CHAPTER III
MYSTERY OF TAMIL NADU DARGAHS

Mystery, which means secret religious rites and ceremonies, is in a sense an impact of the beliefs that knowledge of God and of real truth may be obtained through meditation or spiritual insight, independently of the mind and the senses. It can be called mysticism of a mystic, the person who works out in it. Since it may be applied as a placebo, the beneficial effect must lie in a symbolic power. But such a symbol can prove instrumentally effective and cause substantial physiological change. The mostly like supposition is that this placebo gains its potency through being a tangible symbol of the physician's role as healer. In this belief, the amulets which Muslim pirs distribute to alleviate suffering are a kind of placebo. There is a shared set of beliefs between the pir and the patient and therefore a confidence in the treatment. As well as possible physiological improvement there would also be psychological gain. The ideology and ritual supply the patient with a conceptual framework for organising his chaotic, mysterious and vague distress and give him a plan of action helping to regain a sense of direction and mastery to resolve his inner conflicts.131

The fact that the role of saints as spiritual persons could be inherited through ties of lineal descent meant that a type of pir, very different from this ideal could flourish. This is particularly evident in the religious life of rural areas where almost every village has its hereditary shaikh. These men indeed respected many of the early saints from whom they claimed descent and derive authority and became the healers of soul and quickness of the spirit. Their extreme asceticism is a qualification for

the sanctity with which they could expose the spiritual powers. The Indo-
Muslim chronicles are replete with stories of individuals who lived in
caves and jungles spurning the company of anti-social attitudes. The
mystery, the spiritual power of the saints during their lifetime was
believed by the masses with more specific practices in Tamil Nadu but
the mystic acts after the death of saints can or cannot be believed. It
perhaps depends upon the physiological cure of the patient admitted near
the grave of the saint. It is possible for a dead man to become a saint
posthumously, if certain phenomena considered characteristic of the
resting place of saints occur at his tomb. However it is not only
miracles which prompt this kind of posthumous vogue but martyrdom is
another qualification for posthumous sanctity and a shahid being
considered especially holy because of the status of holy war in Islam.

The hereditary nature of spirituality what was done in
Kottaipattinam and Pasipattinam by father and son means that an
individual may need to explain and legitimise his spiritual authority by
attributing it in part to inheritance from a former darwish. Thus a Sufi
may be upgraded in the spiritual hierarchy after his death to validate the
claims of a later pir or his followers like Naina Muhammad of
Pasipattinam who followed the Islamic footsteps of his father. The
naugaza meaning tomb or shrine erected on the grave of a saint, but with
a forgotten history not recorded by the original builders too introduce us
to a class of saint that has a name with dargah spirituality believed in as a
reality, by the people. It is commonly found in many places where Islam
spread that the new converts managed to carry with them many of their
former doctrines and tomb veneration might be a replica of this one
followed by next generation and all. The exception against all these

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doctrines is that some Sufis did not explicitly like miracles, there was seldom any sign of the passing away of hereditary *pirs* and some are reverenced greatly. It is in the case of Kunangudi Masthan, the Sufi of simple living and humble character never liked to say that any Sufi or he himself in particular had possessed the power of miracles. Many Sufis like Nathar Wali, did not pass the *pir* heirship to his followers but instead they attained the status of Sufi at their own spiritual powers. Persons like Yusuf Khan belonging to non Sufi status is still placed highly and his tomb is treated as a *dargah* of a saint. It is a public belief that whoever their *pir* is or his powers are, they rely on his mystical power as long as their distress is removed. An individual becomes a saint if he is believed to be able to provide for human needs through supernatural intervention. Even the saints without followers but with this power can be vital persons for saintship.\(^{133}\)

The attempts to provide the essential, necessary qualification for sainthood deal with the consequences of sainthood rather than its cause. That which unites a *pir*, *shaikh* or *wali* into a single category is more fundamental. It is their relationship with God and they are considered to be the special recipient of *baraka*. A saint is a person who has *baraka* in an extraordinary degree. The purpose of the saint cult is to mobilize the *baraka* embodied in the saint for any specific or mundane purposes. In the saint cult, it is believed that God chooses those whom he wishes to use as his intermediaries by this gift and this choice is preferred and accepted by the people who visit the saint's tomb. The essence of Muslim sainthood to the believer is derived from the particular relationship of proximity between God and the saint. The saint is believed to translate this relationship into action in the phenomenal world. In the case of an ordinary *pir*, *shaikh* and even *wali* who attains the power in the family of

