

Dargah of Dewa: A Symbol of Communal Peace and Harmony

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Abstract

Dewa Sharif is also known as Dargah of the famous Sufi saint of 19th century India, Haji Waris Ali Shah. It is the only Dargah in India, where the festival of Holi is celebrated with gaiety and fervor. Thousands of people, irrespective of their religion, come from far and wide places of the country to attend the annual festival (Urs) at the Dargah. A large gathering on the Dargah on 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 peace and harmony.

Keywords: Waris Ali Shah, Sufism, Dewa, Barabanki, Dargah, Commonality, Multi-culture, Peace

Introduction

Waris Ali Shah (1819-1905 A.D.) was a great Sufi Saint of 19th Century in India and the founder of warsi order. He is the first Sufi saint to visit Europe. He performed Haj several times on foot and was always in the state of *ehram* in his life. His life is the perfect example for spiritual and ascetic way of life.

Life and Times:

Waris Ali Shah was born in Dewa in the United Provinces of India in the year 1819 A.D. His father was Syed Qurban Ali and his genealogy has been traced back to Imam Husain, grandson of Prophet Muhammad.ⁱ His ancestors belonged to the noble and distinguished family of Syeds of Nishapur. Syed Ashraf AbiTalib migrated to India with his family. He settled on the outskirts of Kuntur town of BaraBanki District. He built a home there, now known as Rasoolpur. Its main gate still survives and is called "Alauddin gate" because Alauddin was the grandson of Syed Ashraf AbiTalib, a venerable person held in high esteem as one of the deceased caliphs of Shah Nasiruddin Chiragh Dehlvi. After four centuries, one of his ancestors named Syed Abdul Ahad migrated from Rasoolpur to Dewa.ⁱⁱ

When he was three years old, he lost his parents. His early schooling started at the age of five. He started learning and memorising the Quran at the age of five and committed the Quran his memory in a mere two years. Thus at the age of seven he was an accomplished *hafiz* of Quran. He was never seen studying books of any kind but was often seen inwardly engrossed. His guardian and brother-in-law, Khadim Ali Shah, with whom he stayed in Lucknow was himself a mystic of a high calibre. It was not long before he also departed from the scene leaving the eleven-year-old Waris Ali Shah to wear his mantle and officially assume his role of heading the order and initiating disciples.

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He was a poetic genius too, wrote and recited poetry of divine romance with great gusto and devotion, and while doing so used to go into ecstatic mood.ⁱⁱⁱ

His Travels

His biographers have recorded that WarisAli Shah performed the Haj pilgrimage as many as 17 times. For 12 years, he travelled in Arab lands, Iran, Hijaz, Iraq, Rome, and Syria and during these tours he performed Haj. The remaining 7 times he performed Haj starting from India. On three occasions, he travelled overland through Kabul, twice by steamer and twice by sailboats.^{iv}

His numerous travels abroad gave scope for a wide spectrum of world personalities as well as lay folk everywhere to seek initiation at his hands. It was during on such sojourn that Sultan Abdul Majid Khan (r. 1839-1861 A.D.) sought and received initiation from him. Waris Shah visited Russia, Germany, France and Ceylon as well. A detailed account of all these trips unfortunately was not kept. WarisAli Shah himself was reticent about them except for sketchy references. The information used to trickle through other Indians who happened to visit these places and had the good fortune of meeting Haji Ali Shah abroad. Obviously these trips were of deep spiritual portent^v.

It should not be forgotten that before Waris Ali Shah set out on his travels he had distributed all his wealth among the poor and had given up his title to all property and thus owned nothing whatsoever. One can imagine the perils and discomfort involved in travelling during those days. Even the bits of information which used to trickle through provide enough food for thought for us about the remarkable happenings associated with these trips.

