

# *The Sufi presence in Pietermaritzburg*

*by Alleyn Diesel*

THE story of the Sufi presence in Pietermaritzburg starts in Durban; extends back to India, and to Sindh province in the lower reaches of the Indus River before it flows into the Arabian Gulf; begins in the wild, vast mountainous spaces of Afghanistan, South Asia, linking these cities with great expanses of ancient and more contemporary history.

Islam, like most major religious traditions, has a variety of branches which make up its complex worldwide faith. Just as the Christian tradition has many divisions such as Catholic, Orthodox and Protestant; so Islam has the Sunni, Shi'ite and Sufi branches, as well as other groups such as Wahhabism, Ba'athism, the Taliban, Al Qaeda, Al-Shebaab, and the Islamic State, much in the news lately. And just as all Christians cannot be lumped together as holding the same ethical values and

advocating the same behaviour and attitudes to various contemporary issues, so neither should Muslims. It is this unfair, ignorant approach to religions which feeds intolerance and prejudice, too often resulting in conflict and violence.

Sufism is more strictly a mystical worldview – seeking to discover divine love and knowledge through direct personal experience of the divine – than a sect of Islam. Although Sufis point out that the Prophet and His companions certainly had direct experience of the Divine presence, Sufism as originally an ascetic movement arose during the Umayyad Dynasty (661–749), less than a century after the founding of Islam. Initially it sought to challenge the worldliness creeping into the faith, but about a century later Sufism transformed from resolute asceticism to an emphasis on love, particularly demonstrated in the life and teaching

of Rabi'ah al-Adawiyah of Basra (d. 801) who propagated the idea of pure love in the approach to God, devoid of all motivation of fear of hell or hope of paradise.

Although both Hinduism and Christianity have extensive mystical traditions, including streams which are close to post-theism or monism, moving beyond veneration of deity in personal form, much Sufism is firmly within orthodox Islam. The mystical path should not be understood as removed from everyday life and the material world, interested only in occult knowledge and extreme spiritual practices such as visions, but a surrender to total love which intensifies the devotees' response to the beauty of the world and relationships. It transcends boundaries of culture, tradition, race and gender, reaching out in unanimous embrace of forbearance to all humankind.

In recent years the poetry of the great Sufi mystic Jalalud-Din Rumi (d. 1273) has become much venerated in America, Canada and other Western countries, spreading awareness of the richness of traditional Sufi mystical writings, Qawwali devotional music and dancing.

The first Sufi master to arrive in Durban, Natal, was in 1895 when Hazrath Soofie Saheb arrived from India. He was born in 1848 in Ratnagir, Maharashtra, north of Bombay on the coast of the Arabian sea. In 1892 Soofie Saheb had gone on Hajj to Mecca and Medina, where he experienced a strong draw to the mystical way, and set out in search of a spiritual guide to place him on the path of Sufism. He eventually was led to his Sufi Master Pir-o-Murshid Hazrath Khwaja Habibi Ali Shah of Hyderabad, now the capital of Andhra Pradesh, a large busy city which has

long combined both Hindu and Islamic influences. Hyderabad is a great centre of Islamic culture and Sufism, with a number of popular shrines of saints still forming an important part of the religious life of the city. Founded in 1591, the city was taken over by the Mughal Empire in 1687, and from 1724 till 1948 the Nizams ruled Hyderabad as an independent state, introducing the populace to Islamic arts, culture and learning. This Muslim influence is still reflected in the fact that Urdu remains the second language spoken.

Soofie Saheb's Master came from a long line of Sufi Sheikhs or Pirs (Peers), belonging to the Chishti (pronounced "Jishti") Habibi Sufi Order tracing their origins to Ali ibn Abi Talib, the cousin and son-in-law of Prophet Mohammad. After his initiation, Soofie Saheb's sheikh then sent him to witness for Islam in South Africa, as part of his Master's mission to send disciples to various parts of the world to propagate Islam in its purity and promote the Chishti path. (Khwaja Habibi Ali Shah died in 1904, and is buried in Hyderabad.)

