



Reconstructing the Life of Alauddin Ali Ahmad Sabir: The Founder of Chishti-Sabiri Sufi Order

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Abstract

The Chishtis have been the most popular Sufi order in the Indian Subcontinent for centuries. Eschewing the religious orthodoxy, they adopted various socio-cultural traditions that were already prevailing in India and promoted religious syncretism and toleration. Sabiri Sufi order is one of main branches of Chishtis but unfortunately no significant academic work has been done to investigate its activities over time.

The main objective of this article is to ascertain the life and activities of Ali Sabir who was the founder of the Sabiri silsilah. Moreover, as the popular perception would make us believe, the shrine of Ali Sabir in Kaliyar attracts maximum number of audiences after Hazrat Muinuddin Chishti. The work begins with an attempt to explain the dichotomy as to how such an eminent Chishti Sufi failed to find recognition in the contemporary literary tradition. Notwithstanding its rapid spread by his worthy successors, the history of this essentially rural silsilah continues to be marred by inconsistency and ignorance.

An important aspect of this work is the overwhelming reliance on the "traditional literature" as it can be called. The "traditional literature" can be best understood as an unbroken tradition of writing hagiographical narratives by generations of devotees on the life experiences of Ali Sabir and his successors. Indeed, the fundamental objective of this piece lies in the recollection of these narratives and to discover a lost tradition on the basis of these literary works. In nutshell, the source material at our disposal, does not offer the scope for a systematic and critical evaluation of the silsilah. Heavy reliance on legends and myths is likely to pose certain empirical inconsistencies. Almost absolute lack of any contemporary account on Sabir further complicates the task of pursuing methodological research. Nonetheless, the legends per se are not completely



devoid of utility for academic research and the tradition of unbridled faith of masses attached with them make them a very powerful subject matter. In this backdrop, an attempt is made to draw a logical inter-connection between these legends and the life experiences of the Sabiris.

Keywords: Sufism, Chishtis, Sabiri Sufi order, syncretic traditions

Introduction:

Islamic *Tasawwuf* (Sufism), an inherent dimension of Islam, strove to achieve the inner realization of divine unity by arousing intuitive and spiritual faculties. Rejecting rational argument, the Sufis plunged into contemplation and meditation. Most of the Sufi orders, however, endeavored to remain *ba-shara*¹. The over-riding emphasis was laid on the purification of the heart through ethical regeneration which was attainable through uncompromising belief in the transcendental nature of God (Ultimate Reality) and a tireless pursuit to establish direct communion with Him.

Crystallization of Sufism into different *silsilahs* (orders) preceded its advent into the Indian sub-continent. With the establishment of Turkish rule in Hindustan² there was unprecedented migration of the learned men including '*Ulema*'³ and the Sufis belonging to different orders. Among numerous orders which thrived in Hindustan, the Chishtis were able to establish their influence in the most profound manner setting a unique precedent of cultural integration and religious toleration. Khwaja Muinuddin Chishti, the fountainhead of the *silsilah*, adopted numerous indigenous Bhakti traditions and inculcated piety, humility and devotion to God.

The syncretic tradition, initiated by the Khwaja was further consolidated by his virtuous successors. Shaikh Qutubuddin Bakhtiyar Kaki Dehlawi, his beloved *Khalifa*, commanded great veneration among the masses and Iltutmish was deeply devoted to the him. Baba Fariduddin Ganj-i Shakar, a replica of his pir Shaikh Qutubuddin, popularized the Chishti precepts in the Punjab and earned massive popularity for his righteousness and distinguished spiritual attainments. Shaikh Nizamuddin Dehlawi was the next luminous star of the Chishti *silsilah*. Baba Farid trained him in a very rigorous environment so he could make the Chishti *silsilah* the dominant Sufi order in India. Liberal, philanthropic atmosphere of his *Khanqah*, his

¹ It implies that they endeavoured to confine themselves within the limits set by the Shariat (Islamic law).

² The term 'Hindustan' is used to denote the geographical territory of north India which first came under the Turkish rule.

³ 'Ulema' are the theologians of Sunni orthodox dogma.



charismatic personality and massive popularity earned him the epithet of *Mehboob-i Ilahi*⁴.

However, at this juncture the *silsilah* was proliferating at a faster pace and the Chishtis were soon becoming the torch bearers of Islamic piety epitomizing a more liberal, hegemonic and amenable dimension of Islam in Hindustan. Among a few most beloved disciples of Baba Farid, who spread the message of devotion and uprightness, was Alauddin Ali Sabir Kaliyari.

The main thrust of this article is to ascertain the life and activities of Ali Sabir who was the founder of the *Sabiri silsilah*.

Nonetheless, certain clarifications are in order. A contemporary of Shaikh Nizamuddin Auliya, Ali Sabir established himself at a distant rural landscape of Kaliyar, now in Haridwar district of Uttarakhand. Unlike the mainstream Chishti tradition there was no trace of any organised *Khanqah* activities in Kaliyar. Nor any *malfuz*⁵ literature or contemporary *tazkira*⁶ are available to systematically reconstruct the life and experiences of the patron Sufi and historical march of his *silsilah*.

Curiously, as the popular perception would make us believe, the shrine of Ali Sabir in Kaliyar attracts maximum number of audiences after Hazrat Muinuddin Chishti. The work begins with an attempt to explain the dichotomy as to how such an eminent Chishti Sufi failed to find recognition in the contemporary literary tradition. Notwithstanding its rapid spread by his worthy successors, the history of this essentially rural *silsilah* continues to be marred by inconsistency and ignorance.