\(^{133}\) P.M.Currie, *op.cit.*, p.11.
auliya, this will take the form of spiritual and material aid to their followers. Thus sainthood in Islam is essentially a function of a relationship in the eyes of the believer and the relationship of the saint to his followers in the eyes of the observer rather than the particular quality of the saint's personality or spirituality. The accepted signs of this relationship, where visible, are sufficiently all embracing and elastic not to disqualify any individual on the grounds of his personality and where they are absent they can soon be supplied.

There is a similarly casual approach in the choice of which tomb should be at the centre of a saint cult. It is a symbol of being and continuing process of divine grace at work in this world. It is a special relationship, not any external characteristic, which is the basic qualification of sainthood. However, the veneration of saints and the graves is clearly opposed by the word of God and the Prophet Muhammad in Islam. The veneration of saints was established as a major characteristic of Muslim life.\textsuperscript{134} It was possible because Islam with its new inhabitants is endowed with a certain degree of flexibility through the operation of 'ijma' which left the door open to the entry of new formulae and opinions. This ijma, though resisted at first by the orthodox schools of Islam, obtained later a sort of toleration and some religious leaders too began to favour the saintly attitudes of Sufis. After centuries of mystical experimentation, mysticism came to embrace a doctrine which, without impairing the divine unity provided a philosophical basis for the practical devotion to saints and had formed in response to people's need. Sanctity resulting from the initiation into the spiritual path which the Sufis considered as the perfection of man is a state according to a specific belief and is possessed in its fullness by some leaders. As Islam spread to remote places of new countries, the popular imagination there

\textsuperscript{134} Ibid., p.15.
required more immediate and accessible substitutes in lieu of some Arab leaders and these substitutes were the saints. The concept of sinlessness and infallibility began to be attributed, though to a lesser degree, to the saints. The traditions of the saints assumed an importance almost as great as the spiritual traditions and because of the simplicity of their form and content and more familiar background of time and space in which they were produced they soon achieved great popularity. As the cult of prophetic function developed and passed from popular belief into respectable doctrine, reverence for the places associated with them increased. The beginnings of the veneration of sacred places are found in the earliest practices of Islamic world. The tradition that God forbade the soil to consume the bodies of prophets buried in it was extended to include the bodies of saints and martyrs. Their tombs were, therefore, intrinsically worth visiting for they continued to survive there. The people as a whole are attracted by the material side of things but their thoughts and feelings are all associated with object of sense and so great men live in people's memory with which their names have been associated.\textsuperscript{135}

A strong but little blind belief in a miraculous form has permeated the society. Even the learned and the powerful are not immune from this and they further believe that the \textit{karamat}, the power of miracles, was the proof that the Sufi has attained the status attributed to him. The Sufi's interventions in the ordinary course of nature extended from trifling affairs of individuals, to whom they supplied amulets, to an influence over major social events and sometimes some political events in which they had to participate. Mystical act has always been part of Sufism in Tamil Nadu. Sufi masters used the mystical effort to combat the forces of evils and darkness. The basis for the existence and use of supernatural

\textsuperscript{135} \textit{Ibid.}, p.18.
powers was endorsed by some of the Sufis and neglected by some in Tamil Nadu. Along with mysticism the other characteristic of Tamil Nadu Sufism is its devotion to poetry and singing. When mysticism healed the mental disorders, poetry removed social grievances. Poem writing is not an act of mysticism but of mind's power to create social thoughts. Mysticism, tolerance and devotion lay at the heart of Sufi practice in Tamil Nadu. This explains the appeal of Sufism to the majority non-Muslim population which was already predisposed to them. The poor, the dispossessed and those in need regardless of caste and religion came to the Sufi or his shrine to find solace. Sufi movement in Islam conquered hearts through love. At this level Islam in India and Tamil Nadu in particular is serene, untroubled and secure. It is a tribute to the saints of Islam and a testimony to sulh-i-kul, the peace and the universality of mystic love. The shrines served as pilgrimage points and the more important among them grew into pilgrimage centres; the believers come there often to pray for the saint's intercession in various problems of daily living and during the yearly festival dedicated to the saint entire group makes the pilgrimage to the holy shrine where they receive the blessings of the living saint. A few of these pilgrimage centres grew into small towns, replete with a market, numerous shrines, a religious zawiya, the lodge and various accommodations for pilgrims.