The Chishti order had its origins in a small village called Chisth near Herat in Afghanistan where a Muslim scholar Abu Ishaq Shami (d. 940), probably born in Syria, settled and taught his mystical views. Later, the order took root in south Asia introduced by the Master, Khwaja Mu'in-ud-Din Chishti, Imam and Islamic scholar born in Persia, who lived between 1141 and 1236. Believed to be a descendant of the Prophet, he became known for his attitude of understanding and sympathy towards all people of all creeds. The Chishti Order is renowned for its emphasis on love, tolerance and openness, welcoming seekers from all faiths and backgrounds. Huge crowds are

attracted to festivals at Chishti shrines. One of Mu'id-ud-Din's close disciples is recorded as saying, "Oh you who sneer at the idolatry of the Hindu, learn also from him how worship is done." Having lived in Lahore for some time, Mu'in-ud-Din then moved to Ajmer in Rajasthan where he eventually died, and was buried in an elaborately beautiful shrine there. Every year hundreds of thousands of pilgrims flock to his shrine on the occasion of the anniversary of his death, the *Urs* Festival, celebrated by night-long Qawwali singing and dancing. (*Urs*, an Urdu word, literally means "marriage": that between the lover and the Beloved finally achieved at death.)

Chishti Sufism is particularly popular in Delhi and Ajmer in India, and the Punjab and Sindh areas of what is now Pakistan. On 11 October 2007 at the end of the fast of Ramadan extremists attacked the Ajmer shrine by exploding a bomb outside, killing three people and injuring 17 others. However, repairs were quickly implemented, and this event has not deterred the numbers of pilgrims who visit the site, one of the most popular Sufi shrines in India.

A vast network of Sufi *dargahs* – shrines erected over the tombs of saints – stretches from Hyderabad, to Delhi through Rajasthan and into Pakistan, with pilgrims travelling from one shrine to another to celebrate the annual *Urs* ceremonies of the various saints. The Sufi message of closeness to the Divine, striving for cosmic harmony and tolerance for those of all traditions, sustains its age-old appeal for the ordinary people, intensifying piety and bringing a sense of acceptance and solace found within this community. Few practising Sufis have any political aspirations, and their principles of abstaining from religious and social conflict have served

to promote peaceful relations among the populace, including Hindus and Christians as well as Muslims.

On arriving in Durban, Soofie Saheb bought a piece of land high above the north bank of the Umgeni River mouth to build a simple home. The young lawyer M.K. Gandhi, who became a close acquaintance of his, was practising as a lawyer in Durban at the time and drew up the trust deed for the property. When Soofie Saheb asked Gandhi what he owed him for his legal help, Gandhi, with perhaps some prescience, replied, "Just make me *maha* (great) like you." It was here that Soofie Saheb supervised the construction of a mosque, built in 1896 by an Italian builder – a simple, but attractive octagonal building with a pitched iron roof. This served as a *madressa*/seminary, and later an orphanage, clinic and a *khanqah* – hospice and lodge for spiritual retreats, and to accommodate and feed the poor and travellers – were also constructed; all typical of Chishti hospitality and generosity.

Tragically, in 1968 the apartheid Group Areas Act was responsible for the demolition of parts of the complex, some buildings being relocated to Kenville in Durban North, where in 1910 Soofie Saheb had bought another piece of land. However, in recent years worshippers have returned to the area and the buildings have been replaced and extended.

Soon after Soofie Saheb's arrival he was told of the life of Sheikh Ahmed who had come from Madras, India, in 1860, one of the small group of Muslims among the early, mainly Hindu, indentured labourers. He later became known as a mendicant, spending most of his time in the area of the early Grey Street Mosque and the nearby Brook Street

Muslim cemetery, where he established a reputation for himself as a “holy man with mystical powers”. He was often observed living in the courtyard of the mosque. On his death in 1895 he had been buried in the Brook Street cemetery, across the road from the mosque – where his grave was already being venerated. Soofie Saheb erected a shelter over the grave of Sheikh Ahmad, renaming him “Badsha (king) of the Pirs of his era”. So gradually Badsha Pir/Peer became recognised as a saint, with the shelter over the grave since being extended into a beautiful shrine.

