

## Dargah of Syed Salar Masud Ghazi: A Sacred Space for all Faiths

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### Abstract

*Bahraich district of Uttar Pradesh is famous because of the Dargah of Syed Salar Masud Ghazi, an 11<sup>th</sup> century Muslim saint and warrior. His Dargah is a place of reverence for Muslims and Hindus alike. It was built by Firoz Shah Tughlaq. It is believed that people taking bath in the water of this Dargah become free of all skin diseases. Thousands of people come from far and wide places of the country to attend the annual festival (Urs) at the Dargah.*

*In this direction, this paper is tries to highlight that the Dargah of Bahraich is a sacred place, where people of all faiths come and pay homage to them and exchange their ideas and turns out to be a viable tool for the promotion of religious tolerance and peace not only in India but in the whole world. A large gathering on the dargah at the occasion of Urs, promotes socio-cultural interaction among the people, practising rituals and religious deeds together and maintaining mutual cohesiveness. With an aim to highlight the total perspective of multi-religious pilgrimages to the Dargah, this paper lays emphasis on the, historical background, spatial structure of the Dargah, special happenings associated with the Dargah, and finally searching grounds for the sustaining communal harmony and mutual integration.*

**Keywords:** Sufism, Bahraich, Dargah, Multi-culture, Commonality

### Introduction

Syed Salar Masud Ghazi, was one of the earliest and most celebrated Indo-Muslim warrior-saint whose venerated tomb is at Bahraich in the sub-Himalayan plain of eastern Uttar Pradesh. The exact period of martyred warrior had been hotly debated among the modern scholars and historians. It is said that Salar Masud might have lived much later than traditionally believed, while other assigned his martyrdom sometime during the early decades of the 13<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>1</sup> Salar Masud is alleged to have been the son of a sister of Sultan Mahmud of Ghazna (r. 999-1030 A.D.),<sup>2</sup> while according to historian Firishta (d. 1620 A.D.) he was one of the kinsmen of Sultan Mahmud.<sup>3</sup> Ziauddin Barani (d. 1358 A.D.) mentions him as a warrior of the Ghazi contingent of Sultan Mahmud.<sup>4</sup> But Salar Masud's attachment, either as a kinsman or as ghazi warrior, with the Ghaznavids Sultan Mahmud tends us to mark the period of his military activity in the eleventh century.

The martyred warrior have variously been referred as *sipahsalar Masud Ghazi* by the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> century historians Amir Khusrow (d. 1253 A.D.), Barani, Afif (d. 1399 A.D.) and Ibn Battuta (d. 1369 A.D.), while the historians of the 15<sup>th</sup> and 16<sup>th</sup> centuries such as Mushtaqi, Abdullah, Nimatullah, Abul Fazal, Badaoni, and Firishta called him *Salar Masud Ghazi*. The renowned Urdu poets of 19<sup>th</sup> and 20<sup>th</sup> centuries Mir Taqi Mir (d. 1810) and Akbar Allahabadi (d. 1921) mentioned him with his popular name as *Ghazi Miyan*.

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سید کی سرگزشت کو حالی سے پوچھئے  
غازی میاں کا حال دفالی سے پوچھئے

*For Sir Syed( the great educationist's) tale, ask Hali*

*For Ghazi Miyan's story, ask Dafali, his balladeer*

We have no really trustworthy account of his life, but are dependent for our knowledge concerning him on certain legends prevalent among his devotees, and on a book written by Abdur Rahman Chishti known as *Mirat-i-Masudi*, an English translation of which in an abridged form is to be found in Elliot's *History of India* (Vol. ii pp. 513-49). This work, fact and fiction are freely mingled.<sup>5</sup> There are numerous biographical works giving an account of his life and deeds.<sup>6</sup> From such sources, we learn a story that runs somewhat as follows:

A descendant in the 12<sup>th</sup> generation of Ali bin Abi Talib (Prophet's uncle), Ghazi Miyan was the nephew of Sultan Mahmud. Bibi Sitr-i-Mualla (the dignified veiled one), the mother of the Ghazi, she was a sister of Mahmud Ghaznawi. Her husband Salar Sahu was a commander in the army of Mahmud Ghaznawi. On the request of a group of beleaguered Muslims from the western Indian town of Ajmer a fabulous contingent of 700000 cavalry, led by General Sahu leaves for Ajmer.<sup>7</sup> While he was on an expedition in Ajmer accompanied by his wife, spirits reveals to the General that he will be victorious, and that a male child will be born to him. Salar Masud was born there in February 1015 (Rajab 405 AH). The Sultan is delighted at the birth of his sister's son, and now re-confers the government of the Kingdom of Hindustan on General Sahu and the infant Masud. At the age of four Masud became a disciple of a great scholar of the time, Syed Ibrahim Bara Hazari, and by the time he was nine, he had acquired most sciences, practical and abstract, and at ten years of age completed studies of the highest level. When his father moved to Kahilar he joined him there with his mother, exhibiting on the way his miraculous military skill. Thereafter he was summoned by Sultan Mahmud to Ghazni and later accompanied him in his conquest of Somnath. The plunder of Somnath by Sultan Mahmud disillusioned the young prince, and on returning to Ghazni he decided to devote himself to the service of God and humanity. Sultan Mahmud's chief *wazir*, Hasan Memandi, became very jealous of the young, charming prince. Scared of his enmity, the Sultan advised the prince to return to India and live with his parents at Kahilar. Resenting this and disgusted with the circumstances, the prince visited his parents at Kahilar and solicited their blessing to move forward in India to spread the message of the unity of God and human brotherhood. Shortly after that, accompanied by a huge army of devotees and admirers, Salar Masud reached Delhi and rejected the throne of Delhi offered to him after his conquest of the principality, affirming that he was only fighting for the glory of God. The chastened Raja Ajaipal of Kannauj now welcomes the young warrior on the bank of Ganga. Masud crosses the river in pursuit of *shikar*. Marching in the direction of Satrikh, he arrives at the holy city of the Seven Rishis on the outskirts of the present day town of Barabanki, twenty three miles from Lucknow. Satrikh was the most flourishing of all the cities of India both a good hunting ground as well as a sacred shrine of the Hindus. Masud fixed his headquarters there and begin to send out armies on every side to conquer the

surrounding countryside that is presentday central and eastern Uttar Pradesh: Amir Hasan to Mahoba, Azizuddin to Gopamau in Partabgarh District, Malik Fazal to the holy city of Banaras and Mir Bakhtiyar to Kanur.<sup>8</sup>The young hero is now engaged in war with infidels and he will soon begin losing important commanders and parents as well. His important teacher Mir Ibrahim Bara Hazari was killed in a battle on his way to Satrikh and some time later his mother breathed her last at Kahilar. These tragedies deeply saddened him, and to overcome his grief he proceeded to the thick forest on the outskirts of Bahraich town which, during those days was apolitically important region of India. While he was encamping at Bahraich, Salar Sahu also died in Satrikh, with this profound shock the young Salar now decided to spend the rest of his life in the forest where he had been living in peace and worship.<sup>9</sup>

Ghazi Miyan began attracting large crowds and soon grew into a spiritual celebrity of the region around Bahraich. He tried to stop the practice of human sacrifice (*bali*) at the local temples, and to restrain despotic rulers from exploiting the people. All this made him a hero with the downtrodden. The growing popularity of the Ghazi alarmed the rulers of Bahraich town and its neighbourhood, and twenty one of them united to challenge him under the leadership of Raja Sahar Dev. The chiefs of the confederacy around Bahraich issued an ultimatum: vacate this domain, or else face our swords. The confederacy of the *rajahs* had instructed their ambassador to convey this message to Masud:

“You come from the Upper Country (*mulk-i-bala dast*), and know nothing of these parts. This is the land of nobles: never shall inhabitants of the Upper Country remain here. Think more wisely on this matter”.<sup>10</sup>