Indeed, breaking away from the lineage of the mainstream Chishti branch, Ali Sabir, initiated an alternative model of spiritualism and withdrawal from public, urban life and allure of the royal courts. From the beginning, the *Sabiris* were much less visible than their predominant Chishti branch. They were renowned for their intense, awe-inspiring (*jalali*⁷) personalities. The *Sabiri* Shaikhs stuck to more rural locales, made fewer public appearances, trained fewer devotees and contributed nothing to the sufic literary traditions.

As a matter of fact, the *Sabiris* are associated with the maximum number of *karamats* (miracles).

⁴ The term Mehboob-I Ilahi means 'Dear to God'.

⁵ 'Malfuz' literally meaning conversation between the pir and disciples is an important genre of Sufic literature.

⁶ 'Tazkira' is a biographical sketch of an eminent Sufi by his disciples or followers.

⁷ 'Jalali' means full of wrath.



The literature at our disposal, which deals with the *Sabiris*, invariably constitutes of a complex web of miracles and legends. However, these legends, if appreciated in the relevant context provide an insight into the attitudes and visions of the *Sabiris* and to a great extent explain the unbridled faith of innumerable devotees reposed in the shrine of Sabir and his successors.

Research Methodology and Literature Review:

An important aspect of this work is the overwhelming reliance on the "traditional literature" as it can be called. The "traditional literature" can be best understood as an unbroken tradition of writing hagiographical narratives by generations of devotees on the life experiences of Ali Sabir and his successors. Indeed, the fundamental objective of this piece lies in the recollection of these narratives and to discover a lost tradition on the basis of these literary works.

Among the contemporary Sufic literature, *Siyar-al Auliya* of Mir Khurd gives explicit references to Ali Sabir and establishes his spiritual and blood association with Baba Farid. Shaikh Abdul Haq Muhaddis Dehlawi in his *Akhbar-al Akhyar* raises some doubts regarding the historical existence of Sabir in Kaliyar. However, the controversy which was sparked off by him provided a focal point to the modern research scholars to pursue the matter with great sincerity.

Iqtibas-al Anwar of Shaikh Ikram Quddusi has given an elaborate account of the foundation and evolution of the *silsilah*. His great concern in giving minute details of the legends and miracles performed by the *Sabiri* Sufis with definite context has been of substantial help in coherently exploring their attitude and vision *vis-a-vis* the state and society.

A slightly later work titled *Haqeeqat-i Gulzar-i Sabiri* by Shaikh Mahmood Hasan Chishti exclusively deals with Sabir and his *silsilah*. Though, the book is written with a great partisanly fervour and devotion to Sabir, its comprehensive style of narration contains numerous oral traditions which are very crucial in perceiving the tradition of tracing this lost tradition.

For the reconstruction of politico-religious thought of Abdul Quddus Gangohi, the most venerated *Sabiri* after Sabir, *Lataif-i Quddusi* of his son Shaikh Ruknuddin provides a deep insight. Shaikh Abdul Quddus' *maktubat* (epistles), which he sent to the rulers and influential people of the time not only acquaint us with the personal inclinations of the Shaikh but also help us in comprehending the prevailing politico-religious dynamics. A comprehensive study of the Shaikh's life and thought also demonstrate how after the advent of the Mughals, the *Sabiri silsilah* grappled with the newly emerging socio-political scenario.

Among the modern Urdu sources, mention can be made of Maulana Abul Hasan Nadwi's *Tarikh-i*



Dawat-o Azeemat. The text discusses the problems related to the historicity of Sabir and gives crucial information on Sabir's esoteric experiences and miraculous feats. It also gives a sketchy biographical account of Sabir and traces his pedigree to Hazrat Ali. *Irfan-i Sabir* by Azeez Hasan provides multiple perspectives to the study of Sabir. He elaborately discusses the evolution of Sabir's personality from an intuitive boy to an accomplished Sufi. His critical assessment of all relevant sources is particularly remarkable.

In nutshell, the source material at our disposal, does not offer the scope for a systematic and critical evaluation of the *silsilah*. Heavy reliance on legends and myths is likely to pose certain empirical inconsistencies. Almost absolute lack of any contemporary account on Sabir further complicates the task of pursuing methodological research. Nonetheless, the legends *per se* are not completely devoid of utility for academic research and the tradition of unbridled faith of masses attached with them make them a very powerful subject matter. In this backdrop, an attempt is made to draw a logical inter-connection between these legends and the life experiences of the *Sabiris*.

The *silsilah* derives its name from a veteran Chishti Sufi called Alauddin Ali Ahmad Sabir Kaliyari. The historicity of this Sufi has always been a subject of keen polemic among the circles of practicing Sufis of different orders. Though there is no historical documentation at our disposal to substantiate it, the legend goes that the first sincere efforts towards tracing the origin and evolution of the *Sabiri silsilah* and especially at corroborating the historicity of Ali Sabir began in the early 20th century following a bitter rivalry between the *Nizamis* and the *Sabiris*.⁸ The *Nizamis* refused to acknowledge the massive influence of the *Sabiris* on the grounds of ambiguity revolving around the founder of the *silsilah* and claims regarding his distinguished spiritual attainments and his influence on the socio-cultural evolution of different Sufi orders in northern India.

A Pakistani writer, S.M. Ikram, characterizes this *silsilah* as very vibrant, flamboyant and full of vigour and dynamism. Unlike the urban character of the *Nizami silsilah*, the *Sabiris* established their hospices in the rural interiors of northern India. He further explains that the well-entrenched position of *Nizamis* in northern India faced an irretrievable crisis with the decline of the Delhi Sultanate.