Situated as the Muslim cemetery is in the midst of the huge, raucous hubbub of the Victoria Street market – previously the Indian Market dating back to 1910 – the contrast as one steps through the gate into the cemetery is reminiscent of what is known in Hinduism as a *tirtha*, a “crossing”, linking a secular with a sacred space, encountering an auspicious potency, a tranquil, attractive haven of *darshan*, evoking a sense of a spiritual presence. The place continues to draw large numbers of pilgrims, the present caretaker, Faizel, reporting up to 500 visitors a week.

In 1909 Soofie Saheb’s eldest son, Muhammad Ebrahim (b.1880) came from India to join his father in Durban, but was not happy so far from his home, so returned to India a few months later. After many years of travelling round India as a Sufi teacher, he died in 1955 and was buried in a shrine in Ajmer, near that of the much-revered founder of the Chishti Order, Khwaja Mu’inud-Din.

During his time in Natal, Soofie Saheb was responsible for establishing twelve Sufi centres – the majority in the Durban area, in Westville, Tongaat, Pietermaritzburg, Colenso and

Ladysmith, as well as one in Cape Town (1905) and one in Lesotho – travelling great distances by horse-drawn cart. The Ladysmith mosque is considered to be probably the most beautiful in the country and, although it was much extended in 1969, still retains features of the original Soofie Saheb structure.

Soofie Saheb purchased a piece of land in Pietermaritzburg in 1909, in East Street (now Masukwana Street), stretching down to the banks of the Dorpspruit, which at the time formed the boundary of the city. Moving here with his family, he established a mosque – built in Turkish style – *madressa* and quarters for staff. He immediately instituted a feeding scheme as was a feature of all the Sufi *khanqahs* worldwide.

Soofi Saheb became well-known for his tireless and compassionate work in Natal, and was responsible for establishing many charitable initiatives amongst the poor and dispossessed, acting as an inspiration to many, and attracting a great number of new adherents to Islam, including numerous Hindus whom he had assisted. On his death in 1911 he was buried in the octagonal shrine at Riverside which he had designed himself, which also contains the tomb of his mother, Hazrat Rabiah. This most imposing, well-maintained building which was much extended in the 1980s is now considered the shrine of a saint and a place of healing. It was declared a National Monument in 1978. There is also a separate attractive mosque. Soofie Saheb’s contribution to the life of this province is honoured by the re-naming of the road in which the Riverside complex stands as Soofie Saheb Drive.

Soofie Saheb’s third son, Hazreth Shah Kader Soofie Siddiqui, who had come with his mother to join his father

in Durban in 1897, grew up under his father's careful guidance and later lived with his parents in Pietermaritzburg. He soon became involved in the life of the community, visiting the sick and helping with Muslim burials, later becoming a trustee of the East Street mosque. But he was not destined to a long life, and died in 1940, aged 45.

On his death his widow Sayyida Khatoon Bibi Soofie continued living in the house adjacent to the mosque, doing the spiritual and pastoral work and service to the community, something of an innovation in Islamic tradition as women are not usually allowed such prominent roles. But the uniqueness of the Sufi tradition for



*East Street Sufi mosque*

transcending boundaries of gender, as well as of race, nationality and religion, made this more acceptable. She was affectionately known as Bhabi Saheba, but it became increasingly difficult for her to interact with the men of the congregation who had taken over the running the affairs of the mosque – Muslims unaffiliated to the Chishti Order. This difficult state of affairs continued for almost 40 years with the mosque buildings becoming rather dilapidated and in need of repair.

Her son, Shah Goolam Mohamed Soofie (b.1938), had received his education from the Madressa in Pietermaritzburg and from his parents, and in 1970 he married Nizambi Soofie, the youngest daughter of Hazrath Shah Mohamed Habib Soofie of the Soofie Darbar in Springfield, Durban. They had a son Abdul Kadir Soofie, and she had a daughter Rueda, who is a doctor in Stanger, and a son Zameer, from her marriage with her late husband.

Shah Goolam Mohamed Soofie had gone into business in Durban, running a very successful furniture factory, feeling no compunction to intervene in the problems at the Pietermaritzburg mosque. However, he continued with his attachment to the Sufi community established by his grandfather in Durban, and in 1977 went to India to visit the shrine of his uncle and sheikh Shah Ebrahim Soofie at Ajmer. While meditating there, he suddenly felt he had been given a message: “You need to get back to the work of your forefathers. What are you going to do about the mosque in Pietermaritzburg?”