Masud’s plea that he had no worldly ambition and wanted to devote his life to the service of suffering humanity fell on deaf ears. He was dragged into battlefield much against his will. After a series of wars Ghazi Miyan fell. He was tested martyrdom on 14<sup>th</sup> June 1033 at the age of nineteen.<sup>11</sup>Sikandar Diwana, Ghazi Miyan’s bare headed and bare footed lieutenant who always voluntarily acted as his bodyguard, was killed while holding the dead body of the Ghazi in his arms. It was then guarded by his faithful horse and dog till it was buried under a *mahwa* tree (beneath which the Ghazi used to preach) by his close friend Mir Ibrahim, who was himself later killed by the enemy.

Syed Salar Masud Ghazi’s grave guarded by his surviving devotees until two of his father’s family servants came down from Satrikh to take charge of it. The local people had begun to venerate it, the Hindus being more zealous in their veneration than the Muslims. Years later a Hindu milkman, Jasu Ahir whose barren wife was blessed with a son on praying there re-built the grave with pure cow milk and costly lime. Soon thereafter the grave became an object of even deeper veneration. In the thirteenth year of the Ghazi’s death Zahra Bibi, the blind daughter of Syed Jamaluddin of Radauli who had regained her sight on praying to the Ghazi, became his staunch devotee and got his grave reconstructed under a magnificent

tomb. On her death the Bibi was buried in a grave near the Ghazi's tomb, which she had kept ready. As time passed the fame of the shrine and its spiritual potency spread.<sup>12</sup>

Nasiruddin Mahmud son of Iltutmish, during his governorship of Bahraich (1245-46) added some new constructions around the tomb built by Zahra Bibi. He planned some of the architectural changes, but was in dream warned against it by the Ghazi himself. By the time of the Tughlaqs ascended the throne of Delhi Ghazi Miyan had become a legend and his grave the shrine of a miraculous saint. In 1341 A.D. Muhammad Tughlaq visited the grave, accompanied by the celebrated traveller Ibn Battuta, and paid his respects to the Ghazi. In 1374, after the triumph of Thatta, Firoz Shah Tughlaq visited the tomb. By that time some people had begun doubting that Ghazi Miyan was actually buried in the place, but a renowned personality of the time, Mir Mah (a descendant of Imam Jafar Sadiq, who lived at Bahraich), led the emperor to the grave and confirmed that the Ghazi lay there. That an Emperor like you and a poor man like me should be equally respectful to the Ghazi is the greatest proof of his spiritual greatness. Syed Mir Mah told the sultan. At the behest of his mother who having seen a pilgrim party leaving from Delhi for Bahraich and being told of the Ghazi's miraculous powers, had taken a vow to build a big dargah around the Ghazi's grave if her son won the battle of Thatta. After the conquest, the emperor built a marble fort around the tomb.<sup>13</sup>

Another eminent historian, Abul Fazl, refers to the popularity of Salar Masud's cult, and describes how people from remote districts carry offerings and multi-coloured flags to the saint's tomb. He mentions with concealed censure that multitudes of pilgrims set out from Agra to Bahraich by night, hollering, making merry and disturbing the Mughal capital. Abul Fazl's regal patron, the Mughal emperor Akbar, also showed particular interest in the warrior saint and in 1561, in the clothes of an ordinary merchant, he walked incognito through several stages with the pilgrims' procession on the way to the saint's *urs*.<sup>14</sup> However, not all the Indian sovereigns regarded the martyr from Bahraich with piety: Sikandar Lodhi in the year 1490 forbade the celebration of his *urs* in the first week of the month of *jeth* (May–June) on the pretext of not appropriate of the rites being performed there.<sup>15</sup>

### **The Dargah of Bahraich**

The shrine of Syed Salar Masud Ghazi has an enormous complex of three different forts enveloping each other. The pivotal *Sangi Qila* is surrounded by historical *Qila-i-Kalan*, while around the latter has grown the huge outer complex of the dargah.