⁸ After Baba Fariduddin Ganj-i Shakar, the Chishti silsilah was divided into two sub-branches. The mystics who identified themselves with the hospice of Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya came to be regarded as the *Nizamis*. Likewise, the *Sabiris* were the spiritual successors of Ali Sabir Kaliyari.



Sabiris were at the ascendant once there was migration of *Nizamis* to Gulbarga, Patan, Pandua, etc.⁹ In fact, the political turbulence which followed the death of Firoz Shah and resultant exodus of *Nizamis* provided ideal opportunity to the *Sabiris* to flourish and become a dominant force in the mainstream life of northern India.¹⁰ Indeed it was sheer rural outlook of the *Sabiri silsilah* which excluded it from any conspicuous effects of rapidly changing political situations in the imperial capital or other major towns.

The focal point on the study of the *Sabiris* is the initiation of eminent Sufi Abdul Quddus Gangohi to the *silsilah*, who is also credited with the discovery of the lost grave of Ali Sabir in the late 15th century. *Lataif-i Quddusi* and other later texts reveal tremendous influence of *Sabiri* precepts of extreme austerity and humility on Ali Sabir and his successors. *Lataif-i Quddusi*, written by Shaikh Ruknuddin, a son and spiritual successor of Abdul Quddus, clearly associates the latter with the *Sabiri silsilah*.¹¹ The works of early *Sabiris* like Shams-al Turk Panipati which are lost to us in original form are available to us in the works of Abdul Quddus's grandson Muhammad Sadiq.

It is imperative to explore the reasons for under representation of Ali Sabir in contemporary Sufic literature and apprehensions regarding his historicity. There are hardly any direct references to Ali Sabir in contemporary literature. Notwithstanding the fact that the later *Sabiri* Sufis attained great heights in their spiritual life and acquired immense popularity among the masses, the personality of Ali Sabir remains to be shrouded in mystery. Therefore, it is not surprising that the available literature pertaining to Sabir is written more on the basis of oral traditions than on any concrete empirical basis. Any recent work on Ali Sabir is invariably a collection of miracles performed by him. Moreover, one witnesses an underlying similarity in this 'traditional literature.' These texts were written with a partisan approach with the purpose to pay a heartfelt tribute to the spiritual achievements of the founder Sufi. The lack of any definite knowledge about his early life and his activities in Kaliyar gave a spurt to miracle mongering, which still continues unabated. It is for these reasons that the apprehensions were always made regarding the historicity of Ali Sabir. However, these miracles and legends cannot be discarded altogether. It is difficult to believe them in totality or for

⁹ S.M. Ikram, *Rud-i Kausar*, Idara-i Safaqaat-i Islamia, Lahore, 1979, pp. 72-73.

¹⁰ *ibid.*, pp. 73-74.

¹¹ Azeez Hasan, *Irfan-i Sabir*, Saharanpur, 1984, p. 71.



that matter even partly since they cannot be qualified from a rational perspective but they reflect a passionate tradition of faith which continues to find place into the psyche of people committed to the shrine of Ali Sabir.

This tradition forms an important part of our data base. Endeavour will be made to explore the reasons for under representations of Ali Sabir in the contemporary accounts, establish his place in the history of Chishti *silsilah* in northern India and to critically analyze multiple shades of a *silsilah* thriving in the rural setting.

With regard to the scanty references to Ali Sabir, a comparative study of the *Nizami* and *Sabiri silsilahs* would be useful. The *Nizamis* flourished in the imperial capital of Delhi which attracted learned scholars from all quarters of the Muslim world; hence it had a rich literary and cultural tradition of learning and writing. Moreover, despite an ideological bias against any association with the state, the *Nizamis* invariably found themselves entrapped in court intrigues¹² and some other veteran Sufis like Amir Khusru enjoyed state patronage. These were sufficient grounds for the *Nizamis* to figure in official chronicles. Ali Sabir resided in Kaliyar, a distant, insignificant small town which neither had any rich cosmopolitan outlook nor any connection with the imperial city.

Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya maintained a grand hospice with his disciples and audience thronging him all the time. Hence each and every activity of the Sufi was carefully recorded. Apart from numerous *tazkiras* on his life and activities, his conversation with his disciples have been meticulously recorded by his disciple, Mir Hasan Sijzi, who exhibited a great sense of chronology and systematically analysed his master's personality. Conversely, as the sources would suggest, oblivious to the earthly existence, Ali Sabir used to be perpetually engrossed in devotional prayers and spiritual practices. He abhorred interaction with the masses and resided in absolute seclusion.

¹² In this context, mention can be made of articles by Simon Digby on connotations of authority of the Sufis' *wilayat* and their involvement in politics. In an article, Raziuddin Aquil further corroborates the contention that throughout the period of Delhi Sultanate the Chishtis were regularly engaged in the court activities and promptly reacted to changing political scenario. Their ambivalent attitude towards the state marked by cordiality and conflict problematises the assumption of their political neutrality. Simon Digby, "The Sufi Shaikh as a source of authority in Medieval India" Purusartha, (1986) pp. 57-77. Raziuddin Aquil, "Sufi Cults, Politics and Conversions: The Chishtis of the Sultanate period." Indian Historical Review, Vol. 22, No. I, (July 1997-January 1998), pp. 190-197.



