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Miracle and Sufi Construction: Space of Society in South Indian Sufism

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ABSTRACT

Miracle (*Karama* in Arabic) is an exclusive realm of *Sufi* community. It constructs a *sufi* and, ultimately, *sufism* as a social category. Many a time, the social existence of a *Wali* itself is based on his miraculous activities. Since the *sacred-ization* among Muslims, as opposed to Christian “canonization” process through particular institutions, is a societal process, miracle is considered as important reflective parameter for that. Apart from the hagiographic texts, the socially transmitted oral memories about individual experiences with a Sufi spread in society to the extent that they play a critical role in terms of his personally irrelevant societal existence and growth, ie, from the stage of Sufi to the next stage of *Wali*. Once a Sufi is reconstructed as *Wali*, the social memory about him through his miraculous performances reconstructs him again and again. Focusing on south Indian landscape, this paper tries to understand the miracle and how social construction of *Wali* happens through it.

Keywords: Miracle, Baraka, Sufi, Society.

Miracle¹ is the superhuman performance by a higher *Sufi* who is popularly known as *Wali* (*friend of God*) through which people realize his proximity and affinity with God. It is a symbolic reflection about the gradual transcendence of stages one after another from devotee to Sufi to higher *Wali* or to the position of *Wilayah* (friendship with God). Its symbiotic effect that the performer introduces his spiritual existence in a particular social setting and the member of that society identifies him as requiring special consideration, instigates a sociological quest. Once a miracle is objectified then the society would undoubtedly stand for promulgating him as *wali/Sufi* saint which ultimately lead to an attitudinal change to him. It causes

¹ There are plenty of examples for amazing miraculous experiences from hagiographical accounts of Sufis. For example, Fawaid al., Fuad, Siyar al., Awliya, al., Nafahat al., Jaleela (on Syed Alawi of Mampuram) etc. Such ones are re-written in studies on Sufism like “History of Sufism in India (Rizwi, 1978), Indian Muslims (M Mujeeb, 1967), Mampuram Tangel... (Malayamma and Panangangara (2009)

the increasing honoring attitudes and revering practices by people like kissing hands. All the commands given by them would be holy and, therefore, obeyed even though its apparent manifestation is negative and unease.

However, the history of *Sufism* explains that sufis interacted with and existed in society through the mechanism called miracle. The *Sufis* of India in general and the ‘*Sufi* missionaries’² of north India in particular showed their miraculous prowess in many instances. The *Sufi* missionaries of north India many a time stood to compete with their counter groups of *yogis*. Many of the Hindu Sanyasis and yogis stood face to face with *Sufis* to flat each other and ensure their position in the spiritual world and which ultimately reassert their spiritual existence in society. Some *Sufis* have showed their miraculous power to the political leaders of the medieval India who denied to settle here. For example, Khaja Mueenuddin Chisti had desiccated the ponds and rivers as Pritvi Raj Chavan denied them water. However, miracle was one of the prime means of their canonical aims of missionary project.

Hagiographies of many Sufis give information regarding many such miracle performances, as a result of which thousands of people were converted. In the world of spirituality, therefore, the Sufis were asked by the common people to perform miracles for their personal well-being as well as for the social betterment. In other words, miracles were significantly important in terms of their internal and external social visibility. At some point of time, the aim of the miracle was so sacred also that some of the *Sufis* showed their prowess in the *Sufi* field through their prayer to the God for begetting child and wealth. Wonderful example in the history is the baby born to Akbar the great as a result of prayer from Dargah of Mueenuddin Chisti of Ajmer. In short all the miracles are locally or widely important and meaningful.