On returning to Durban, Goolam said to his family, “In three months I’ll challenge them!” And he set about passing his business on to other members of his family. He then went frequently to the

tomb of his grandfather, Soofie Saheb, at Riverside to sit and meditate, asking for help to take on his new responsibilities. He received the enthusiastic support of his family. While he was engaged in sorting out his business in Durban, Goolam appealed to his nephew, Imam Irshad, who was teaching in Johannesburg, to move to Pietermaritzburg to assist with the situation there. On arriving in Pietermaritzburg, Goolam tried to persuade the incumbent administrators of the mosque to relinquish their claim, but they maintained that after 35 years they held a legitimate right to possession. So, reluctantly, he decided to take them to court to contest this.

Having engaged Advocate Booysen to act on their behalf, an extremely lengthy Supreme Court case ensued, only finally being resolved in favour of the Sufi family after several years of stress. So, the Mosque was restored to its original Chishti Soofie family, with Soofie Saheb’s grandson Goolam, his son Abdul Kader Soofie and nephew Imam Irshad Soofie forming the Trust. Bhabi Saheba, who had for all these years struggled against the odds to keep the institution in the family, faithfully maintaining her vegetable garden at the back of the mosque near the river, was overjoyed. She lived until 1991, being part of the new developments there. So, the influential work of the Chishti Sufi tradition was assured its continuance in Pietermaritzburg, the yellow and red flag of the Chishti order flying daily over the building.

Despite all predictions by those who had claimed ownership over the previous 35 years that most of the congregation would leave if the Sufi family took over, it soon became evident that increasingly growing numbers were attending prayers and



other functions, so that the original mosque capable of accommodating approximately 450 worshippers would need to be extended. Thus, in the early 1990s construction was commenced to rebuild a larger mosque, which today can accommodate at least 1500 people. Weekly Friday prayers attract anything between 300 and 400 people. At present, at the age of 77, Goolam Soofie, chief trustee and “Caretaker”, is ably assisted by his son Abdul Kader Soofie and nephew Imam Irshad Soofie in the daily running of the complex. Imam Moosa from Malawi also plays an active role.

In the old Jewish and Muslim cemetery off Roberts Road in Clarendon, Pietermaritzburg, traditionally known to Muslims as the Darwana-Shahenshah cemetery – with graves dating back to 1882 – are the shrines of two Sufi saints, Hazrat Saayah Bawa and Hazrat Qaasim Bawa, who were well-known to Soofie Saheb’s family, as well as the community in the area near the East Street Mosque. The tomb of a third, woman, saint has also been added

more recently. Known only as Zainab, she is reputed to have been connected to the male saints. These shrines are the centre of an annual *Urs Shareef* ceremony attracting large crowds. The complex is presently administered by Omar Saanglai and his wife Shariffa.

The wonderful work of Dr Imtiaz Sooliman of the Pietermaritzburg Gift of the Givers, whose search and rescue teams have provided life-saving aid at disaster scenes worldwide, with medical supplies, treatment and urgently-needed nutrition, was founded in direct response to the instruction of Sufi Teacher and Master Saffer Effendi al-Jerrahi, who initiated Sooliman into a Sufi order in Istanbul in 1992. The sheikh said to Sooliman: “You will form an organisation. You will serve all peoples of all races, of all religion, of all colours, of all classes, of all political affiliations and of any geographical location, and you will serve them unconditionally.” Their work has become a shining example of Sufi commitment to the service of all humankind, changing the lives of countless people.



*Shrine of a Sufi saint in Roberts Road Cemetery, Clarendon, Pietermaritzburg*

Asked about the overall influence of the Sufi path on his life, Soofie Goolam explains how, firstly, the law (*Shariah*) must be perfected, not as a series of negatives of what not to do, but as opportunities to fulfil one's journey by living in the spirit of the Prophet and merging with the Creator, the Almighty, who is infinite energy. Meditation, the constant "remembrance of Allah" – opening up to God – finding inner peace, and realising that wherever one turns, there is the face of Allah. He maintains that when you come from such a long line of Sufis, going back to the Prophet himself, being a Sufi is in your blood, in your genes.

