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The Mystery of the Nizamuddin Dargah: The Accounts of Pilgrims

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PROLOGUE

One approach in the social sciences attempts to explain the experience of people in terms of categories of which the people themselves may not be conscious. Religion, for instance, has been explained in terms of its functional importance to social integration (Durkheim), or in terms of maintaining the status quo (Marx). The present study attempts to look at subjective experience and its meaning to those who participate in the rituals of the Nizamuddin dargah. This approach made it difficult to pursue research with the conventional methods of data collection, namely dispassionate survey and interview methods. It became necessary to employ a different methodology by which empathy with the experiences of the respondents was important. In a sense, the methodology drew its inspiration from the Weberian tradition of *Verstehen* (an interpretive approach). The respondents' initial reticence to talk about their intimate experiences and feelings was slowly overcome by repeated efforts to establish a meaningful rapport by attempting to win them over as friends. Subsequently, they made themselves

* My first debt is to the pilgrims, pirs and pirzade of the Nizamuddin dargah who allowed me to study them and their dargah. The second debt is to Mohamed Talib, who initiated me into the methods of research with support and encouragement. Finally, I am indebted to C. W. Troll for moral and intellectual support. The opinions expressed in this paper are my own. The material was gathered during field-work in the Nizamuddin dargah, Delhi, between April 1985 and February 1986.

available for longer discussions on their experiences in the dargah, the relevance of the saint and his dargah to their lives, the loss of purposefulness that the dargah had restored.

The word 'mystery' in the title of this essay is used in the sense of something which is present or confronts one and yet is ever distant. It is not something persons can master, but that which persons let themselves be grasped by. Therefore, it is something that retains its character as mystery even though it reveals itself to persons.¹

INTRODUCTION

Thousands of people from different parts of India and other countries, backgrounds, classes and even religions visit the Nizamuddin dargah regularly every year. Muslims are the largest group of visitors, Hindus coming next, followed by Sikhs, and occasionally a few Christians. Most of them come to pray at the tombs of Hazrat Nizamuddin (1239–1325) and his disciple, Amir Khusrau, which are a few hundred feet from each other. After paying their respects to the saints—first at the tomb of Amir Khusrau, since he is believed to serve as the gate-keeper of the dargah, and then at the tomb of Hazrat Nizamuddin—a considerable number of visitors meet their *pirs* (spiritual directors), who claim to be descendants of Hazrat Nizamuddin and who sit either at the shrines or in their respective offices built along the wall of the dargah. However, some people (they are so few as to be hardly noticeable) come only to visit the *pirs*, paying their respects at the tombs only to please them.

Aware of the harsh criticism directed against the dargah and its practices by orthodox Muslims—it is considered unIslamic and a falsification of the teachings of Islam—it is worth wondering why Muslims of all classes (though the poor are preponderant) continue to visit the dargah regularly. I have even found people who, while officially criticizing the dargah, pray at the tomb of Hazrat Nizamuddin. Visiting and praying at tombs, especially of holy people, is by no means a recent Islamic phenomenon. It is, as some *pirzade* (custodians of the dargah) proudly relate, an ancient one practised all over the Muslim world, and goes back to the example

Karl Rahner, *Foundations of the Christian Faith*, tr. William V. Dych (London: Darton Longman and Todd, 1978), pp. 44–86.

set by Prophet Muhammad himself. The Nizamuddin dargah forms part of this tradition and, according to some of the pirzade, has never been bereft of pilgrims.

PETITIONERS AND SEEKERS OF MATERIAL FAVOURS

At first I was led to believe, both by the pirzade and the pilgrims themselves, that people come to the dargah mainly to acquire something, be it from God through the intercession of the saint, or from the saint who is seen as God's representative, or from the pirs and pirzade who, because they are related to the saint through blood ties, are perceived as possessing spiritual power or influence over the saint.

It is true that pilgrims come to the dargah with all kinds of petitions and requests. Those who find it difficult to communicate verbally with the saint write out their petitions on pieces of paper which they tie to the grilled walls surrounding the shrine of Hazrat Nizamuddin. Others tie strings and pieces of cloth torn from their clothing to the grilled wall of the shrine to remind the saint of their requests and themselves of their commitment to feed or clothe the poor of the dargah as soon as their requests have been granted. A sampling of some typical petitions, which cover a wide range, is provided in the following paragraphs.