This is what we see at Nagore the growth of which was the impact of the existence of the shrine of Shahul Hameed. The surroundings of the dargah of Syed Ibrahim at Ervadi became a small town hamlet at a later period keeping away from the original village located one km from the shrine. It may not be an exaggeration to say how mysticism of the saint attracted the seashore fishermen and the depressed people of

neighbouring villages to make Kottaipattinam into a developed big
village where a secular society and serenity prevail upon the people.\(^\text{137}\) The Muslim dominated Pasipattinam with houses here and there in
clusters was, no doubt, a creation of the Sufi saint Naina Muhammad.
The streets inhabited by Muslims near the shrine of Nathar Wali at
Tiruchirappalli are mostly occupied by the spiritual followers of his and
the environment of this location shows how the saint had worked out to
spread the Sufi movement and made the people accept its ideals. The
mystic love and service in royal court of Sultan Alaud din made his
disciples, call the site of his burial as Goripalayam after the name 'Gori'
which is supposed to be his birth place in Afghanistan. His Sufi doctrines
still now speak secularism here and no anti-Muslim and anti-secular
events take place in this location where the secular power was sown by
the saint. It is not a surprise that the mystic saint of Baghdad observed
penance in some places in Tamil Nadu and one among them being
Pottalpudur became popular and the memorial erected on the site of his
stay is respected with the local name "Andavar" equalled with God to the
great saint Mohideen Abdul Qadir Jeelani.\(^\text{138}\) The small village
Attankarai was not definitely inhabited by the people before the advent of
the female Sufi and the name itself gained popularity among the Muslims
of Tamil Nadu only after the people began to realize the mystic acts of
the saint. Though the life span of the female Sufi did not last long at
Attankarai, her shrine is giving lasting peace to the devotees. The
Muslim population of the village, \textit{Pallivasal}, realize the mystic powers
of Kattu Bava by which the once tribal population was brought into a
civilized Muslim society. Even the non-Muslim Kallar community
remembers the difficulties faced by the saint during his mystic life.

\(^{137}\) Personal visit to the \textit{Dargah} at Kottaipattinam on 22.10.2006.
\(^{138}\) Interview with K.Mohideen Pitchai Lebbai, a Fatiha performer, Pottalpudur on
Mysticism succeeded at Kottar in Nagercoil where the Sufi saint Fasil Shah has been buried. The well settled line of the Dakkini Muslims call back the memories of the saint with whose efforts, the Muslim faith was strengthened and these Muslims gathered behind him to make Muslim settlement spiritually united. Yusuf Khan from a non Sufi cadre is revered by the Madurai Muslims not treating him as a real Sufi but a "Sufi for public sympathy" and his "so called shrine" is placed in the rank of dargah and therefore mysticism itself becomes a mystery in the mausoleum. A seashore village, Kovalam near Chennai with a cluster of Muslim houses began as a Muslim identity with the advent of one Arab Sufi, Thameem Ansari whose shrine serves as an abode for spiritual insight and to make mind and senses of patients independent of disorders.

In order to understand the system of Muslim faith and worship which developed in South India, we can come to know how the region of Tamil Nadu came to acquire a population of professing Muslims. Islam took root in the Tamil Nadu region well before the waves of invasion from North India and the Tamil Nadu Muslims had a confused picture of their origins and of the groups' numerous linguistic, territorial and occupational subdivisions. The Muslims who came in the form of Sufis acted as missionaries whose main work was to spread the message of Islamic faith. The traders from Arab nation who carried maritime trade to Tamil Nadu confined themselves to commercial activities but established some mosques for their payers not taking attempts to propagate Islam. This is evident from the mural paintings found on the second tier of the gopuram in the Narambunathaswamy temple in Thiruppudaimarudur, a village situated in the Ambasamudram taluk of

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139 Interview with M.Ebrahim Khan, President, Muslim Jamath Federation, Kanyakumari District on 15.09.2007.
140 Personal visit to the Dargah at Kovalam on 17.09.2006.
Tirunelveli district and this painting which dates back five hundred years shows Arab leaders with a ship and horses and as it is not known that the Arab leaders were traders or Arab Sufis, it can be ascertained that the temple paintings could reflect the arrival of saints only.  