This mechanism that crops up by words or deeds is sacred and important to the society because it goes beyond the causation theories and popularly agreed upon scientific means. It is something that breaches the normalcy (*Amrun Khariquun lil Ada:*) of the routine mundane social setting. For example the local experiences of bed-ridden cancer patients are ordered by the *Sufi* to stand and go³. As a result of his order, it is believed, the patient was cured and started his normal life as he was earlier. Therefore, his words as well as his deeds are considered with special care. Fearful to such miraculous power of the words of Sufi, even the social critics who are over-influenced by scientific rationality are not dared to come down upon him. These miraculous deeds bring some sort of soft power to the *Sufis* in the society, which is why the *Sufi* activities are seldom reverted even though it affected the perceiver some apparent adverse effects. For example, the local *Sufi* of Kerala Muhammed Musliyar of Kizhisseri asked one of his businessman-followers to stop the migratory behavior and settle down in Kerala only, when he informed the sufi about his journey to abroad. The follower became ready to accept this apparently dreadful and negative injunction. But his life, as the local people say, now is flourished to a better level than what was there before.

It actually is a phenomenon that is beyond the human nature. Nicholson (1914) takes “western” scientific growth to critique such kind of “eastern” belief in saints and their miracles. He says, “Modern theories of psychical influence, faith-healing, telepathy, veridical hallucination, hypnotic suggestion and

² Sufi missionary is an analytical category that is developed on the basis of the predominating behavior of spirituality over the missionary activities by Sufi.

³ This is the experience from the local sufi Muhammed Musliyar ®. For detailed biography see: VM Nisar Cherukode, “Muhammed Musliyar: Arbhadangalillatha Athma gjani”P:71-74. There are plenty of miracles reported and well documented in the cases of syed Alawi of Mampuram.

the like, have thrown open to us a wide avenue of approach to this dark continent in the Eastern mind” (P:140). But, actually, such ‘post rational’ social realities cannot be evaluated on the cause and effect dictum of modern science or on scientific rationality premises. At the same time, the unrestricted existence of this phenomenon in the mundane realms of social life makes it so important in the sociological discourse. It can be seen in the form of rain falling, walking on the waters, flying in the air, appearing in various spaces at a time, predicting the future, turning stones to gold, healing by breath, producing and multiplying the food materials, etc. Though all of them are given various interpretations by the modern rationally oriented, scientifically thinking people, the common people find their own interpretation to respond to this.

However, to a *Wali* or grown *Sufi*, healing is part of his miracle or what is technically called “*karamat*”. That sort of miracle is due to his affinity with God and it is more of ‘happening’ than of conscious ‘making’. It occurs through him because his personality itself stands similar to the divine verse which is also, as believed, capable of creating wonders. That is the reason why normally any observer cannot view any form of special rite practiced by *wali* for actualizing any desired goal. Rather, practicing some rites for healing purpose is done by local people with some “*Ijaza*” from any *sufi* master. Such wonderful effect is due to the miraculous power of verses, say of Quran, he uses for such purpose. *Wali*, in fact, does not need rites to heal any psychosomatic or physically abnormal person.

Karamath or miracle is the exclusive realm of a *wali*. It happens as a result of his oral predictions. The blessing sentences like “*ini operation venda*” (now there is no need for such an operation), “*prashnamaakkenda*” (don’t worry, go safe), “*ellam shariyaakum*” (all will be OK) etc. are the miraculous oral wordings by Sufis which the researcher got from the devotee communities of South India. At the same time the healing is the realm where a *Sufi* and non-*Sufi* can confluence together. The analysis shows that in the case of non-*sufi* (though many *sufi* elements would be there) the verses he utters would bear special form of miraculous power. There are practices like “*Asma’u*” which is sort of magic with the help of Quranic verses or any other sacred verses.

Miracle to a *wali* is both ‘evidential’ and ‘instrumental’. The more the society experiences miracles, the more the *wali* would be revered and approached by the people. His visibility depends upon his miraculous practices. There is great influence of miracles in the construction of Dargah around the tomb of *wali*. In other terms, a *wali* is miraculously evident and visible even after his death. Its instrumentality is rather more understandable as the very existence of a *wali* in society is the result of social need to him in terms of his extra-human services. Therefore, miracle is the ontological need for the existence of a *wali*. It would play the role of thousands of debates over the divine presence for spreading which *Sufis* have been striving for. The friend of God uses the miracle as an instrument to introduce his Friend to the people⁴. At that time it can be the instrument for teleological unification of God⁵ and His friend, ie, the presentation of divine evidences to the Divine presence.