Some pilgrims seek cures beyond the competence of ordinary doctors; for instance, a pirzada told me of a cancer patient who, after sitting at the shrine of Hazrat Nizamuddin for three months, praying and eating nothing but the rose petals strewn regularly by pilgrims on the tomb, was cured of the illness. On the other hand, many do not go to a doctor at all and seek cures for the most ordinary illnesses: skin irritations, boils and common colds. Others come to prevent the recurrence of a calamity in their lives. For instance, one forty-year-old man told me that seven brothers and sisters before him were still-born. Fearing that he too would be still-born, his parents came and prayed at the tomb of Hazrat Nizamuddin. Thankful for sparing their eighth child's life, his parents became annual pilgrims. The son continues visiting the dargah every six months, even though he lives in Calcutta. A Hindu woman told me she has been visiting the dargah for the last thirty years to ensure that her only surviving child continues to live.

A few pilgrims come to beseech to bring about a favourable verdict in court cases they are fighting. I once met one such person feeding as many beggars as he could find at a nearby restaurant. He told me that a relative had tried to rob him of his ancestral house. On filing a case to regain possession of the house, he had come to pray at the tomb of Hazrat Nizamuddin. Now that the saint had granted his request and given his home back to him, he had returned to the dargah and, having thanked the saint verbally, was now expressing his gratitude in action by feeding the poor who, he said, 'come to the saint for food'.

Some people are brought to the dargah by family members, well-wishers and friends to be exorcised from evil jinns or spirits. I was told of a woman who, because she was possessed by a jinn, had withdrawn completely into herself. She was brought by force to the shrine of Amir Khusrau where she began to wail and hit her head on the grilled marble wall of the shrine. After much prayer and supplication to the saint by the people who had brought her, the jinn left her and she returned to her normal self. Another woman told me that Hazrat Nizamuddin, after repeated prayers to him at his shrine, had driven out a jinn who had haunted her house, giving her and her family immense trouble.

A note attached to the grilled wall of the shrine of Hazrat Nizamuddin read: 'Bring back my wife who has run away, deserting our children and myself.' An old woman told me that her husband and son were always at loggerheads with each other, making the home an impossible place. The father constantly suspected the son of being on drugs, and the son, while protesting his innocence, accused the father of wasting his money on adulterous liaisons. On the advice of a friend who regularly visits the dargah, she began to pray regularly to Hazrat Nizamuddin, visiting the dargah whenever she found time. As the months went by, she found them tolerating each other, becoming eventually friendly with each other.

An elderly man told me he could not keep a job for any length of time. 'Finally', he said,

I decided to come to Delhi and pray at the tomb of Hazrat Nizamuddin, hoping that he would solve my problem. Consequently, I got a job at one of the restaurants near the dargah. Little problems that arise during the normal course of work and which earlier made me leave other jobs began to disappear. At last, I found I could hold a job. And I have kept this one for the last ten years.

THE ROLE OF THE PIRS AND PIRZADE

Besides organizing the feasts, maintaining the dargah and the peace within it so that people can pray, the pirs and pirzade claim to have spiritual powers of their own, if not on account of personal holiness, then because they are blood relatives of the saint and have been handed down these powers generation after generation. They guide the pilgrims and visitors as to the manner in which they should pray, trying to turn half-hearted Muslims into fervent ones, and leading to their God those who belong to other faiths. One pir said, 'People of all faiths are loved here. A different religion is no barrier since all people are the same in the eyes of the saint. Because there is one God, all people are one. The saint acts as God acts, treating all people equally, whatever their faith or status—all people are equal here.' The pirs effect cures and miracles through *ta'wizes* (amulets), which are prayers, more often verses from the Quran, usually written but sometimes recited, on various materials which are either worn, drunk, burnt or eaten by the pilgrims. One woman had taken a *ta'wiz* from one of the pirs because her husband, a captain in the army, was listed as missing during the Bangladesh war. A month after she had taken the *ta'wiz* her husband returned to her after escaping from a prisoner-of-war camp. Another time I met a Hindu who had been brought by a Muslim to one of the pirs of the dargah because it was believed that he was possessed by a jinn who threw him into fits and who would make him run away from home for days on end. The pir to whom he was taken recited some verses of the Quran on some drinking water. Rose petals from the tomb of Hazrat Nizamuddin and Amir Khusrau were immersed in this and he was asked to drink that water every morning and evening.

