break boundaries and go beyond their domestic and social roles established by society.

Simple concepts provided by Baba Jan Sarkar such as body being just the ‘uniform’ given by physical nature to determine biological needs. Soul being the true worker inside the uniform determined the true identity of a person. Thus, both women and men respected the uniform since it meant performing certain specific duties such as giving birth to babies or breastfeeding them. However, since the true essence was beyond and more than the uniform, it meant giving more value to that. The study looks at the Taoist concept of ‘yin and yang’ and tries to establish how the same were at play in the dynamics among men and women in the spiritual tradition. Baba Jan Sarkar taught both sexes to adopt either yin or yang qualities to nourish and fulfil themselves by gaining what they lacked and thus adopting a bigger and higher self-perception. However, instead of their feminine or masculine, yin or yang aspects, both gave more weightage to the qualities that Baba Jan considered more important for spiritual development. Therefore, men did not shy away from becoming gentler, more caring and serving their wives, which they earlier thought was against their ‘*mardangi*’ (masculinity). Their authoritative, unbending behaviour changed into a flexible, responsive and empathetic one. Women became gentler yet more confident and open in communication, less suspicious of their spouses and genuinely committed to service. They learned to enjoy performing their traditional roles inside families, especially in-laws, more meaningfully and without frustrations or hypocrisy, which they earlier were doing only due to social pressure. Willingness to serve ‘God’ through all possible roles were found common in both genders.

Although, both men and women found forgiveness difficult to adopt, however, for men it was far more difficult than women. They took longer if they were asked by Baba Jan to visit a relative with whom they had cut off relationship for some family or personal dispute. Controlling

anger was also difficult for both. However, it was men who indicated it to be a bigger challenge, especially if they were involved in wife-battering and were now trying to avoid it. For women, avoiding backbiting and copying others were difficult to leave. Many women openly admitted that their husbands have changed in adopting positive behaviours far more than themselves. It could have been due to their graciousness. Some men laughed and said they were now more of '*zannureed*' (a devotee of their wives). Avoiding critical, negative, rash and callous behaviour was a common focus for both. An overwhelming majority of couples found a new and more meaningful relationship with each other and with their respective in-laws after a few years of training with Baba Jan. Nevertheless, there were also some cases of disciples who remained as they came or became even worse in negativity, criticism or jealousy. Baba Jan did not avoid or reject any of them. He sometimes seemed to give them more attention than others.

Women demonstrated great *futuwwat* characteristics during big *Urs* gatherings where they were required to accomplish unusual amount of work. whether they knew each other well or not, they all tried to help in one way or another. Observations conducted in the kitchen area showed small and sweet sacrifices. If one woman would ask the other to stop washing dishes and let her do it, the other would comply, but would leave that task and look for another. They would help each other, look after if someone's was not well and serve the guests. Women who came from other cities also helped in chores. They assisted those who were part of the management committees. When women were asked if they felt tired after so much work, in the entire analysis of responses, there was not a single one with an affirmative answer to that question.

At *Astana-i-Pak*, there was no separate category for serving women since all devotees considered them as servants of God or their Murshid-i-Pak. Most of the women were keen to help and support even if they did not do so at home because serving Baba Jan's guests were considered

auspicious and honourable. Also, they opted to do it to curb their ego and contribute to the overall well-being of guests. Receiving a certain ‘duty’ was considered a huge honour that each one looked forward to having. These devout and dedicated women selflessly helped, looked after, and served their fraternity and anybody needing human care and love. However, some devotees were keener to offer themselves for such tasks than others. When they were working, some women were found lying around and chatting as well. Nevertheless, none was observed uninterested in listening to Baba Jan Sarkar. As soon as Baba Jan came out of his bed room or returned from clinic, each and every one of men and women were seen flocking around him to listen to his talk and sitting for hours without moving. His magnetic pull worked for the lazy and the keen ones alike.