Sufi masters are generally capable of objectifying the miracles as it is very much needed for the successful rooting of their order. The miraculous practices are reported by hagiographies and treatises like *Thadbkira*⁶

⁴ Every *Karamath* (miracle) emanates from *Wali* is the sign of God.

⁵ There is one Hadith Qudsi which says “I was an invisible treasure. I wished to be known. Then I created all”, See *Sahih Bukhari* and *Sahih Muslim*.

⁶ *Thadkira* literature is one genre. There are many more like *Siyar al.*, *Auliya*, *Manaquib* which again is a good part that explains miracles of *Sufi* masters.

of *Sufis* which provide many examples. *Rifaee* order, for example, has taken the miracle works as part of its customary celebrations to show its prowess to the people. Many special studies have been conducted on the *Rifaee* practices of horrible “Kuthu Ratheeb” (assaulting rites). For example, Evans Prichard (1954), Bruinessen (1999) finds the same in Africa and Indonesia respectively. In Kuthu-Ratheeb the *Sufis* would pierce the self with iron rods, cut their limbs with knives which are handed over by their *Sufi* master. In a moment after the practices the wounded limb would be placed as it was. The local experience is that people cannot see even a scratch of the wound on the body of the performer in the very next morning! Though all *sufi* orders celebrate the miracle of their masters, *Rifaee* and *Barzanji* *Sufis* have ritualized such practices as Bruinessen (1999) points out.

Miracle of a *Sufi* does not have religious bias or sectarian sensitivity. It is not reserved to any particular religious community. Rather, *Sufis* in their life time and *Dargahs* after their demise attract people of heterologous origins through their living miracles. Miracles which are doted in the oral tradition of the society are transmitted to the succeeding generations as a result of which *Sufi* is alive and visible in the society even after his physical absence. Miraculous experiences to them and to their bygone generations are the pulling elements that prompt all the new generations of Muslims and non-Muslims for visiting and thronging around the *Dargahs* of the dead *Sufi*. Many studies like that of Akbar Ahmad’s (n.d) study in Ajmer, Heitemeyer’s (2011) in the *Dargah* of Mushtaq Ali Baba of Mahmetnagar of Gujarat. expose this religious confluence and social acceptance of the *Sufi*. Akbar Ahmad (n.d) says in his ethnographic study,

“[T]he majority of the devotees at the Ajmer shrine are Hindus, “I was told by the Sayyeds who tend the shrine, some 3,000–4,000 of the 4,000–5,000 who come daily. Hindu *qawals*—singers—like Shankar- Shambhu move congregations to tears. I heard miraculous stories of Gharib Nawaz’s powers from Muslims and Hindus of various social backgrounds. A senior Hindu civil servant recounted, fighting back tears, a personal miracle at Ajmer after being disappointed by doctors and failing to evoke a response from other shrines in India” (Akbar Ahmad: 96)

1. MIRACLE, BARAKA AND SUFI

All the miracles and healings are the visible part and the objective resources of the spiritual capital of the *Sufi* field. These and other *Sufistic* elements like the *Dargahs* are inextricably tied up with other spiritual resource called *Baraka*. To make a definitional understanding, “*Baraka* is the holy power inherent in a saintly figure that set him or her apart from everyone else; it was normally conceived as a fluid force that emanated from the saint, alive or dead, and permeated the places, persons, and objects around him, and its ultimate proof was the saintly miracle (*karama*) (Karamustafa, 2007: 288). It’s the abstract force that can only be actualized through other materials- physical, temporal or spatial.

Baraka is objectified through various temporally and spatially specific means as well as through particular bodies. In other words, the special grace of God is revealed through particular *Sufi* personalities and through their words. Theoretically, *Sufis* and *walis* are the bodies of *Baraka*. The months like *Ramadhan*, the days like *Friday* and the times like early morning are the times when *Baraka* is possibly gratified. *Masjid* is example of spatial object where *Baraka* is gratified. *Dargah* and its premises are also considered as space of *Baraka*. Therefore, the things that are brought from the *Dargah*, the breathed water by a *Sufi* or a *wali*, the materials owned from the auctions in the month of *Ramadhan*, the food products given away in *Urus*

days of any died *Sufi* are considered as having Baraka in them. Many Prophetic Hadiths are there which describes the materials and time and places which possess Baraka⁷.