The pirs and pirzade are also approached for advice on all kinds of problems, both spiritual and mundane, and for monetary help. One poor Hindu who had just come to Delhi lost his five-year-old daughter in a road accident. One afternoon, when I was present, he approached the pirzade for help to release her corpse from the police morgue, and for money to conduct the funeral rites. To please the pirzade he even offered to have her buried like a Muslim. The pirzade told him to cremate her as per his Hindu custom and promised to pay all the expenses so incurred. Then they sent one of their own men to help him get the corpse released and to arrange the funeral.

PILGRIMS AND DEVOTEES ON A SPIRITUAL QUEST

Quite early in my interviews I found people who, contrary to the information I was given earlier, visited the dargah on a regular basis, some once a week, others every four or five hours, or every day, without the intention of acquiring anything from the saints, the pirs and pirzade. As my interviews progressed, I found this group of people formed the majority. In due course I realized that these people had not always belonged to this group. In most cases they visited the dargah initially on the advice of friends or well-wishers to find a solution to pressing problems, and hence belonged to the first category. For instance, one man told me that before he began visiting the dargah he suffered from cirrhosis of the liver. For one year he went from one doctor to another, seeking a cure, but without success. Finally, a friend advised him to go to Nizamuddin saying,

Do not ask these doctors to cure you. Ask God to cure you, for only he can truly cure. Even doctors try to cure through his power. Go to the saint, Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya. He has a power within himself given him by God, and that power is meant to be used even for your benefit.

The man said he came to the dargah, prayed to the saint, and was eventually cured. A poor man told me he had initially come to the dargah with his body covered with sores, which made life unbearable. He said, 'I do not believe in medicine and therefore did not go to a doctor. Rather, I prayed to the saint and Allah cured me through his intercession. Now I visit the dargah every week.'

Many others are reticent about the problems that drove them finally to the dargah. They prefer to state the change that took place in their lives as the result of their pilgrimage. One Hindu, who owns a truck and is constantly on the move, told me that there was a time when he did not own a truck, and had many problems. A Muslim friend gave him some literature on the dargah. The next time he arrived in Delhi he visited the dargah and prayed to the saint, with the desired beneficial consequence: 'Ever since that day I have had no problems worth mentioning. The saint takes care of me. Even then, I come to the dargah whenever I have to pass through Delhi, for it is a holy place.'

A businessman told me he used to visit the dargah as a child with his mother. But, as he grew up, he gave up the practice. As the years passed he found himself with problems which defied solution. In desperation, he visited the dargah. After that, he said,

the problems began to disappear. Now, problems do come my way, but they are small and disappear quickly. I visit the dargah every month and bring my wife and child along. I do not ask for anything, for the saint knows and sees to all my needs. When I come here, I feel a sense of peace and quiet and I forget the world with all its meanness and problems.

THE PILGRIMS' EXPERIENCES OF THE SAINT AND THEIR INTERPRETATIONS

Continued interviews with those who visit the dargah regularly, expecting nothing specific, revealed their unshakeable faith that Hazrat Nizamuddin is alive. They often said, 'He is not dead. He has only put a veil between himself and us, ordinary mortals. That is why we cannot see him.' But sometimes he is believed to appear to some people. These appearances are taken as a mark of special favour and love. They occur in places where many people are present, but it is only the chosen few who are gifted with the ability to see him. The son of one pir told me he overheard one regular visitor to the dargah tell his father that whenever he entered the shrine of Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya, he saw him sitting cross-legged on his tomb. Another young pirzada told me that 'many of the older generation had seen the saint. Unfortunately, this is not so common today because not many are interested in spiritual attainment.' One middle-aged woman confided that she had on many occasions seen the saint walking around the dargah. Others have seen the saint in dreams. A woman told me she sees the saint in a dream every time she recites the Quran on the side of the tomb where his head is supposed to lie. Still others talked of an experience of the personal presence of the saint every time they entered the dargah.