Muhammad Ghaus Mandavi Shattari in his *Gulzar-i Abrar* mentions that Sabir possessed a dignified and awe-striking personality and exercised extreme restraint in displaying his esoteric experiences and did not have a vast train of disciples and followers. Shaikh Shams-al Turk Panipati, the only disciple of Ali Sabir, was indeed a replica of his *pir*. He relished seclusion and devotion to God and did not take any interest in cultural pursuits, including writing, poetry, etc.¹³ In fact, he would receive occasional blessings from his *pir* only on Thursdays.

In this backdrop, it is not surprising that there are scanty references to Ali Sabir in contemporary literature. It was after 200 years had lapsed that Hazrat Abdul Quddus Gangohi commenced a systematic study of Ali Sabir in the late 15th century. The given description of Ali Sabir suggests that Sabiri *silsilah* in its initial stage did not involve any well organised *khanqah* activities. It remained localized with virtually no outside interaction. The seclusive attitude of Ali Sabir, his reluctance to interact with the masses and enroll a large number of disciples resulted in the absence of any active *khanqah* activities. It consequently prevented the recording of his life and activities.

Moreover, Shaikh Ali Sabir was among the initial disciples of Baba Fariduddin Ganj-i Shakar and most of the other veteran disciples of Baba Farid joined his *khanqah* after the departure of Ali Sabir to the *wilayat* of Kaliyar. Shaikh Nizamuddin and Shaikh Badruddin Ishaq entered the *khanqah* in the year 652 *Hijri*/1240 A.D while Ali Sabir left Ajodhan much before this year.¹⁴ It precluded all possibilities of mentioning of Ali Sabir in subsequent *malfiz* literature. Nonetheless his failing to find recognition in these texts does not belittle his stature amongst the towering *Chishtis*, the reason for it will be explored below. But let us first deal with the apprehensions regarding the historicity of Shaikh Ali Sabir. In this regard, mention can be made of *Siyar-ul Auliya*, one of the most widely acclaimed Chishti texts written by Khwaja Mir Khurd, a disciple of Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya. He says, "I heard from my father that there existed a *derwesh* who excelled in piety and righteousness and was called Sabir. He had attained great heights in *tasawwuf* and dwelt in the township of 'Dekri'. He was a disciple of Baba Farid and was related to his *pir* by blood. On Sabir's query about his future the *pir* prophesied 'O Sabir you will have unique experiences in life.'"¹⁵

¹³ Muhammad Ghaus Mandavi Shattari, *Gulzar-i Abrar*, Lahore, 1911, pp. 585-586.

¹⁴ Azeez Hasan, *Irfan-i Sabir*, p. 58.

¹⁵ Mir Khurd, *Siyar-al Auliya*, Urdu translation by Abdul Latif, Delhi, 1994, p. 196-



The reference testifies beyond doubt that the Sufi called Sabir who stayed in town Dekri was a disciple of Baba Farid. Shaikh Abdul Haq Muhaddis Dehalwi in his *Akhbar-ul Akhyar* accepts the presence of Ali Sabir in the hospice of Baba Farid and unambiguously maintains that he was a senior disciple and a nephew of Baba Farid. But he rejects the view that the Sabir who is referred in *Siyar-al Auliya* is Alauddin Ali Sabir of Kaliyar.¹⁶

However, Aziz Hasan in his *Irfan-i Sabir* explains that since Abdul Haq Muhaddis Dehlawi knew about Sabir's activities in Kaliyar and not in Dekri, he raised such doubts. The historical documentation of the township of Dekri in Mir Sharfuddin Yazdi's *Zafarnama* will help us in locating the present day Kaliyar in the contemporary Dekri and, hence, refute Shaikh Abdul Haq's doubts regarding the historical existence of Ali Sabir in the foothills of Shivaliks. While describing the march of Timur's army in Haridwar; Yazdi says, "The victorious force marched and joined the royal camp at the village of Bahrah, a dependency of Dekri, well known as 'the country of Mayapur'. On the 11th he marched four *kos* from Bahrah and encamped at the village of Sarsawa. In consequence of immense booty which the army had gained, it was impossible to march more than four *kos* per day. On the 13th he marched and encamped at Komdar, a distance of nearly four *kos*."¹⁷

This description substantiates the contention that the present day Kaliyar which exists in the foothills of Shivaliks in District Haridwar was once a part of Dekri, better known as Mayapur. It is also noteworthy that the places described above still exist in present Haridwar and in the neighbouring town of Saharanpur.

There is another confusion related to the identification of Ali Sabir. The critics argue that *Siyar-al Auliya* does not contain the name Ali and this does not sufficiently prove that the Sabir who is mentioned in the book is Ali Sabir Kaliyari. In this context *M'arij-al Auliya* of Muinuddin Nizami gives useful information. The author says, "You must know that the Sabir who is referred to in *Siyar-al Auliya* is indeed Shaikh Alauddin Ali Sabir Kaliyari who was a beloved disciple and nephew of Baba Farid. Sabir set an exalted tradition of 'sabr' (patience), humility and selfless devotion to God and inspired many subsequent generations to imbibe the precepts of the

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¹⁶ *Irfan-i Sabir*, pp. 36-37.

¹⁷ Mir Sharfuddin Yazdi, *Zafarnama*, English translation by Elliot and Dowson in *History of India as told by its own Historians*, Vol 3, pp. 513-514.