In Tamil Nadu there were a number of Muslim centres which worked for the Islamic cause and had possessed the royal honours from local kings in support of Islamic ideals and sometimes the kings themselves became the favourites of these centres which developed Sufi mysticism. Intermarriages between the Sufi followers and non Muslim population is an example to say how the Sufi mystic love was worked out among the people of other religion. When this mysticism was strengthened with roots on the soil of Tamil Nadu, most of the Arab or North Indian Sufis left their disciples or descendants here who can now claim descent from the early or later Arab migrants. Many Muslims from Deccan with linguistic style of Urdu migrated to Tamil Nadu to spread the Islamic doctrines or to follow the Sufi saints from North and a few of them only came with potential fervour who have settled and now seen around Chennai, Tiruchirappalli, Madurai and a few families in Nagercoil. At the same time, even those with political aspirations did not keep themselves from spirituality and sometimes they began their career at first as spiritual preceptors. In Sufi texts he is perceived as a supernatural being and in the case of Nathar Wali he is actually referred to as a powerful saint who could even now bless the marriages of Muslims and such a karamat, the power of miracles, is believed to have been vested in him and that is why he became the first popular saint in Tamil Nadu. When this type of power of a Sufi is conceived in the minds of the visitors, they are ready to harmonies with the Muslims'

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understanding of divinity and place them on the physical ordeals to some extent.\textsuperscript{143} In Tamil Nadu, the portrayal of Sufis as evil drivers and supernatural warriors came into existence during eighteenth century. It was in the case of Sikandar of Tirupparankunram whose death occurred in fourteenth century and whose place of shahid was protected by his followers from that period but became well known and visited by many only from eighteenth century. It was also a parallel comparison of one, Yusuf Khan who lived and died in eighteenth century and the tomb of this warrior came to be venerated from the same century in Madurai. Here, the cult of tomb veneration with the significance to mysticism came increasingly to be focused on the figure of the hero martyr on par with the conventional Sufi leaders and the warrior saints appear in the texts as the straight-forward Sufi saints. Such a warrior saint's death and transition to saint cult status take place in a sharply visualised political and strategic landscape, the landscape of eighteenth century social building. In the Tamil Nadu cult traditions, the pir and evils and conqueror and real life adversaries are played out in a real historical and social setting and everything in its events, personalities and the tombs is mingled with mystic colour and mystic spirit. But it can be appropriate to say that the eighteenth century ruler of Mysore, Tipu Sultan was born to his father, Hyder Ali on the blessings of one Sufi saint Tipu Masthan lying buried at Arcot in Tamil Nadu after whom he was named Tipu and this mystic blessing was believed as a power of Sufi reality by Hyder Ali who used to visit the dargah before his son was born.\textsuperscript{144}

At the same time, though many martial cult traditions linked with mystic principles which date back from the early centuries, usually came to acquire new identifications which was well linked with the

\textsuperscript{143} Ibid., p.141.
development of shrines in eighteenth century. But the saint Syed Ibrahim of twelfth century cannot be called a warrior saint since he had possessed one set of biographical traditions which located him fairly securely in that century itself and therefore, his shrine became a major south Indian pilgrimage place in eighteenth century. It grew as a special mystic centre among the Tamil *Maraikkayars* and *Lebbai* worshippers and these devotees have no difficulties with the apparent contradictions in the cult legend. It is not a wonder why this shrine is crowded by the Kerala Muslims most of whom come here with mental patients but it is a mystery that may of them return home with satisfaction telling that the patients get cured in the dargah and their reply that the dead saint has ordered them to leave the shrine once they are cured is a mysterious one. This Ervadi *pir* even after his death is still a holy hero and the dead saint is regarded simply as an even more powerful figure because the world in which he moved and performed his miracles have become so much more concrete and accessible and even now he and his tomb are directly associated with real life activities. One sign of this added power is the fact that the Ervadi saint went on to become a successful dominion builder in his own right when he faced obstacles in his spiritual path. Like the Tiruchirappalli saint, Nathar who also came to be revered as the first popular and ultimate master or *Khalifa* of many subordinate south Indian *pirs* or Tamil Nadu *pirs*, Syed Ibrahim also acquired an ever growing network of saints who came to be identified as one of the purifiers of Tamil Nadu in the family of dead saints.