**The Sangi Qila:** The beautiful *Sangi Qila* (stone fort) is the original mausoleum. Measuring 20x25x2.5 metres, it has latticed walls and marble flooring of white and black square tiles, inside this fort is the tomb housing Ghazi Miyan's grave, which has a huge pinnacle dome over it. The interior of the tomb is remarkable for its atmosphere of sanctity.<sup>16</sup>

**The Qila-i-Kalan:** The *Sangi Qila* is surrounded on all sides by the *Qila-i-Kalan* (big fort), measuring nearly about 90 square metres and enclosed by 2 metre wide walls. The main entrance gate to the *Qila-i-Kalan* is in its western wall, known as the *Nal Darwaza*. The

ancient *Nal Darwaza* is supported by a new 7.5 metre high outer gate. Other exists from the *Qila-i-Kalan* are the two *Nishan Darwaza*, the *Purbi Darwaza* and *Khirkhi* (small door). In the complex of the *Qila-i-Kalan*, on the front side of the *Sangi Qila*, there is mosque which is said to be of the period of Shah Jahan. In front of the mosque are buried, around an old tamarind tree, many of Ghazi Miyan's companions and servants like Rajjab Salar, Panchd Pirs, Jhaunra and Bhaunra the wrestlers and Naina, the maid. Near the graves of the Panch Pirs is Jhaunra-Bhaunra's *kundal* (a huge stone), said to be one of their exercise tools and now venerated for its antiquity. On one side of the *Qila-i-Kalan* is a series of seven old rooms in some of which are preserved the great Ghazi's relics including his dress, his sword and a copy of the Holy Quran. On the other side of the *Sangi Qila* are buried in two separate tombs Zahra Bibi and some of her relatives.<sup>17</sup>

**The Outer Complex:** The *Qila-i-Kalan* is surrounded by the huge outer complex of the dargah that has come up in the course of time. The main entrance to the outer complex, is the *Zanjiri Darwaza*, almost 14 metres high and three metres wide. It has a roofed gate and large, heavy iron chains hanging across its side. These are meant to allow entry into the complex only on foot. Outside the gate on both its sides are fixed in the ground old heavy cannons which are once upon a time ceremonially shot on festive occasions. On top of the *Zanjiri Darwaza* there is *Naqqar Khana* where *drums* and the *shahnai* are regularly played. Inside the outer complex, immediately on entering through the *Zanjiri Darwaza*, is a relic of the ancient times, the *baoli*, a large masonry well with winding steps down to the water, landing places and chambers in the surrounding wall. Nearby is the entrance to an old walled orchard called the *Salar Bagh*. Beyond the *Nal Darwaza* is situated a mosque said to have been constructed to commemorate the visit to the dargah by Aurangzeb, who is reported to have visited the shrine accompanied by the famous divine of his time, Shaikh Sarmad. The rest of the outer complex now houses administrative offices of the dargah, a hospital, a garden called *Syed Bagh*, a school, a library, a police post, a guest house (*Mihman Khana Masudia*), and a *Mafil Khana* (auditorium). The back entrance to the outer complex has numerous rest rooms on both sides, a waiting shed for pilgrims, and a tank surrounded by huts to be used by lepers.<sup>18</sup>

### **Festivities at the Shrine**

Most days are busy at the dargah, but there is an unusual rush on the two *Eid* days, on *Yaumi-i-Ashurah* in Muharram and on *Shab-i-barat*. There are also three major periodical festivities, which commemorated with great enthusiasm.