Chishtis."¹⁸

Even before the attempts of Hazrat Abdul Quddus, we find sketchy references of Hazrat Ali Sabir in the contemporary literature but unfortunately either they were destroyed due to lack of preservation or could not attain popularity in the circles of major Sufi orders. In this regard, mention can be made of Ali Sabir's spiritual grandson Shaikh Kabir-al Auliya whose *Zad-al Abrar* contains explicit references to Ali Sabir's associations with Baba Farid, his early mystical experiences at Baba Farid's *khanqah*, his consequent arrival at Kaliyar and different phases of his spiritual and social life. The manuscript of this book is lost to us but it is quoted by other Chishti saints.¹⁹

Another successor of Ali Sabir, Abdul Haq Rudaulwi, in his memoirs called *Bayaz-i Shaikh-al Alimin*, refers to the vigorous activities at the *Sabiri khanqah* in Kaliyar. He also describes the active involvement of Ali Sabir in the socio-cultural life of the region. This book also perished but fortunately survives in the works of Abdul Quddus.²⁰

However, in the light of legends attributed to him, it is difficult to believe that Sabir ever took keen interest in the socio-political issues of the time. It is equally problematic to conceive of any vigorous *khanqah* activities in the early phase of the *Sabiri silsilah*. What seems more plausible is that the enthusiastic successors of Ali Sabir tried to project a more acceptable image of the founder Sufi to legitimize their massive social influence and popularity.

The references to Ali Sabir are equally ubiquitous in modern Urdu sources. Syed Abul Hasan Nadwi in his *Tarikh-i Dawat o-Azeemat* mentions five prominent Khalifas (successors) of Baba Farid. Among them Ali Sabir Kaliyari figures along with Badruddin Ishaq and Nizamuddin Auliya.²¹ He argues that the essence of Baba Farid's spiritual life and his distinguished stature among his contemporaries is unquestionable. His inclinations, integrity, humility and selfless devotion to God were more than manifest in the virtuous upbringing of Hazrat Nizamuddin and Shaikh Ali Sabir²².

Syed Nadawi also acknowledges the fact that Sabir has not received due place in the writings on

¹⁸ Muinuddin Nizami, *Ma'arij-al Auliya*, Moradabad, 1978, pp. 17-18.

¹⁹ Azeez Hasan, *Irfan-i-Sabir*, p.82.

²⁰ *ibid.*, p.82.

²¹ Syed Abul Hasan Ali Nadawi, *Tarikh-i Dawat o-Azeemat*, Lucknow, 1978, vol-3, p. 46.

²² *ibid.*, p. 42.



Indian mysticism. He argues that this is not the first historical mistake and history has repeatedly overlooked such eminent personalities. Nonetheless, the way *Sabiri silsilah* has attained supreme position and reached the deep nooks and corners of UP is ample testimony to the fact that the founder of the *silsilah* was a distinguished Sufi.²³

Biography of Sabri:

Sabir's real name was Ali Ahmad. The legend goes that when Sabir was in his mother's womb, she was given the good news of Sabir's prospective birth in her dream by no other than the great Ali, the fourth righteous Caliph and fountainhead of Islamic mysticism (*tasawwuf*). Ali instructed her to name her son after him. On the second night, Sabir's mother witnessed *Sarwar-i Kainat*, the prophet Mohammad, in her dream who asked her to name her son Ahmad after him. Hence the boy was named Ali Ahmad after his birth²⁴. The Sufi attained the title (*laqab*) of Sabir owing to his exemplary perseverance, integrity and upright character. The word Sabir has been derived from the term '*sabr*' literally meaning 'patience.' The title was bestowed upon him by his revered *pir* Baba Farid.

Ali Sabir was born in Herat, Afghanistan in year 591/1213 Hijri/A.D. Some traditions ascribe his birth to the year 1205 A.D. However, he was six years of age when his father died in 1207 A.D. It lends credence to the earlier proposition of his birth in year 1201 A.D.²⁵

It has been suggested that Sabir was a keen observer in his childhood and refrained from interacting with other than his household members and maintained a dignified silence most of the time. His first encounter with his inner self occurred at the age of four when during his morning prayers (*fajr*), he turned spiritual at the recital of a particular verse "*La Maujood Illallah*," meaning "God is everywhere"²⁶. It marked the beginning of the unfurling of Sabir's spiritual self.

Sabir had a very speculative bent of mind. He remained in seclusion most of the time, slept a little and used to be perpetually engrossed in '*Zikr*' and divine thoughts. He learnt the holy *Quran* at the age of seven and spent most of his time in prayers and devotion to God.²⁷ The first turning point in Sabir's life came with the death of his father due to severe stomach pain.

²³ *ibid.*, p. 47.

²⁴ Aziz Hasan, *Irfan-i Sabir*, p. 100.

²⁵ *ibid.*, p. 103.

²⁶ Shah Mahmood Hasan Quddusi Chishti, *Haqeeqat-i Gulzar-i Sabiri*, p. 142.

²⁷ Azeez Hasan, *Irfan-i Sabir*, p. 108.



Sabir remained in absolute seclusion for the next one year and hardly interacted with anybody.²⁸ Indeed, this was the time when Sabir started exhibiting his *Qalandiri* (ascetic) and miraculous tendencies. There is an interesting legend regarding his childhood days of extreme penury and starvation.

Once under desperate hunger, Sabir asked his mother for some food. Since there was no food, his mother put some water on fire and asked him to wait for the rice to get ready. A lot of time lapsed and in exasperation Sabir again demanded food. His mother opened the pot and smelt the fragrance of boiled rice. She was pleasantly surprised. She stretched her hands and paid her heartfelt gratitude to God.²⁹

Sabir was a *Sayyed* and traced his genealogy to the eminent personalities of Islam. From his father's side, he could boast of being the direct descendent of Hazrat Abdul Quddus Jilani, who in turn was a great grandson of Ali the Great, the fourth righteous Caliph and son-in-law of the prophet.