Among the Sufi shrines of Tamil Nadu, the largest established mystic foundation is the tomb of Nagore Shahul Hameed. Even the Nawabs from the Arcot dynasty began to strike out in new directions seeking particularly to have links with the *dargah* of Shahul Hameed. This was partly a reflection of the shrine's exceptional power and sanctity
for South Indian and Tamil Nadu worshippers and according to one widely known formula and belief of Tamil Nadu Muslims, seven journeys of pilgrimage to Nagore confer the same merit as a single Haj pilgrimage to Makkah. This concern to broaden the Nawab's sacred landscape is still visible in the Nagore pilgrimage chronicle Bahar-i-Azam Jahi which was commissioned by Azam Jah, the Nawab from 1820-25. The cults of some martyred heroes or shahid saints figure very prominently in this account and their grave rites are included as important stopping points for the Nawab on his sacred progress to the Shahul Hameed shrine.\textsuperscript{145} When the shrine's official tazkira\textsuperscript{146} publications describe the saint as a sixteenth century Sufi adept, the mysticism of the dead saint and his tomb began to gain its popularity at the close of the same century or at the beginning of seventeenth century after the foundation of the tomb structure and therefore the mystery of the shrine, it is believed, could have started from a fixed datable period.

It is the visitors' belief that the Sufi discipline brings its practitioner to view the world from an angle different from that from which men ordinarily look, but do not doubt the sincerity of the great Sufis like Nagore Shahul Hameed, Tiruchirappalli Nathar Wali, Ervadi Syed Ibrahim, Pallivasal Kattu Bava and the penance observer Abdul Qadir Jeelani at Pottalpudur and others and the saints like them from the other religions and that they really describe what they witness, because they do see what is really true or their psychic discipline and their frequent struggling against the lower self through hunger, fasting, isolation and celibacy make their souls unnatural so that they see what has no existence. The Sufis give a reply which seems intended to be convincing since the Sufi is like a man with a microscope in comparison to one using

\textsuperscript{145} Susan Baily, \textit{op.cit.}, p.216.
\textsuperscript{146} Tazkira is biography
the naked eye. Even science knows that the unaided senses are not to be trusted and invents instruments to make up for them deficiencies. He then makes the familiar point that science cannot explain life and death, nor can it explain the relation between the brain and thought, but the Sufis uncover things that science cannot, according to popular beliefs and thoughts. Furthermore, many of the best Sufis have followed both the scientific and the Sufi ways and preferred the later. A final proof is that Sufis of all times and religions have arrived at similar results. Even material scientists disdain the ordinary viewpoint and see the universe as a unity of similar cells and try to see matter in its pure state, unaffected by time and space. It may be that at the end of their road they will meet the saints for physical solace because the saint sees inward illusions brought on by habitual practice and distortion of the mind.¹⁴⁷

Sufi mysticism introduced in religious devotion a strong personal and individualized element. The intellectual and religious springboard for this deviation in Islam was provided by the development of the doctrine of "trust" in God which directly led to the central concept of the relationship between man and God. The twin concepts of love and grace fused into one sentiment. It is not difficult to realize that saint veneration came into existence and has persisted because the saints inspired particularly among the masses who turned to them for spiritual guidance. For such Muslims the Sufis brought God and divinity within reach. It is not unIslamic but it may be to rival the ulama because the Sufis, as spiritual preceptors, may overtake the religious path of the ulama. The appeal of Sufis, however has not been confined to the masses. Some Hindu kings of Tamil Nadu in Tanjore and Madurai either visited or invited the Sufis to seek their blessings. It is just like the