**The Urs:** *Urs*, The death anniversary of the Ghazi, is celebrated every year on 12, 13 and 14 of Rajab-the seventh month of the *hijri* calendar. On this occasion, popularly known as the *Rajbi fatihah* is recited at the grave by the *khuddam*, the officials of the shrine and the visiting pilgrims. The main attraction of the occasion is the ceremony called *gagar*. In the old days this meant the ceremonial march of the *khuddam* to the grave, carrying on their heads in a big tray the holy relics of the Ghazi. Now the relics have been replaced with flowers and a *chadars*. The sacred dress of the Ghazi is now carried to the grave on the night of 14<sup>th</sup>

Rajab, among the carries being leading Muslim divine and god-men of the time visiting the dargah. *Qawwalis* and religious discourse by noted *qawwals* and *ulama* and *Natiya Mushairas* are organised, all of which usually attract participants and listeners from all parts of the country. The *urs* is a Muslim dominated festivity, while the two melas Basant fair and the jeth fair enumerated attract a conglomeration of pilgrims from all faith.

**Basant Fair:** The one day Basant fair takes place on the 3rd of the month of Magh in the Hindi calendar. This occasion attracts a large number of pilgrims of various communities, mainly from Bahrich and the adjoining districts. Farmers dressed in their best yellow-indicating the colure synonymous with Basant, visit the shrine in groups with offerings comprising of green spikes of wheat, fruit, vegetables and flowers, and they mainly pray for their crops. Ghazi Miyan's standard is unfurled over the *Nal Darwaza*. The Basant Fair is the harbinger of an ensuing occasion, much bigger in every respect; on this occasion are announced the exact dates of the forthcoming Great Fair.

**The Jeth Fair:** The Jeth fair begins on Sunday following the first Thursday of the month of Jeth, and it continues for nearly twelve days. To this magnificent fair pilgrims come from far and wide in India and abroad. The origin of the main festivity and rituals held during the Jeth Mela is embedded in the story of the legendary Zahra Bibi. After her death and burial at the shrine, her parents and other family members used to come from Rudauli *nishans* every year in the fashion of a *barat*- marriage party and hold wedding rites for their deceased daughter, who was supposed to have been spiritually wedded to the Ghazi. Two boys in the regalia of bridegroom and bride, depicting Ghazi Miyan and Zuhra, were seated on an eminence, and this tradition cannot but remind one of a similar representation of a young couple – Rama and Sita – during Ram lila, when the Northern Indian folk dance drama recounting the stories from the epic Ramayana is performed.<sup>19</sup>To watch the ceremony huge crowds of people would assemble. Later this tradition was continued by the people of Radauli and is, now, the main function at the Jeth Mela. The groups of pilgrim parties are still called *medni* or *barat*. They bring *jehez*-bridal gifts and offer these at the grave of the Ghazi and Zahra Bibi. The *jehez* include decorated beds, silver thrones, and clothes with gold and silver embroidery, footwear, furniture, household goods, jewellery and cash. The carrying and presentation of *alam*- long spear headed sticks covered with costly cloth and other decorative materials, is the main attraction of the great fair. Pilgrims seeking the Ghazi's blessing for the fulfilment of their desires touch with the *nishans* brought by them the dome of the Sangi Qila, taking a vow that if they achieve what they aspire for they will return to the shrine with *nishans* and further offerings. Many do come back during the next *mela*, and this goes on year after year. The origin of the *nishans* is traced to incident: those poor people of the region whom the Ghazi had helped, on knowing of the local rulers' aggression against him, rushed with their flags and spears to fight by him. They were, however, late. Finding the Ghazi already slain and buried, they left flags and spears all around his grave. Since then devotees of the Ghazi carry *nishans* to the dargah.

The annual marriage festival of Ghazi Miyan culminate in the breaking not only of caste barriers, but also even of religious barriers between Hindus and their Muslim neighbours. Even in 1873 at the Bahraich fair, the proportion of Mahomedens was found less than the Hindus. The Hindu devotees were largely Kories, Kurmi and Ahir peasants and cowherds.<sup>20</sup>In the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a researcher found that 50% of the visitors to the grave were Hindus. Even though the ancestors of the Hindus had suffered heavily at his hands, they worshiped Salar Masud.<sup>21</sup>