Goolam explains that the Chishti branch of Sufism is particularly colourful and joyful, frequently expressing this elation in the singing of Qawwali devotional music, and dancing *ruqs* similar to the twirling dervish movements which express the ecstasy of communion with divine love. In fact, the origin of Qawwali music is accredited to a Chishti saint, Amir Khusro Dehlavi of Delhi, who lived between 1253 and 1325. A scholar in Persian poetry and music, he wrote many love songs poignantly expressing joy at his devotion for God, the yearning of the soul for union with the Divine, and the agony of separation from the beloved. Although seemingly secular at first hearing, the expressions of longing for wine and intoxication in the taverns sung about in *ghazal* are metaphors where "wine" conveys the knowledge and intoxication of union with the Beloved in the tavern, the sacred recess, where the soul achieves spiritual enlightenment. Other Qawwali songs praise God, and the Prophet and Sufi saints, with laments for the beloved dead also part of the repertoire. Similar

to dervish whirling which begins slowly, gradually building momentum to fervent spinning on the still point of the axis, Qawwalis often begin slowly and gently, developing faster rhythms and a high level of energy which generates hypnotic, ecstatic states in both the musicians and the audience. The songs then end suddenly, and the excitement subsides. Originally only performed in specifically religious contexts such as Sufi shrines and tombs, Qawwali music has become popular in mainstream traditions worldwide.

Sufi mystics believe that these states of ecstasy resulting in whirling dancing are bestowed by Allah and approved by the Prophet. Achieving such close apprehension of divinity can induce loss of one's senses, producing an immense spiritual energy which comes upon the heart unexpectedly, leading to a self-transcendence and total focus on God.

Beauty in all its forms – singing, performing Qawwali, listening to poetry, being moved by the season of Spring and its flowers – can evoke ecstatic expressions of love.

With regard to the challenge of extremist forms of Islam, such as ISIL/ISIS, Goolam believes the most important thing is to continually demonstrate love and tolerance, as opposed to divisiveness and intolerance. He says humans are the highest part of creation because they have the freedom to choose, and to choose love as opposed to hate and destruction. Truth will finally be victorious, and eventually the *Madhi* – "he who is guided", the successor to the Prophet Muhammad – will be sent by God to bring justice and true knowledge to the world, and to teach all humanity how to live in love and peace.

However, his nephew, Irshad, points to a number of contemporary Islamic



scholars, many of them Sufis, who are actively challenging extremist forms of the faith by preaching internationally against this view of religion. Two whom he finds particularly powerful and articulate are Muhammad al-Yaqoubi, a Syrian Sheikh who supports the Syrian uprising against Bashar al Assad and condemns ISIS, and Hamza Yusuf, an American convert to Islam who has been named by both *The Guardian*, UK, and *The New Yorker* as “the Western world’s most influential Islamic scholar”. Both scholars are ranked in “The 500 Most Influential Muslims”. Irshad also recommends the fascinating novel by Elif Shafak, a Turkish author who divides her time between Istanbul and London, called *The Forty Rules of Love*, based on the life and teachings of the great Sufi mystic Rumi.

Numbers of contemporary Chishti Sufi devotees from KwaZulu-Natal still make pilgrimages to visit the shrine of Mu’in-ud-din in Ajmer – also to the tombs of those members of the local KZN Sufi saints buried there.

Sufism stands as a beacon of tolerance, peaceful acceptance of other traditions, and empathy for all

humanity, encouraging appreciation of all things beautiful, because, as God is beautiful he loves the beautiful – a shining example of religion attempting to bring people together, promoting the wellbeing of all humanity. As such, Sufism, the other face of Islam, is at the centre of the contemporary struggle for the soul of Islam; possibly the most potent challenge to the fundamentalist intolerance and destructiveness of extremist Islamic movements such as ISIL, the Taliban, Al Qaeda, and Al-Shebaab.

As Jalalud-Din Rumi said, “Be a lamp, a lifeboat, a ladder, help someone’s soul heal. Walk out of your house like a shepherd.”

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