mighty emperor Akbar or lesser known Muslim kings in India have paid homage to Sufi saints and the tombs and even in modern times the military ruler, Zia ul Haq of Pakistan, notwithstanding fundamentalism and orthodoxy, included in his itinerary to India a pilgrimage to such well known dargahs of Nizamuddin in Delhi and Muinuddin Chishti in Ajmer. What the Pakistan President Pervez Musharraf did at the dargah of Ajmer in April 2005 was an obeisance at this historic tomb before the beginning of the official part of his visit to India and his prayers at the shrine for peaceful and cordial relations between India and Pakistan by offering forty two metre long green velvet chadar, a specially made cloth to cover the grave brought from his country is a sign of mystery that the Sufis' dargahs are believed to have it.\(^{148}\)

While emotional attachment and loyalty of faith in Sufis have mystical roots and religious overtones, the hold of the saints over their followers has not rested exclusively on these grounds: secular and mundane considerations - in sociological term 'magical' - religious term 'mystical' have not been equally important. While the term 'magical' is applied to physical work inviting old one as it is new, the term 'mystical' is applied to spiritual power of a saint. The saints have provided the hope to their followers of various this-worldly material favours.\(^{149}\) Indeed, several Sufi orders had little pretensions of having anything to do with mysticism. Thus, in any effort to understand the phenomenon of saint and dargah veneration, due recognition is given to the social and psychological factors that are an integral part of this phenomenon. But some social thoughts that had given great importance to the saint worship by constructing a whole intellectual scheme according to which it was the saints who governed the universe are not acceptable and it is quite


legitimate to address the saints directly or to God through the appeal to the saints.

The impact of sociological relevance is that many of the local saints are supported only by given sects of the population, determined either by locality, social group or professional group. Therefore a sort of patron saint is created there. Shahul Hameed of Nagore protects all castes associated with seawater - water carriers and boatmen. Similarly textile workers and weaving community invoke the name of Peer Muhammad of Thuckalay who was the son of a weaver in Tenkasi and what the poor Muslims and seaside people do the business at Kottaipattinam is the replica of the saint Rowther Sahib's humble earnings for his livelihood. The medical service provided in the dargah of Syedani Beevi at Vellore at present was done by the female saint in those days. If not many, a few earn a good name by extending this free social service and this female patron saint was socially accredited and her tomb too now gets accreditation. Interestingly enough, pirs, family descendants and khadims also have a patron saint in Nathar Wali. Besides being linked to various vocations, saints are also linked with specific types of favours. Given the great concern, bordering on obsession for progeny that prevails among people in this part of the world, saints who are reputed to help overcome sterility are legion. Besides these, there are other specialists who take care of various illness and afflictions. Thus for example, Ervadi Syed Ibrahim exorcises those possessed of evils, Madurai Sultan Ala ud din cures melancholy and Attankarai Syed Ali Fathima cures people who have been bitten by snakes.

This specialization obviously suits the vast masses who have faith in saints and dargahs. Its strength lies in the fact that it allows for great choice and freedom to venerate whichever saint the individual chooses.
Moreover there is also scope for social groups, professional groups, races and castes to latch on to saints of their choice.\textsuperscript{150} At the psychological level, such attachment provides for identity as well as security both of which have been considerably important in pre modern times in the lives of the rural and tribal communities of this subcontinent from where we can know why the saints have found greater following among the Muslims than the \textit{ulama}.\textsuperscript{151} That there a better understanding provided for comparing a village paying homage to a single \textit{pir} with one in which a number of \textit{pirs} were acknowledged by the different people of different status is very perspective and so also that constancy of followers can result in a considerable complexity of organization amongst \textit{pirs} themselves. A matter of considerable sociological interest and relevance is that sometimes the descendants of \textit{pirs} have divided disciples amongst themselves, in a way reminiscent of the division of clients by artisans under a new system. This was what happened after the death of Shahul Hameed of Nagore in making divisions among the fellow \textit{pirs} to carry their master's spirituality and to reassemble every year at Nagore was nothing but best remembrance of his sainthood and the prevalence of mystery behind his shrine. Moreover, it could lead the disciples of the founders of shrines and saints to become themselves \textit{pirs} and \textit{murids} and a hierarchy of \textit{pirs} has in some cases emerged.\textsuperscript{152}