An Encounter with Sir Syed Ahmad Khan

Waris Ali Shah was the same to all whatever may be his creed, caste, religion or persuasions and never used harsh word for anyone irrespective of whether they regarded him as friend or foe. It so happened that the founder of the Aligarh Muslim University had expressed some iconoclastic ideas which had enraged the formalist fundamentalists. His critics considered him a heretic. However, he did not think so. Once he stayed in Aligarh and Sir Syed sent word that he wanted to have a private meeting with him. Waris Ali Shah readily agreed. Sir Syed arrived late at night and knocked the door. When the servant asked him who it was, Sir Syed replied “*satan*”. The door opened and Sir Syed entered. Waris Ali Shah warmly greeted him and the dialogue between the two continued for a long time. Sir Syed was highly impressed and almost ecstatic. The local press devoted considerable attention to this meeting. In the course of the conversation Waris Ali Shah was overheard telling Sir Syed that he was not against modern education but that adequate attention should be paid to spiritual and moral values in any system of education. When Waris Ali Shah was informed that some religious *ulama* had declared Sir Syed to be a heretic he discounted such a judgement. Waris Ali Shah said that a Syed could never be a heretic.^{vi}

Death

According to the author of *Hayat-i-Warsi*, Haji Waris Ali Shah passed away on the 30th of Muhrram 1323 A.H. corresponding of 6th April 1905 AD. A lot of disputes arose regarding the place of burial, at last all agreed to prepare his shrine there where his last breath ceased, on their unanimous opinion Shaikh Mazar Ali removed the sacred body of his spiritual guide along with the bed a little away towards the East and marked the place where the tomb is to be erected. At this juncture Abbas Husain Khan Warisi arrived and perceiving their devotion said that it was better to bury him in the garden offered by chotiBibiSahiba where a grand tomb could be erected and the pilgrims could be comfortably lodged as the place is spacious. But Shaikh Mazhar Ali Khan said that the desire of the saint should be respected and did not agree with the proposal. Thus the tomb began to be erected. A police inspector objected to erect a tomb in a populated place but BabuKanyalal gave him suitable reply and sent him back.^{vii}

Disciples

He had many prominent followers from several faiths. His numerous disciples, which include both Muslims and Hindus, are the followings.

- ShaiqKhudaBakhsh
- Mushir Husain Kidwai
- Thakur Pancham Singh, Zamindar district Mainpuri
- Raja Udyat Narayan Sing (Suratgunj, Oudh)
- BabooMotiMisser (Bhagalpu)
- Thakur Grur Mohan Singh, Zamindar (Bhagalpur)
- Hadhrat Baba Sufi Syed Diwana Shah Warsi (Jagatdal, West Bengal)
- SadafJabbarFazihat
- Shah Abdul Ad Shah
- Maulana Mohammad Shah
- Mustaqim Shah
- Sai Baba of Shirdi

Shrine of Deva Sharif

The town of Dewa is situated in Lat. 27°2' N. and Long. 81°10' E., to the east of the road running from Nawabganj to Fatehpur, about 12 km from Barabanki and 42 km from Lucknow.^{viii} This is the birth place of Haji Waris Ali Shah, who was to influence the lives of many generations of people with his message of universal love for humanity.

Dewa is said to derive its name from Dewka Rani, a princess of antiquity. According to a tradition the place was formerly held by the JanwarRajputs who had large possession in the north of the *pargana*; it is said that Dewa and the adjoining village of Bhitauli were once held by the Bhars. The Muslim conquest of the region occurred at the time of the invasion of Syed SalarMasud Ghazi and Shah Wesh took the place.^{ix}

The Hindu-Iranian Styles of Structure

The mausoleum of Haji Waris Ali Shah is a monument of communal amity, constructed on a pattern, blending the Hindu-Iranian styles of architecture. The mausoleum is an emblem of communal harmony, universal brotherhood and affection, preached by the Saint. Being a symbol of purity and peace for many, the Dargah of Dewa is designed to be an enormous white mausoleum with a green dome and houses two intricately decorated shrines. The tomb, the shrines and the latticed outer apartment girdling the inner shrine for 'Parikrama' (*Tawaf*) are indicative of the Hindu style of architecture while the towers and minarets present the Persian architecture.