The body of the descendants of the Prophet is a place where the Baraka is expected. Therefore, the society has great reverence to them. Muslim community chooses them in all instances of worldly affairs including the highly secular realm of modern politics. Such embodied *braka* is urged when they start any economic transactions, business firms, house warming, congregational prayer for achieving any divinely gift like rain, settling tussles among the society, and even as the leaders of political parties. *Ulama* with Sufi reserves also possess similar social status of 'Baraka bodies'. The breathed waters, the inaugurated firms, the initiated marriages etc. by them are Baraka brimming and, therefore, it is believed, would be long-lasting and lucrative. Normally, the objectifiable piety is considered as a yardstick for this selection. That is why although there are instances where the Baraka is understood as hereditarily transmitted process (for example, the case of Syed family), the real objectification and appearance of the *Baraka* is based on personal purity of the *Sufi*.

Baraka as an agency of visibility of sufism and as a connecting thread between society and spirituality has a ubiquitous existence all over the world. Syed Hussein Nasr (2002) says this overwhelming practice of sufi elements is visible among Muslim communities of various regions of Arabia, central Asia, South east Asia, Africa, etc. Indian Muslims are also not different from it as himself puts it. Many studies of past and recent rightly make allusions to it (Mujeeb, 1967, Rizwi, 1978, Curie, 1989, Qureshi, Farroqui, 2004, Green 2006, Heitmeyer, 2011 etc). For example, one of the studies in Gujarat Heitmeyer (2011) exposes that the *Sufi* mazars are still venerated and approached for the miraculous results like in cases of conceiving child, for amulet against the spirits and cure of any physically or mentally diseased members⁸. The study exposes that society approach *Sufis* for similar purposes just mentioned, even though fundamentalists like Wahabi and Ahl-e-Hadith sects detract them. (P: 489). The same experience is not a matter of wonder in Delhi and Kerala where the researcher is in constant contacts with its Dargahs and *Sufi* spheres.

Though many social scientists and thinkers questioned the ontological reality of the miracle⁹, a social scientist cannot deny its existence as it is the experiential knowledge of the sufi and as it is objectively visible to the people around a *wali*. More than that, there are many social scientists who studied the reality of the miracle and came into the conclusion that it is the phenomenon which is beyond the sensory realizations. Sort of phenomenological treatment would be appreciated to analyse the miracle oriented Sufism. Thomas Aquinas, for example, says that it is not in the capacity of nature, it can be conceptualized as 'beyond' the nature and not 'against' it (P: 186). Therefore, we can call it as a "post rational" phenomenon.

2. CONCLUSION

However, miracle is so important to Sufi sphere because it takes a *wali* to the society. Through that, *wali* achieves dual identities at a time, which ultimately helps him to mediate the God and the common people, i.e., (a) the friend of God, and (b) the friend of people. It is because of this importance all the hagiographers and *Malfoozat* writers deal with it. Obviously those hagiographical texts play critical role in the construction

⁷ See Bukhari, Muslim, or any of six Sihah for such accounts as Baraka concept is so widely discussed matter

⁸ A massive number of field experiences of healing and Baraka from Ervadi Dargah is discussed in the 5th chapter.

⁹ For example, see Alastair McKinnon, Hume (1711-76), etc.

and reconstruction process of the *Sufism* in a society. I would say that, in fact, the hagiographies through which the legacy of a *Sufi* lives are only partial constructive engagement of the memories. To some extent, the hagiographies are fledged only when the orally transmitted unwritten traditions and memories of miraculous experience which are still on the tongues of the inter-generational communities are properly considered. Unless the texts can include all of the stories, as it is, they are partial understanding and therefore there is strong importance to the orally maintained social existence. The hagiographies speak from written texts to society where oral texts speak from society to written texts. In other words, the reproduction of *Sufism* in a society spreads from inclusive, unofficial and popular realm of folk memories to exclusive, official and private realm of readers and writers through what is called miracle.

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