It was an interesting finding to see that both men and women doted alike on their spiritual master to an unbelievable extent. Both were willing to discipline themselves and sacrifice anything if he ordered them directly. It could be apparently something simple yet challenged them greatly. For example, for younger girls, adopting a simpler way of life without makeup or less makeup was a huge sacrifice. For men, it could be anger management and treating their wife respectfully. Whatever he indicated to anyone, they were willing to try it for their *Murshid-i-Pak*. He was their example, their ideal and their inspiration to change for better. At an old age, if he could deal with all his guests with utmost love, as if he loved each one of them more than others, was the most charming phenomenon for them. Each one of the interviewees admitted that he or she thought that Baba Jan loved him or her the most. They all trusted him more than their parents or spouses. His simple way of telling them that to love him means they had committed to love the universe and to serve him meant they had to serve the one they liked the least was found to be an amazingly powerful strategy for inculcating self-discipline, sacrifice and loss of ego in his disciples.

The last chapter provides life sketches and short case studies of a few prominent women devotees of Baba Jan Sarkar. The case studies provide in-depth information on unique journeys of prominent Sufi women in the *Silsilah*. Also, these case studies are presented to trigger further interest in learning and writing about women Sufis of the twenty-first century. Information is provided on processes, challenges and transformations that women went through while trying to tread on a spiritual path. Some earlier studies (as indicated in literature review section) have propagated that outside the Sufi traditions based in Western countries, women are not given leadership roles in Sufi traditions. The current study answers that misperception and indicates that six women and a young girl-child received *Dastar-i-Khilafat* (receiving the turban from the head of the Sufi *silsilah* as a symbol and permission of spiritual succession) along with 10 men. Women's role and authority was accepted, sometimes with a bit of hesitation from some men, yet still not rejected or undermined by any. When some selected women were asked to sit among mixed audience to lead discussion and answer questions on spiritual aspects of life, men did not hesitate to seek guidance from them. When eminent women like Baba Ji Iffat Ara Begum or Maan Ji were asked to represent Baba Jan's teachings or messages by explaining intricate issues related to spiritual life, their insights were respected and sought by both women and men. Primarily, due to Baba Jan's attentive, affectionate and gracious behaviour toward women, his men devotees were seen more willing to accept women's inclusion, participation, agency and authority. One can conclude that if figures of authority set good examples for gender parity, social change with regard to gender roles is far easier and acceptable.

Women's case studies also show their long and arduous journeys as well as their ardour to practically walk on the spiritual path while also fulfilling their social and familial obligations. The three major case studies and various short snapshots capture women's committed struggle to win

over themselves, their innate or socially learned behaviours transforming into high spiritual ideals and their spiritual ascension showing miraculous traits that many Sufis spend their lives to achieve. Their amazing and unbelievable love with their spiritual cause is their hallmark. The study observed that the wine of love that intoxicated them also purified them. While being drunk by the wine of love, they had the art of keeping the discipline and keep walking too. Such an awe-inspiring capacity to be simultaneously drunk and sober is the fruit of their spiritual *riaza* (effort). A conscious effort to play their gendered roles in the society while adopting a supra-gender identity through love and oneness helped them reach higher spiritual stations.

According to Baba Jan Sarkar, the true seeker of the Truth moves from the form to the formless, under the continuum of Absolute Being. The same is true in the question of gender. From gendered, limited, imprisoned identities of being men and women who can be only ‘this or that’ to a vaster, deeper and richer identity, which is outwardly singularly gendered and inwardly supra-gender help them overcome limitations of the biological or social roles prescribed for their gender. A boundless identity he tried to inculcate in them beyond all physical definitions.

The study has noted in above chapters that Baba Jan called both men and women ‘friends. When he wanted to call either men or women, separately or together, he would say, “*dostaun ko bula lain*” (call in friends). Calling a woman, a friend could have negative connotation in the social context of Jhang. He still used the same categorization for all, disregarding gender, which demonstrated equality of rank in front of him. It also showed his constant and unwavering focus on the ‘Friend’, a term frequently used by Sufis for God. It cannot be claimed that he originated most of the teachings he delivered. However, it can be confidently asserted that he practiced and exhibited a model not only in his life but also provided a laboratory to others to practice the same in their individual lives. Thus, Baba Jan Sarkar seemed more iconoclastic than his spiritual

predecessors given the difficult and challenging socio-religious setting in which he operated in Jhang. If Ibn Arabi or Ghauth Ali Shah were to visit him in the physical realm, they were to look at a mirror reflecting them. In the twenty first century, Baba Jan lived what they had taught many hundred years back.