### **The Champion of Lepers**

One of the most important miracles of the shrine of Syed Salar Masud Ghazi is the recovery of lepers from their disease. The water used for the bath of shrine is believed to be a cure. Pilgrims collect it in small bottles from the tank near Sandal Tree and take it back home to treat with it patients of leprosy and leucoderma. Lepers themselves also visit the shrine in large numbers. Outside the east-north corner of the Qila-i-Kalan there is a big *haud* connected through a long drain to the floor of the shrine. During the Jeth Fair this *haud*, called *Korhi Khanah* (lepers house), is full with patients of leprosy appealing to Ghazi for the miraculous cure. On the bank of this *haud* there are huts where lepers can stay. Beside this *haud*, they occasionally sit also in the drain attached to the mosque inside the Qila-i-Kalan, where the water is used in ablution (*wudu*) gets collected. Year after year, lepers are repeatedly cured in these places; many stay there with deep devotions for as long as they are not cured, or keep on periodically visiting the shrine, waiting to be picked by the great Ghazi for his blessings. It is believed that thousands of lepers have been cured at the shrine. The shrine office maintains registers to record the names and addresses of leprosy patients who get cured; and these registers are indeed full with countless entries.

A leper who gets cured rushes to the Anarkali Lake and takes there a holy dip. This means immediate thanks giving to the Ghazi with whom the ancient lake was a favourite summer resort. From the lake the leper, now cured, must go back home and revisit the shrine with enormous offerings during the next great fair.

Those reluctant to accept these curative powers believe that the water in the shrine has beneficent properties. In the colonial period the water in the area was once chemically tested to determine the presence of minerals. The finding was reportedly negative.

### **The Myth of the Ghazi outside Bahraich**

The myth of Ghazi is not confined to the city of Bahraich only. In many towns of northern India there are places related to his name. In Meerut a memorial to the Ghazi was reportedly built long ago by Qutubuddin Aibak, where Bale Miyan's *nauchandi* is celebrated even now with great enthusiasm, attracting huge crowds from the town and neighbourhood. Near Sambhal in District Moradabad a *neze ka mela* (fair of spears) has been taking place since ancient times in memory of Ghazi who, reportedly, passed through the place on his way to Satrikh. In Ginnaur is buried his companion, Tajuddin Turk. In village Lakhanpur near Badaun a place of worship is related to the Ghazi's arrival there during his travels in northern

India; here an annual *mela* takes place coinciding with the great fair at Bahraich. The grave of Ghazi Miyan's father Salar Sahu, at Satrikh is a popular pilgrim centre. Besides the existence of the graves of those related to the Ghazi or those of his companions who had died and were buried locally during his long march from Ghazni to Bahraich via Multan, Delhi, and Meerut, another reason is mentioned in books for the growth of places and festivities related with him. It is said that when in mid 18<sup>th</sup> century Aurangzeb closed the dargah in order to put an end to the 'un-Islamic' practices of prostration and other forms of veneration, the general public that firmly believed in grave worship greatly disliked his action. Unable to challenge the authority, people in various regions who had been traditionally going to the great fair at Bahraich erected in their own towns and villages memorials to the Ghazi and began holding annual fairs there, coinciding with the dates of the Jeth Mela of Bahraich. These local fairs continue to be held until now and their sites are still respected.<sup>22</sup>

### Conclusion

It may be fairly claimed from the above, that the Dargah of Syed Salar Masud Ghazi is the symbol of harmonious coexistence where Hindus and Muslims participate on the occasion of *urs* and fairs. Of course, relatively Muslims overall dominate these fair at the martyr's tomb, however, Hindus have important role in each and every festivities and also in giving financial donations to organize the *melas*. The reasons behind this mixing include their mutual cohesiveness being living in the same neighbourhood, preponderance of the low caste community, both Muslim and Hindus, who feel safer to maintain companionship, wherein such *melas* provide opportunity for amusement, recreation, and religious satisfaction and also for purchasing kitchen utensils. Naive People believe that the miraculous blessings from the *pirs* and *mutawwali*, would certainly give them relief from sufferings.

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