Sabir's father, Abdur Rahim, is buried in Jaliyya, Afghanistan while the shrine of his grandfather, Abdul Wahhab is in Baghdad. Baba Farid's sister and Sabir's mother Jameela Khatoon was a descendent of Umar bin Khattab, the second righteous Caliph and one of the closest associates of the prophet.

There is an interesting anecdote regarding Ali Sabir attaining the title of Sabir. It is recorded in a lot of Sufic works that once Baba Farid asked Sabir, "Do you take anything of which you distribute among the needy?" Sabir replied, "I could never muster enough courage to do so without my *pir's* permission." Baba Farid was overwhelmed by this statement and conferred the title of "Sabir" on him. The "Sabir" is the one who possesses the virtues of patience (*sabr*) and integrity of character.

Realizing the spiritual inclinations of Sabir, his mother took him to her brother, Baba Farid, who was a distinguished Chishti saint and maintained a hospice in Ajodhan, Punjab (now in Pakistan). Sabir was one of the initial disciples of Baba Farid.³⁰ *Iqtibas-al Anwar* describes Sabir to be the first, closest and foremost disciples of Baba Farid.³¹ Sabir served Baba Farid with selfless devotion and utmost reverence. Under the intensive guidance of Baba Farid, he mastered *ilm-i*

²⁸ Shah Mahmood Hasan Quddusi Chishti, *Haqeeqat-i Gulzar-i Sabiri*, p. 146.

²⁹ Ibid., p.150. Also see *Irfan-i-Sabir*, pp. 108-109.

³⁰ Abdul Hayy, *Nuzhat-al Khwatir*, Lahore, 1965, p. 191.

³¹ Shaikh Muhammad Akram Quddusi, *Iqtibas-al Anwar*, Urdu translation by Ilhaj Khudabaksh Siyal Sabiri, p. 497.



zahiri (exoteric knowledge) of Islamic theology, jurisprudence, the holy *Quran* and *hadis*. And finally, after rigorous spiritual training of many years Sabir was initiated into the *Chishti silsilah* by his spiritual mentor, Baba Farid. Impressed by Sabir's ascetic life style and his spiritual attainments, Baba Farid once exclaimed to his disciples, "My esoteric and external knowledge is transmitted to Nizamuddin, whereas that of my *pir* (Hazrat Qutubuddin Bakhtyar Kaki) is inherited by Sabir."³²

Sabir was given the responsibility to supervise the management of *langar* (public kitchen). On 26 *Shawwal* 603 Hijri/1225A.D, Sabir came out of the mosque after offering his afternoon prayers and distributed *langar* for the first time and again retired to his *hujra* (a small personal room for a Sufi).³³ He subsequently performed this service for 12 years. The only time Sabir interacted with his *khanqah* mates was during his service at *langar*. Most of the time, he confined himself to his *hujra* and engrossed in his eternal quest for esoteric experiences and in witnessing the "Ultimate Reality" (*Ashghal-i Batini*).

It is quite unlikely that Sabir became a popular disciple of Baba Farid's *khanqah*. His indifference to other *khanqah* activities might have marginalized him from the mainstream life of the *khanqah*. But several oral traditions as well as written works attest a close and sentimental relationship of Sabir with Baba Farid as his disciple and a nephew.

As per the wish of his sister, Baba Farid got his daughter Shareefa Banu married to Sabir. The legend goes that she succumbed to the awe-striking state of Sabir when he was overpowered by his spiritual bliss. His wife, in a legendary description, was reduced to ashes when she saw Sabir in the state of spiritual ecstasy. However, the tradition seems to be an attempt to characterize Sabir with the attributes of a perfect human who had annihilated all of his senses. Other traditions give elaborate accounts of Shareefa Begum who is described as a replica of Bibi Rabia Basri³⁴ in her exposition and piety³⁵.

It seems that in keeping with the Chishti tradition, Sabir got married to Baba Farid's daughter but due to his extremely ascetic disposition he could not lead a normal married life. The marriage did not survive for long as we do not hear of his progeny in the contemporary accounts or in the

³² *ibid.*, p. 498.

³³ *Haqeeqat-i Gulzar-i Sabiri*, p. 158.

³⁴ She belonged to the classic age of Islam and is considered to be the first great woman Sufi of Arabia.

³⁵ *Irfan-i Sabir*, pp. 111-112.



legends ascribed to him.

A big turmoil in Sabir's life came with the death of his mother in *Muharram* 614 Hijri/1236 A.D. It was an irreparable loss to him and it further distanced him from the worldly affairs. He completely took to secluded existence and immersed himself in *Zikr* and prayers to God. A statement of Baba Farid recorded in *Haqeeqat-i Gulzar-i Sabiri* suggests that after the demise of his mother, Ali Sabir remained in his *hujra* for nine years. Baba Farid says, "On 23 *Muharram* 623 Hijri/1245 A.D. I entered into Sabir's *hujra* and found him in the state of spiritual bliss. I recited *Kalimah* in his left ear and brought him back to the normal state of mind."³⁶ The description seems to be exaggerated since survival in a small room for nine years without any outside interaction is improbable. But Sabir must have engrossed himself in the thought of God much more intensely and further curtailed his association with the *khanqah*. It helps us in reconstructing the inclinations and demeanour of the Sufi under consideration. Apparently, on that very day, after late afternoon prayers (*asr*), Ali Sabir took formal allegiance at the hand of Baba Farid in front of other disciples and entered into the Chishti *Silsilah*. Sabir stayed in the *khanqah* for some more time before he left for the *wilayat*³⁷ of Kaliyar.