An overall conclusion of this study is that Sufi values could only work if the spiritual leader was leading by example. Baba Jan Sarkar succeeded in growing change and transformation for better and higher character in his disciples as he exhibited the same first in himself. He worked on helping, supporting and facilitating transformation in them tirelessly. When he taught them love, he exhibited unconditional love practically every day without fail. When he taught them sacrifice, he gave it first by completely ignoring his comfort, privacy and personal interests. He lived for his devotees. In response, they lived for him. When he taught human, universal values, he welcomed and integrated teachings and people of other faiths to take his followers out of limited, narrow understanding of religion. Moreover, his magnetic charisma and spiritual powers also made an enormous impact on people. Not only that he had a charming personality full of positivity, soaring vision and a wonderful sense of humour. His strength of character, generosity, benevolence and a highly gnostic lifestyle that he practically lived created an inseparable bond with his disciples. He did not take a single day easy when he wanted to rest or not comfort and console people when they needed so. Both his charisma and his hard work operated hand in hand. Women and men changed under the influence of this incredible combination. They could transcend the boundaries of their social, gendered, small self, as they saw Baba Jan living a supra-gender role beyond egoistic clutches of personality. His blow was on their ego. Gender traits were also blown off when the ego weakened. Both men and women tried adopting a spiritual code of conduct, which included forgiveness, compassion, tolerance, joyfulness, and selflessness in all situations. Beyond that, there

was another even level asking for connecting with the universe unconditionally and reaching to oneness of humanity. They were no more ordinary people with ordinary thoughts. Baba Jan Sarkar seemed to have given them a new birth with a new identity and a higher worldview. They knew that men and women, all exist due to the ‘spirit’, the ‘One’ that has no name, no gender. Now, this knowledge demanded a code of conduct, a practice, to establish its rule in one’s life. They learned to understand, recognize and operate their every-day life under this this simple and obvious, yet a secret and sacred fact, which has made all the difference for them.

It is not possible to put an ocean of mystical knowledge into a chalice through a single research study. A mystic and spiritual master of as high and unique a stature as Baba Jan Sarkar deserves more and various sets of inquiries and analyses to grasp more of his spiritual treasures. In the current study, the thematic scope of the research clearly focuses on his teachings and relevant mystical doctrines on gender, women, femininity and masculinity. The study also looks at methods and training strategies of Baba Jan Sarkar, his relationship with his men and women disciples and an overall relationship of his insights with gender and women’s role in Sufism. The research attempts to explore the role and issues of women’s participation in Sufism from their own perspectives by capturing their stories as narrated by them. Their challenges, opportunities and transformation over the years regarding their life and worldviews is also one of the major themes that the research tries to cover.

Using the Sufi symbolism, the study concludes that the wine of love and oneness offered by Baba Jan Sarkar was not new. His chalice contained the Muhammadan wine from the Qadiri tavern with an Akbarian seal, that tasted just like the original and had the same effect of nullifying all delimitations including gender, caste and creed making people realize their true Self. It was the same old wine that had been prepared by the Holy Prophetﷺ and over the centuries have been

distributed by *Awlia Allah* including Sarkar Ghauth al-Azam, Shaykh al-Akbar Ibn Arabi, Baba Ji Ghauth Ali Shah Qadir Qalandar, whose selected teachings have been included in this study. However, Baba Jan Sarkar's chalice and his tavern was unique as it responded to the context of the twenty-first century.

Baba Jan's message of self-attainment and inseparable oneness of humanity is not a philosophy to be discussed but a way of life to practically adopt and live every moment, every day of life. His love was his discipline too. His practical Sufi way of life, although rooted in centuries old teachings, yet is fresh and unconventional given his geographical and social contexts. Ibn Arabi wrote *Fusus al-Hikam* around twelfth century and declared women as the perfect vessel for a perfect contemplation of divine. After nine hundred years, we see Dr Muhammad Youssuf Shaheen Shah, practically demonstrating these iconoclastic teachings in a city notorious for sectarian violence in the country. His wine had inebriated thousands, who learned to adopt supra-gender identities beyond feminine or masculine and serve as vessels of divine contemplation as well as equally capable human beings for their individual self-actualization.