It is noteworthy that Hindus along with Muslim devotees made a significant contribution to the construction of the mausoleum.^x The silver plated spire was donated by Raja Udit Narain Singh of Ram Nagar in this district, the silver covering on doors was done on behalf of the rulers of Kashmir and the entire marble flooring was completed from the estate donated by Thakur Pancham Singh of Mainpuri at whose cost a mess runs to feed the visitors during the *Mela*. The mausoleum is surrounded by an array of *Khanqahs* and imposing gate in front of it. There is a trust to look after the management of the mausoleum and properties donated by the disciples.^{xi}

Four years from now, Dewa Sharif, as the shrine is called, would have completed a 100 years of existence. Back in 1917, the first secretary of the trust, a Hindu by the name of Babu Kanhaiya Lal Srivastava, had laid the foundation of the shrine. The *urs* at Dewa Sharif attracted many more devotees. Haji Waris Ali Shah started it, to honour his father Haji Qurban Ali Shah, it was held on *Karva-Chauth*, the fourth day of the dark half *Kartik* in October-November. The *urs* around Waris Ali Shah's own mausoleum eventually became much more popular.^{xii}

Interestingly, the shrine has no 'sajjadahnashin' or hereditary administrator, as is the practice at most *dargahs*; neither is there any practice of dynastic succession. The shrine is run by a trust, usually headed by someone eminent. The current Secretary & Joint Secretary of Dargah Hadhrat Haji Waris Ali Shah Warsi Mausoleum Trust, Dewa Sharif Mr. Hasan Mohd Khan Warsi as Honourable Secretary & Mr. Saad Mahmood Warsi as Honorary Manager of *Astana-i-Aliya* and honorary Secretary of Dargah Warsi Association Dewa Sharif. Assisting him in this task is a team comprising members of the citizenry, academicians and bureaucrats. It is this trust which maintains the building, and also takes care of its security.^{xiii}

The shrine of Dewa is thronged by lakhs of devotees, Hindu and Muslim alike, peaking during the annual *urs* at Dewa, according to Syed Ghafur Shah, Haji Waris Ali Shah had 400,000 disciples that included Turkey's sultan and countess of Spain.^{xiv} He did not expect his Hindu followers to convert to Islam but exhorted them to observe their religious codes.

The Festival of Holi Celebrated

The *Holi* celebrations at the Dargah in Dewa are unique in many ways as both Hindus and Muslims celebrate the festival of colors in harmony and play with rose petals, other

flowers, ‘*abeer*’ and ‘*gulaal*’. The Sufi saint is revered as a harbinger of peace and amity as he spread his message of ‘*Jo Rabhaiwahi Ram hai.*’ He started this tradition of playing *Holi* in Barabanki with members from all communities and since then it has been a tradition.

The *Holi* here is special and perhaps it is the only Dargah in India where the festival is celebrated with gaiety and fervor. *Holi* is played at the Dargah usually in shades of yellow that is the revered color at the shrine and more than Hindus, it is Muslims who participate in the festivals. Haji Waris Ali Shah’s disciples usually wear yellow. Followers and devotees of the shrine come from distant locations to participate in this unique *Holi* that rises above the realms of religion and caste.

“In these times, when communities clash even without any apparent provocation, the Dewa Sharif is a lesson in communal harmony. Thousands of people who believe in the philosophy of oneness come here every day and the entire township has grown over the years around the shrine. For Hindus, Haji Waris Ali Shah is Lord Krishna, for Christians he is Jesus and Muslims see him as the Prophet’s essence. He is one of those rare saints who has found acceptance and recognition in every religion,” said Karim Khan who owns a tiny flower shop outside the dargah^{xv}

Many have come here seeking peace and tranquillity, including VIPs. Warsi needs very little prodding to reel off names. “Former prime ministers Atal Behari Vajpayee, V.P. Singh, Chandra Shekhar; former UP governor Moti Lal Vora, former president Zail Singh among many others were ardent believers of this shrine.” He also recalls a visit by actor-turned-politician Sunil Dutt, shortly after his son Sanjay Dutt was charged under TADA. Cricketer Suresh Raina apparently makes it a point to visit Dewa before a big match.