At this juncture certain clarifications are in order. In the popular imagination of the followers, Sabir is perceived as a perfect saint who was *Ala-al Haque* (upholder of truth), a *darwesh* whose uttered words became the truth itself and *jalali* whose anger brought devastation to the accursed. Tradition says that Baba Farid gave Sabir the discretion to go the *wilayat* of his own choice and Sabir showed willingness to go to Delhi. Baba Farid wrote a *khilafatnama* (letter of investiture) to him and asked him to get it confirmed by one of his other senior disciples, Shaikh Jamaluddin Hasnavi.³⁸

The legend goes that Shaikh Jamaluddin, who was aware of Sabir's asocial nature, had an argument with Sabir and tore apart the *khilafatnama* in the heat of the moment. Sabir got infuriated and cursed him by saying, "You have torn my *khilafatnama*, I tear your *silsilah*." And

³⁶ *Haqeeqat-i Gulzar-i Sabiri*, pp. 168-169.

³⁷ In the world of Islamic mysticism, there is a concept of spiritual territorial supervision by different Sufis. In the assigned territory, the particular Sufi is expected to spread the teachings of his *pir* and *silsilah* and to undertake the oath of selfless service to mankind.

³⁸ As per the tradition, Baba Farid had assigned the task of formal implementation of *khilafatnama* to Shaikh Jamaluddin. It was customary and all *Khalifas* of Baba Farid had to take prior confirmation from him.



it is said that Shaikh Jamaluddin could not proliferate his *silsilah*. His son became mentally retarded and his grandson later joined the *khanqah* of Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya.³⁹

When Sabir returned to Ajodhan and narrated the story to Baba Farid, he said, "I cannot sew what Jamal has torn but I will write a better *Khilafatnama* for you." Hence, he was given the *wilayat* of Kaliyar.

What appears from the aforesaid description is that perhaps Baba Farid also realised the unsuitability of Sabir for a place like Delhi. Sabir with his 'Qalandari Jalal' (wrath of an accomplished saint) and his tendencies for solitude could not have adjusted himself in the capital city, which was characterized by political intrigues, wars and other worldly pursuits. Additionally, Sabir's encounter with Shaikh Jamaluddin must have reinforced his suspicion.

Conclusion: Reconstruction of Sabir's life and activities in his Wilayat

Kaliyar poses numerous problems. As mentioned earlier, no *mal'fuz* literature or *tazkiras* are available to systematically comprehend Sabir's daily experiences, his interaction with his followers and the masses. Sufic traditions believe that every accomplished *wali* is a replica of a prophet in terms of his attitude, outlook and temperament. In this backdrop, Sabir is believed to have resembled Hazrat Musa.⁴⁰ In the popular imagination as well as among the practicing Sufis, he has earned the distinction of a *Jalali Darwesh* (awe-inspiring saint) and is credited with the performance of unimaginable miracles.

There are innumerable legends associated with his miraculous acts and *his jalal* (anger)⁴¹. The legends are exaggerated versions of his experiences in Kaliyar and they shed immense light on his evolution as a great Chishti saint, who set a paradigm of unparalleled devotion to God and inspired many successors to emulate him in spiritual attainments.

Sabir reached Kaliyar in 650 Hijri/1256 A.D. and attracted masses with his divine and awe-striking appearance. He faced stiff opposition from the *ulema* who disliked Sabir's ascetic outlook and his *qalandari* attitude.⁴² The *ulema* led by Qazi Tabarrak started challenging Sabir's claim of wilayathood of Kaliyar. They started creating troubles for Sabir and his followers

³⁹ *Iktibas-al Anwar*, p. 499, and also in *Siyar-al Auliya*, p. 190.

⁴⁰ Qazi Manzoor Gangohi, *Mashaikh-i Uzzam*, p.5. Also see *Iqtibas-al Anwar*, p. 498.

⁴¹ Sabir is associated with most of the miracles among Chishtis. *Iqtibas-al Anwar*, p. 498.

⁴² *Iqtibas-ul Anwar*, p. 502.



and humiliated them on various occasions.⁴³ A very popular legend demonstrates the bitter opposition Sabir had to encounter at his arrival in Kaliyar.

One Thursday, when Sabir was delivering his sermon at the mosque, Qazi Tabarrak challenged him, "If you can tell me about my goat I lost three months back, I will acknowledge you the *wali* of Kaliyar." Sabir clearly understood that his authenticity was challenged. He raised his hand toward the sky and said, "Those who have eaten the goat, come here." As soon as he said this, 27 men came forward. When asked if they had eaten the goat, they denied it. On repeated denials, Sabir asked Qazi Tabarrak to call out the lamb's name. Qazi shouted, "Harmana Harmana! Where are you?" Hearing this, she screamed from the stomachs of those men who had eaten her and described how she was cut into pieces. This miracle brought rapid popularity to Sabir but Qazi Tabarrak called him a magician and started conspiring against him.⁴⁴ It is difficult to believe in the authenticity of these miracles from a rational standpoint. However, it should be borne in mind that it is the faith of Sabir's followers in his miraculous powers that his shrine emerged as a powerful regional cult. The miracles attributed to him might be purely concocted, but they are deeply embedded in the imagination of his followers.