Baba Jan Sarkar's *Shajrah-i-Tariqat*

(Spiritual Pedigree)

Qadiri Qalandari *Silsilah*¹⁴⁶

Our Lord and Master – *Sarkar-i do-alam*, the Holy Prophet Muhammad ﷺ

Baba Ji Sarkar Ali Murtaza (*Karam-Allah-u Wajh-u*)

Baba Ji Sarkar Hassan Basri

Baba Ji Sarkar Habeeb Ajmi

Baba Ji Sarkar Dawood Taa'i

Baba Ji Sarkar Khwaja Maroof Karkhi

Baba Ji Sarkar Khwaja Sirri Saqti

Baba Ji Sarkar Abu al-Qasim Junaid Baghdadi

Baba Ji Sarkar Abu Bakr Shibli

Baba Ji Sarkar Abdul Wahid Yamani

Baba Ji Sarkar Abdul Aziz Yamani

Baba Ji Sarkar Abu-al-Farrah Tartusi

¹⁴⁶ Although, Baba Jan Sarkar had received *khilafat* (spiritual succession) and *ijaza* (spiritual authority) from multiple Sufi *silsilahs*, his primary and major *silsilah* via his Murshid-i-Pak Baba Ji Fazl al-Rahman is included here for reference and historical record.

Baba Ji Sarkar Abu-al-Hassan Ali Al Quraishi, al-Hankari

Baba Ji Sarkar Abu Saeed Mubarak

Baba Ji Sarkar Ghauth al-Azam Sayyid-i-na Abdul Qadir Jilani

Baba Ji Sarkar Syed Abdul Razzaq

Baba Ji Sarkar Khwaja Abu Saleh Faqir

Baba Ji Sarkar Syed Ahmad Shah Ula

Baba Ji Sarkar Syed Shahab-ud-Din

Baba Ji Sarkar Syed Shams-ud-Din

Baba Ji Sarkar Syed Ala-ud-Din Shah

Baba Ji Sarkar Syed Noor Muhammd Shah

Baba Ji Sarkar Syed Abdul Jalal Sehrai

Baba Ji Sarkar Syed Bahawal Sher Qalandar

Baba Ji Sarkar Abu-al-Musa

Baba Ji Sarkar Muhkim-ud-Din Hajarwi

Baba Ji Sarkar Shah Amir Bala Pir

Baba Ji Sarkar Syed Abdul Latif Barri Imam

Baba Ji Sarkar Shaykh Darvesh

Baba Ji Sarkar Shah Ahmad Sahib Karatpuri

Baba Ji Sarkar Shaykh Abdul Latif Sani Karatpuri

Baba Ji Sarkar Madah Shah Mandarwi

Baba Ji Sarkar Syed Azam Ali Shah Babarwi

Baba Ji Sarkar Ghauth Ali Shah Qadir Qalanadar Pak

Baba Ji Sarkar Fazl al-Rahman

Baba Jaan Sarkar, Dr. Muhammad Youssuf Shaheen Shah, Qadir Qalandar Pak

Stories told by Baba Ji Ghauth Ali Shah Qadir Qalandar – An Excerpt

“There were once five travellers who were journeying together in great fellowship. One was a cook; one was a drunkard; one was a hafiz [one who has memorized the Qur'an]; one was a Sufi and one was a Brahmin. They passed through a jungle and heard the call of a black partridge. One of them asked, 'What is it really saying?' The cook said, 'Nothing but onion, garlic and ginger'. The drunkard said, 'No, it is saying that every religious jurist is malicious'. The hafiz recited the Qur'an, 'When We created the heavens'. The Sufi said, 'It is saying "Great is His power"'. The Brahmin said, 'Ram, Lakshamn and Jasrat'. And so everyone interpreted the partridge's call after their thought and temperament and nobody knew exactly what the partridge was saying. Many of the stories narrated in the *Tazkirat-ul Ghouseiya* deal with the oneness of all humankind and the essential unity of different religious paths attempting to reach the one. Each religion is unique, Hazrat Ghouse Ali Shah Qalandar Panipati (RA) suggested, and behind the historical manifestations of religious difference is a common quest for the Truth”.