The \textit{dargah} beliefs with mysteries are underlain over devotions and institutions. The worshippers are convinced that the saint hears their prayers and that if pleased with the offerings, he can grant the favours requested - food, children, the cure to diseases, redress of torts, discovery

\textsuperscript{150} \textit{Ibid.}, p.214.
of unknown things and social disturbances. Totally they consider that the saint has the power of performing miracles because they believe that if a good man, by his mystical exercises, his piety and his austerity has reached near God and become an intercessor, then his soul get great powers after his death. If a faithful represents his image or makes a visit to the place where he lived or to his tomb to make a supplication then on the basis of the aforesaid powers, the saint will be informed of his problems and will intercede for him in this world. The powers of the saints do not concern only the well-being of individual worshippers. They are also credited with the control of the territory where they lived. Similarly the tomb worshippers are of the opinion that as long as head Sufis did not give ijazat to their fellow Sufis or disciples to settle in a particular place in Tamil Nadu, the light of the guidance of the fellow pirs would not rise here. Another framework of institutional mysticism is that it is the general belief that the dead saints may have all the miraculous powers attributed to the living saints like granting children, knowledge of the invisible, etc.

The Sufi movement and its leaders of mysticism have been expected in terms of its functional importance of social integration. Mystery of Sufis and their dargahs is not something persons can feel, but that which persons let themselves be grasped by. It is something that retains its character as mystery eventhough it reveals itself to persons. It is why thousands of people from different parts of Tamil Nadu and other states, backgrounds, classes and even religions visit the Tamil Nadu dargahs regularly every year. Muslims are the largest group of visitors, Hindus coming next and occasionally a few Christians. Most of them come to pray at the tombs of the saints and their disciples which are a few hundred feet from each other. The custom of the visitors to meet

\footnote{Ijazat means permission of a Sufi to his fellow pirs.}
their pirs or pirzade, the custodians of the dargah, who claim to be descendants of the Sufis and who sit either at the shrines or in their respective offices built anywhere in the courtyard of the dargahs is very rare in Tamil Nadu shrines. But it has become a dargah custom to meet the khadims who may or may not be the saints' descendants but act as religious caretakers for performing the rites. People, though themselves knowing the method of rites prefer the khadims since the belief behind the performance is a mystery and they are also the permitted to do for the dargah activities. Even those who criticise the dargah visit pray at the tomb of the saints in Tamil Nadu with the help of these religious caretakers.

Pilgrims for material favour and on a Spiritual Quest

The dargah zayrins\textsuperscript{154} themselves admit that people come to the dargah mainly to acquire something, be it from God through the intercession of the saint, or from the saint who is seen as God's representative, or from the pirs and pirzade, who because they are related to the saint through blood ties are perceived as possessing spiritual power or influence over the saint. It is true that pilgrims come to the dargah with all kinds of petitions and requests. Those who find it difficult to communicate verbally with the saint write out their petitions on piece of which they tie to the grilled wall surrounding the shrines. Others tie strings and pieces of cloth torn from their clothing or specially made pieces of clothes preferred in green colour to the grilled walls of the dargah to remind the saint of their requests and themselves of their commitment to feed or clothe the poor of the dargah as soon as their requests have been granted. Some pilgrims seek cures beyond the competence of ordinary doctors. Some devotees tell of a patient who

\textsuperscript{154} Zayrins are pilgrims.
after sitting at the shrine for months praying and eating nothing but the flower petals strewn regularly by pilgrims on the tomb that he was cured of the illness. On the other hand, many do not go to a doctor at all and seek cures for the most ordinary illness like skin irritations, boils and insane conditions. Others come to prevent the recurrence of a calamity in their lives.