Apparently, Sabir was gaining rapid popularity by performing miracles which silenced his critics. They indulged in slander and propaganda against his claim as the *wali* among the people, and denounced him as the enemy of Islam. Opposition reached intolerable proportions and Sabir's attendants complained against repeated intimidation at the hands of the *ulema*. Sabir asked them to be patient and corresponded with his *pir* informing him about the situation. Baba Farid wrote a letter to the people of Kaliyar to accept Sabir as the *wali* but opposition from the *ulema* continued unabated.⁴⁵ Sabir remained patient but his followers showed their inability to face the *ulema*'s hostility and asked Sabir to do something about the matter.

Sabir again wrote to his *pir* who finally replied, "This *wilayat* is your goat. Milk it or slaughter it."⁴⁶ The statement is recorded in almost every source pertaining to Sabir and raises a lot of apprehensions. Given the exemplary tolerant attitude and humility of Baba Farid, it is quite unlikely of him to give Sabir the permission to destroy Kaliyar (implicit in his statement).

⁴³ Ibid., p. 503.

⁴⁴ Qazi Mansoor Ahmad Gangohi, *Mashaikh-i Uzzam*, p. 12.

⁴⁵ *Irfan-i Sabir*, pp. 119-120.

⁴⁶ Ibid., p. 120.



However, chroniclers give justification of subsequent destruction of Kaliyar by Sabir on these grounds.

Once during the Friday prayers, Sabir, with his followers, was sitting near the *mimbar* (pulpit). When the time of prayer approached, one of the *ulema* asked Sabir to leave the place. Sabir's followers replied that they came first and Islam does not allow discrimination on the choice of place to worship. The *alim* replied that he had inherited the place from his ancestors and, hence, claimed it as a matter of right. In this ensuing altercation, Sabir raised his head from his meditative state and exhorted the *ulema* by saying that a *wali* deserves this place more than the *Ulema-i Zahir* (theologians oriented toward this-worldly pursuits). The *ulema* and their followers started humiliating Sabir and raised a cry asking Sabir to prove his *wilayat* then and there.

Sabir replied in his utmost exasperation, "The proof of my wilayathood will cost you your lives." He was almost dragged out of the mosque with his followers. It is a legendary description that *Jalal-i Sabir* reached intolerable limits. Sabir raised his hands and the demolition of the mosque followed and all opponents perished. A lot of hue and cry followed and survivors and other people visited him seeking pardon. Sabir replied, "Desertion of this place is better for me," and asked them to leave since destruction of Kaliyar was inevitable.⁴⁷

This incident apparently happened in the early years of Sabir's stay in Kaliyar. That there was dogged resistance to Sabir from the *ulema* is beyond doubt. In all likelihood, Sabir would have had to leave Kaliyar due to violent opposition and vehement antagonism of the *ulema*. Further, it must have taken him some more years or spiritual meditation and isolated existence in an adjacent jungle to attain the position of a distinguished Sufi. But interestingly, a different Chishti as he was, it was his ascetic and *qalandari* outlook and not the hospitality of his *khanqah* which attracted the masses towards him.

This particular event apparently marked a decisive shift in the life and activities of Sabir. His miracles earned him the reputation of an accomplished saint, his popularity increased immensely and people started thronging him. However, he took to isolation, completely immersed himself in divine thoughts and started abhorring the masses and worldly affairs. Sabir migrated 4 kos away to a forest and completely devoted himself to his spiritual practices and prayers. Only on Thursdays he would

⁴⁷ *Irfan-i Sabir*, pp. 120-121.



reluctantly allow audience to come to his *khanqah* but he would lament on every Thursday, "Dogs of the forest leave today because dogs of the world will come today."

Sabir is believed to have completely annihilated his senses in the pursuit of his spiritual goals. He is believed to have been taken by spiritual ecstasy while holding a branch of a *goolar* tree. He remained in the state of spiritual bliss for 12 years, coming out only to offer his prayers and survived on *goolars*. The tree still stands erect and is revered by the followers even today. The story is definitely exaggerated but it shows that Sabir exhibited matchless integrity, patience and ascetic virtues in attaining a distinguished position among the contemporary Sufis and, notwithstanding his *jalali* image, left an indelible mark on the psyche of people. It is no exaggeration that after his death, a strong Sabiri cult arose around his grave which still continues to attract innumerable audiences.

Some interesting inferences can be drawn from the aforesaid description. It reinforces the theory of traditional rivalry between the Sufis and *Ulema* in the contemporary context. It is worth mentioning here that unlike the urban setting of Delhi where the mutual animosity between the *Ulema* and Sufis was confined to an ideological plane, opposition to Sabir and his followers assumed violent forms, including their intimidation and discrimination by the *Ulema*. This might have been equally true for the other regional and remote settlements. Some generalizations regarding Chishtis also stand untenable in the light of Sabir's life experiences. Unlike the popular notion regarding the Chishtis, Sabir in most of his lifetime remained indifferent to the masses, did not maintain a significant hospice. Nor had he a vast number of disciples. He did not reflect on any current socio-political issue. It was not his grand hospice, his social stature or his recognition among political circles which gave him a distinct identity. Indeed, he comes across to us as a disillusioned saint who failed to attain fame and recognition, as a *derwesh* whose awe-inspiring personality rendered him unfit to carry forward the socio-syncretic mission of Chishtis. However, quite paradoxically, Sabir, who avoided interaction with the masses in his lifetime, continues to serve humanity in the awe-inspiring ambience of his shrine in Kaliyar.