Because of the saint's personal holiness and close association with God the dargah, the place where he is 'most certainly present', is called holy ground. Pilgrims and pirzade stress the holiness of the place by pointing to the behaviour of all who enter the dargah, contrasting it with the behaviour of people who visit the tombs of other famous and powerful Muslims—Emperor Humayun's tomb being a favourite point of comparison (this is opposite the Nizamuddin dargah). One pirzada, reiterating these views on different occasions, said:

In Humayun's tomb, the tomb of a very famous and powerful emperor, people walk around with their shoes on and their heads uncovered. They talk aloud and laugh, showing absolutely no respect for the great person buried there. But here the atmosphere is different. Everyone who enters, even tourists, come in removing their shoes, covering their heads and talking in low tones, without being told. They walk around the dargah with respect, and most pray, instinctively feeling the presence of the saint.

I was also told the story of a man who dared sweep the inner shrine of Hazrat Nizamuddin, a task reserved only for the pirzada. One evening there was an interesting play in progress near the dargah, to which most of the pirzade had gone. The pirzada whose turn it was to sweep and close the shrine also wished to attend. But finding no other pirzada to take his place, he delegated the job to a friend. When he, along with some other pirzade, returned from the play later that evening, they found the shrine still open and suffused in a strange light. On entering the shrine they saw a man flat on his face with a broom in his hand. They immediately took him out of the shrine and poured water on his head. When he regained consciousness he told them that as soon as he had started sweeping the shrine a powerful ray of light emerged from the tomb and struck him down. He was very frightened and had no recollection of what happened after that. The pirzade immediately said some prayers to appease the angry saint and themselves swept the shrine.

However, the pirzade and pilgrims do not dwell only on the fear element pertaining to the holiness of the place. They are quick to point out another element which exists side by side and is much more in evidence—love. Pilgrims talk of the saint loving them personally, as they are, with all their problems and defects. This love is not restricted to a few but extends to all, even those who do not visit the dargah. One pirzada told me of a poor man who fifteen years earlier swept the area in front of the shrine of Hazrat Nizamuddin every day, out of devotion to the saint. Once, while sweeping, he thought to himself that the saint would not know him or the humble service he performed, there being so many important and more worthy persons visiting him daily. While thinking thus he heard a voice call out to him. Looking around and seeing no one, he continued with his work. Then he heard the same voice call out to him a second time. Thinking that someone from within the shrine was calling out to him, he entered the shrine. There he saw a dis-

embodied arm hanging erect above the tomb, with the palm of the hand open and facing him. And, at the same time, he heard a voice say to him: 'I know by name every single person who passes by Delhi Gate. How can you think that I do not know of your existence and of the humble service you do me every morning?' I was also told by many of a woman who was very worried because she could not get her daughter married for lack of means to provide her with a suitable dowry. One day this woman happened to be praying to the saint in the mosque, which is in the dargah and a few feet away from the shrine of Hazrat Nizamuddin. As she prayed, one of the two gold bowls hanging from the roof of the mosque fell at her feet. Seeing the gold bowl as a gift from the saint to pay her daughter's dowry, she took it away.²

Very often, cures from various illnesses and solutions to problems are taken as proofs of the saint's deep love for those who visit him. Usually the saint waits for persons to approach him first. Even then, some do not have their petitions granted. Such persons console themselves by saying that the saint is testing them, and assure themselves of the saint's love for them by repeating to themselves the good things the saint has done for others. But in some rare instances the saint approaches persons even before they know of his existence. For instance, one woman told me:

Eight years ago I had terrible problems and I did not know what to do. One night whilst in the midst of those problems, I saw a very old man in a dream telling me not to worry, for all would go well. Then I awoke and inexplicably experienced deep peace and contentment. And just as the man in the dream had said, the problems really did disappear. Three years later my husband was transferred to Delhi. Hearing of this famous dargah I decided to pay it a visit. When I arrived here I recognized it as the surroundings of the old man in my dream. And I realized that the old man who had appeared to me was none other than Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya. Ever since I have come to visit him once every week and sometimes twice.