The message of the unity of all human beings, transcending religious differences, underlies many stories contained in the *Tazkirat-i-Ghauthiyya*. In another story, Baba Ji Ghauth Ali Shah relates:

“Once there were four travellers passing through a dense forest. When they stopped to rest for the night, because of the dangers from highwaymen, robbers and wild animals, they decided they should keep a watch for each part of the night. The first watch was given to the wood sculptor. While he was sitting alone, his three companions sleeping, he took a piece of wood and began to carve. During his watch in the first quarter of the night he carved the figure of a beautiful woman. Then he woke one of his companions, a dressmaker, to take over the watch while he slept. Noticing what his friend had created and admiring his skill, the dressmaker decided to spend the time of his watch making a beautiful garment for her. After he had made the garment and dressed the statue, it was time to wake up the third watch of the night, who happened to be a jeweller.

This man decided to adorn the girl with beautiful jewellery from earrings to necklace, from bracelets to a beautiful belt for her waist. Now the last watch of the night was about to begin. The jeweller managed to wake the fourth man who was fast asleep, a good-for-nothing fellow with no skills or arts to speak of. The man rubbed his eyes to shake off his sleep and looked around in the pitch darkness broken only by the last embers of the fire which they had lit. In the light of that fading fire he saw to his utter amazement the figure of a beautiful woman, dressed and adorned. He looked at his three friends, now fast asleep, and admired their skills. He was perplexed because they had left nothing for him to add, and even if they had, he was unable to offer anything. So he felt very distressed at himself and thought how useless his life had been and was ashamed before these strangers whom he had met on the journey. The night was quickly receding as he rose with tears in his eyes and did the necessary ablution to offer a special prayer. There he sat in that still land before sunrise and raised his hands and prayed thus:

'Oh Almighty and Merciful Lord, give from your boundless mercy a little portion so that I may not be ashamed before these friends as this day rises. You are the Giver of Life, who gives

life to everything in the universe. You are Eternal. Bestow upon this figure the gift of life, which is in Your power alone to give'. At the first moment of daybreak, there was a movement in the figure and there she was, a breathing, beautiful woman. So when the travelers awoke, their eyes were filled, not only with the light of the rising sun, but also by the beauty of a living form before them whose miracle confounded them. They could not believe that a form carved out of dead wood could breathe and move.

Soon their bewilderment was replaced by mutual hostility as to who had greater claim over her. Each one talked about his contribution to her making, and the fool about his prayers. They had slept the previous night as friends but when they awoke the following morning they became bitter enemies. However, they agreed on one thing, that they should go into the city and present their case before the magistrate. This they did and the magistrate was baffled by the intensity with which each one of them stressed his part of the story. What mystified him most was the fact that the girl did not utter a single word, as if she were deaf and mute. We are of God, and unto God we return, says the Holy Qur'an, Hazrat Ghauth Ali Shah (RA) noted. Such is the case, he said, with all of us. As soon as we step into this world, we are surrounded by claimants of various kinds and powers -- parents claiming us because they brought us up; teachers claiming us because they gave us education; relatives claiming us because they are our kin; friends claiming us because they gave us their love; and rulers and employers claiming us because they gave us security and livelihood; and, if we happen to be Muslim, the Imams claim that we owe them our obedience; and if we happen to be Hindu, then the Pandits claims us because they have prayed for us in the temple. But a day shall come when these relationships and the claims that build upon them will all be nullified, and none shall ever know from where he came and where he went. On that day, each soul shall have much to worry about itself. On that day shall a man flee from his own brother, and from his mother and father, and from his wife and children, says the Holy Qur'an, Hazrat Ghauth Ali Shah (RA) instructed.”

Drawn from: Gul Hasan, *Solomon's Ring: The Life and Teachings of a Sufi Master*, trans. Hasan Askari (London: Sage Publication Ltd, 1998), 19-20.

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