Highlights of the Fair and Exhibition

The Dewa Fair, which attracts pilgrims and visitors from all parts of the country to the mausoleum of the great Saint, comes in full swing with the ceremony of *Chadar* presentation on the tombs of Haji Waris Ali Shah and his father. Embodied sheets of Varanasi Silk are placed on the tombs of Haji Sahab and his father Haji Qurban Ali Shah.

Dewa has two *melas* (festivals) every year. They have, over the years, taken on the character of *gala* events in which religious rites take place. Until the very last day the period is devoted to cultural events, recitation of poetry- devotional and secular, particularly rural re-enactment of *Maha Bharat* and the legend of Allah, a folk poetical rendering of an ancient Indian battle, acclaimed *Mushaiaras*, where one had the pleasure and edification of listening to such great masters as Josh Malihabadi and Jigar Muradabadi, along with many lesser lights. People went into virtual trances, especially towards the early morning hours. Sports and athletics in which national teams participate are held as well.

There was, of course, a awesome street market in which one could buy practically anything made in India, and most of the imports too, including all kinds of arts and crafts, machinery, jewellery, cosmetics, dresses, and books. For miles around the village, the area

was transformed into a veritable tent mega polis; about a million people attended the festivals. Restaurants provided to all kinds of tastes representing all the regions.

You could also find nomadic preachers admonishing listeners, though they usually did not attract many in audience. Devotees of all faiths visited the shrine every day of the festival, bringing follower garlands and more material offerings too. Some prayed directly to the saint; this was an adaptation of Hindu mores. Others begged the saint to intercede with God and or the Prophet of Islam for them.^{xvi}

There is much of interest to the peasantry in Dewa Fair. A big cattle market is the highlight of the fair and is the main source of its revenue. The cattle market has been split into various portions each being reserved for a particular species of animals.

The demonstration of improved agricultural implements and engines for pumping of water for irrigation draw large crowd of cultivators. Concerns dealing in chemicals/ fertilizers arrange free distribution of packets and literature explaining the use and effects of various types of fertilizers.

Some field demonstrations are also arranged by agriculture and Cane departments to explain improved farm strategies to agriculturists. Improved agricultural implements are also on show. The cynosure of all eyes at the Dewa Fair is a decorated exhibition consisting of stalls of various departments, depicting the activities and achievements through colourful exhibits arranged in any eye-catching manner. The exhibits portray through pictures, photographs and models methods to contain the population explosion. In another stall are placed on view various exhibits showing the cultural life and historical places of the state and also national building schemes.

The Dewa Fair, which is regarded as one of the finest and neatest fair in the state has its own water supply arrangement. The exhibition association every year spend large amounts in maintaining sanitary and conservancy service to keep the *Mela* area spite and span. Treatment facilities and First-Aid services are provided free of cost during the ten days *Mela* period. An elaborate arrangement is made to maintain law and order and regulate traffic arrangement by having a full-fledged Kotwali, Wireless Station, Walkie-Talkie sets and central Loudspeaker system. Evenings, in the fair provide greater attractions for the visitors as the entire township in the fair is transformed into a fairy land with millions of coloured lights.

A brilliant display of fireworks marks the conclusion of the ten days Dewa Fair. The Fireworks manufacturers of Dewa, Fatehpur, Zaidpur, Nawabganj and also from outside the district demonstrate their skills in letting off paper-balloons in the sky with a flame burning at its centre, firing rockets with a flame burning at its centre, firing rockets with a string of multi-coloured fireballs, shooting in the air and depicting picturesque landscape by igniting gun powder inside the fast rotation wheels, releasing *mariads* of twinkling star-like sparks of various tints.

Conclusion

In conclusion, it may be said that Dargah of Dewa is a symbol of communal peace and harmony, where thousands of people, irrespective of their religion, come from far and wide places of the country to attend the annual festival at the Dargah. They come to pay their homage to the great Sufi Saints, Haji Waris Ali Shah whose life is the perfect example for spiritual and ascetic way of life.

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