Whether the pilgrims approach Hazrat Nizamuddin first or vice versa makes no difference to the pilgrims. In both cases they see him as loving them first. Moreover, they see his love as undeserved,

² The pīrzada admit hearing this story but claim it to be false. The pilgrims explain the pīrzada's rejection of the story by saying that the pīrzada have no other option, for their job is to protect the treasures of the dargah.

and for that reason all the more profound, for they cannot lose his love because of their own unworthiness. This makes pretences before him superfluous. Thus the place where he dwells, the dargah, is the place where they can be themselves. Those who are in pain cry out aloud without shame. Some pilgrims go so far as to openly admit their utter sinfulness, begging the saint for forgiveness and peace.

Together with this deep sense, of being loved as they are, is a deep assurance of being protected by the saint from reprisals. A few denounce the pīrzade and their malpractices to their face, and the pīrzade only try to laugh it away. One fakir, who was literally shouting abuses at the government and the country's rulers, told me: 'The saint will protect me as he has always done. The police have on many occasions tried to arrest me because of my criticism, but they have always been prevented from doing so.'

This deep, undeserved and protective love for them, the pilgrims point out, is in accordance with the life of the saint:

He gave up marriage in order to be more available to serve the poor and the needy. . . . He regularly received large sums of money, but always distributed it to the poor who would crowd his *khanqah*, keeping nothing for himself. . . . Every afternoon he would feed whoever came to visit him with the best possible food. . . . Once a visitor seeing the quality of the *langar* he served decided to eat with the pir himself, thinking to himself that since the *langar* was so good, the pir's lunch would have to be tasted to be believed. Accordingly, he insisted on lunching with the pir himself and eating only what he ate. The pir and his disciples tried their best to dissuade him, telling him he would regret his decision but without success. Finally, after everyone had had his fill at the *langar*, the pir invited him to lunch with him. A small bowl of very bitter vegetable was placed before them. After inviting him to being, the saint began to eat the most inedible parts of the vegetable, leaving aside the tastier, fleshy parts. The guest was surprised and asked if anything would follow. The saint replied that this was the only food he ate and that he had invited him to join only because he had insisted on eating only what he himself ate. The guest tried to eat but was unable to. In the end he left with great humility and respect for the saint. . . . Indeed, many a time the saint refused to eat even that inedible meal out of solidarity with the countless poor who would have to go hungry.

Today, the pilgrims point out, the saint continues to feed the poor and the hungry through the rich pilgrims who visit him.

What is far more important, the pilgrims say, is that he makes them acceptable to God: 'This holy man who is very close to God and still deeply concerned for us and for our welfare understands our plight, for he was a man like us. Therefore, he is able to take our case to God, intercede on our behalf and make us more acceptable to him.' People come in large numbers to say the namaz on Thursday evening, and on Friday and Sunday afternoons, believing that he prays with them and makes up for defects and deficiencies in their prayers. A few pilgrims and some pirsade talk of the strength the saint has given them to follow more strictly the tenets of Islam, thus enabling them to be more pleasing to God. Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya is, in effect, the mediator between the pilgrims and God. Both the pilgrims and the pirsade are very fond of saying:

One does not approach the King [God] directly. First, one approaches the gate-keeper [Amir Khusrau] and then the courtier [Hazrat Nizamuddin], leaving it to him to plead one's case before the King, trusting fully that he will try his best to bring about a happy verdict. Hazrat Nizamuddin is the beloved of God and therefore God always listens to him.

When reminded of the Quranic injunction that there is no one between a person and God, they respond,

Of course, one can approach the King directly. But when one looks at oneself and sees one's own unworthiness, one knows that there is a far greater possibility of being rejected and condemned, than accepted. Therefore it is much better to approach the King through the courtier, especially this one, for besides being loved by the King, he loves us.

THE PILGRIMS' RESPONSE TO THE SAINT

Generally, the response evoked is one of love, gratitude, reverence, often expressed also by the distribution of alms.³

³ However, not all respond to the saint with gratitude and love. I came across only one case of ingratitude. A man who is a regular visitor to the Tablighi Jama'at, but who is very opposed to the dargah and its practices, makes great efforts to draw people away from the dargah. This man is also very critical of the dargah, even though he was once forced to go there and pray for a job. In order to get his petition granted he stayed outside the shrine of Hazrat Nizamuddin for two weeks. Consequently, he got a job as a cook in the Gulf. Now

The saint's love for them, the pilgrims say, has evoked from deep within themselves a deep love for him. Their regular visits to the dargah is one expression of this love they bear him. One said, 'I make it a point to come here as often as I can because I love this saint who loves me so much.' Another said, 'I come to give my attendance to the saint. I want him to know that I have not forgotten his love or taken it for granted.' Many have said, 'I feel a deep sense of happiness and peace whenever I am here, close to the saint.' One woman told me, 'I feel the supporting presence of the saint wherever I am. But all the same, I just have to come here to visit him and express my thanks and love for him.' Very important to these people is the *'urs* (feast day of the saint), for 'that is his big day and keeping away from him on that day would be the most unpardonable of offences.'

Once in the dargah, the pilgrims kiss the steps leading to the shrines of Amir Khusrau and Hazrat Nizamuddin, and the thresholds of the doorways to their shrines. On entering the shrines they spread rose petals on the tombs and, after greeting the saints, walk around the tomb, at the end of which they kiss the *chaddar* (the cloth covering the tomb) and the small marble fence surrounding the tomb, sometimes touching their eyes and cheeks against these. Before leaving the shrine they lift the chaddar on that side of the tomb where the feet of the saints are supposed to lie, and pull it over their heads, touching their faces to the tomb. Once outside the shrines they light incense sticks, explaining all these actions as manifestations of their love for the saint. Finally, they go to the side of the shrine where the head of Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya is supposed to lie and recite a part or the whole of the Quran, saying that the saint loves to hear it recited to him, for it is the word of God. Explaining their actions further, they say:

When someone loves another, for example a child, he wants to touch him and kiss him and be with him all the time doing him services that he likes. So it is between us and the saint. We do not worship the saint knowing that worship is due to God alone, but we love him deeply and are ready to do anything for him.

The pilgrims also manifest their love for the saint by putting into

he is back after completing his contract but does not visit the dargah, even though his house is next to it.

the collection-box whatever they can afford. They know that this money is not only for the maintenance of the dargah but also for the upkeep of the pirezade who look after the dargah. They say of them: 'Whatever their faults and failings, they are the blood relatives of the saint. And they serve an important function by maintaining the dargah, keeping order and praying for us.' Finally, they give food, clothing and money to the poor and beggars whenever possible, saying that in this they are continuing the work of Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya, and in the bargain becoming instruments of his love for them and themselves, drawing closer to God.

For the pilgrims, pirs and pirezade the mystery of God's love for man, manifest in Hazrat Nizamuddin's love and concern for them, is the realization of salvation. The entrance into this mystery is not a matter of human intelligence or mere rationality, but a gift to be received with gratitude, in faith and with a pure heart.

Soul of the Soulless: An Analysis of Pir-Murid Relationships in Sufi Discourse

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and
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This paper presents an interpretive analysis of Sufi practice based on interviews with believers affiliated to a dargah in Bareilly, UP.

We would like to clarify at the outset that the word 'soulless' does not here allude to the state or status of the believer. The word contains within it a symptom of the life of a society rather than the lifelessness of an individual. Though borne by an individual, the tormenting prose of soullessness, however obnoxious the term may be, is authored by society. Hence, depicting the individual's quest for the soul turns out to be a saga of society's soullessness.

The respondents belong to a clan whose ancestors were locally known as 'the maulwis' and traditionally held a *zamindari*. They lived in huge *havelis* in a settlement called Bachhraon in the Moradabad district of Uttar Pradesh. The dilapidated brick structures, supported on wooden beams and surrounding spacious halls and courtyards, still stand at Bachhraon. With the abolition of *zamin-dari*, however, the clan has steadily grown into a spatially dispersed aggregate of nuclear households. The kinsfolk are spread over many towns and cities in the state, seeking a livelihood while maintaining

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