A few zayrins come to beseech to bring about a favourable verdict in court cases they are fighting. We can meet such persons feeding as many beggars as they could find at a nearby restaurant. They told that their relative had tried to rob them of their ancestral house, money or causing disturbance. On filing a case to get rid of the redress, they come to pray at the tomb of the saints. Now that the saint had granted their request and given their home back, or money and even removing the family sufferings, Thereafter they return to the dargah and having thanked the saint verbally, express their gratitude in action by feeding the poor, who they say, come to the saint for the food and shelter. Some people are brought to the dargah by family members, well wishers and friends to be exorcised from evil spirits. If we meet the patients after cure, they tell us that they had withdrawn completely into themselves. One girl was brought by force to the shrine of Ervadi where she began to wail and hit her head on the grilled stone wall of the shrine. After much prayer and supplication to the saint by the people who had brought her, the evil spirit left her and she returned to her normal self. Another woman told that the saint after repeated prayers to him at his shrine had driven out the spirit which had haunted her, giving her and her family immense trouble. An old woman in the dargah of Sultan Ala ud din in Madurai told that her husband and her son were always at loggerheads with each other making the home an impossible place. The father

constantly suspected the son of being on drugs and the son while protesting his innocence accused the father of wasting his money on adulterous liaisons. On the advice of the family friend who regularly visits the dargah she began to pray to the saint visiting the shrine whenever she found time. After some months of prayer, she found both father and son tolerating each other, becoming eventually friendly with each other.156

One person who was ailing from mental illness for the past three years came to the dargah of Sultan Alaudin. A small shop runner in Madurai city could not walk and speak due to brain disorder. After the stay of six months at the dargah now he is recovering. The father of this mental patient expressed his deep faith and belief in the mystical acts of the saint and he feels the mystery of the shrine where his son is getting cured. A Hindu with chronic stomach ache and not cured by the medical treatment had confidence in the mystery of the Madurai dargah and came with hope, stayed here and was cured of the long pending ache and the patient himself expressed gratitude to the saint and began to call him "Bava" meaning father as the Muslims use to call. It is a phenomenon on the hill top of Tirupparankundram where too the relatives of the sick persons bring them for the remedy of the diseases. The difficult journey on the dry rock along with the patients evokes enthusiasm the people show to the dargah veneration.157

Some people visit the dargah on a regular basis, some once a week or every day, others every few hours who stay in the courtyard of the shrine without the intention of acquiring anything from the saints or

156 Interview with Sultanbi, a pilgrim, in the dargah of Sultan Alaudin on 07.01.2007.
157 Interview with Muhammad Shah, the relative of a patient in the dargah of Tirupparankunram, Madurai on 13.01.2007.
pirzade. In most cases they visit the dargahs initially on the advice of friends or well-wishers to find a solution to pressing problems. An old man told that before he began visiting the dargah he suffered from physical ailments. For one year he went from one doctor to another, seeking a cure but without success. Finally a friend advised him to go to the shrine of Syed Ali Fathima at Attankarai. He told him not to ask the doctors to cure him and instead ask God or the saint for only they can truly cure. He further asked him to make request with the saint who has a power within himself given him by God, and that power is meant to be used even for his benefit. The man came to the dargah, prayed to the female saint and was eventually cured. A poor man told that he had initially come to the dargah with his body covered with sores which made his life unbearable. He said that he did not believe in medicine and therefore did not go to any doctor. Rather he prayed to the saint and with his blessings he got cured through his intercession to God. Now he is visiting dargah every week.

Many others are reticent about the problems but drove themselves finally to the dargah. They prefer to state the change that took place in their lives as the result of their pilgrimage. One Hindu who was mentally retarded and could not move was admitted in the dargah of Pasipattinam with the advice of a Muslim friend who gave him some literature on the dargah. His parents prayed to the saint with the desired beneficial consequence. They said that their son after a few months had no problems worth mentioning. They believed that the saint took care of him. A business man told that he used to visit the dargah as a child with his mother. But as he grew up, he gave up the practice. As years passed, he found himself with problems which defied solution. In desperation, he began visiting dargah and he felt the problems disappearing. He expressed that he did not further ask for anything, for the saint knows and
sees to all his needs. Whenever, he said, he comes here, he feels a sense of peace and quiet and he forgets the world with all its meanness and problems.¹⁵⁸

Realisation of Pilgrims about the Saints

Those who visit the dargahs regularly expecting nothing specific, reveal their unshakeable faith that the saints are alive. When interviewed, they often said that they are not dead. They have only put a veil between himself and us, ordinary mortals. That is why we cannot see them. But sometimes the saints are believed to appear to some people. These appearances are taken as a mark of special favour and love. They occur in places where many people are present, but it is only the chosen few who are gifted with the ability to see him. One regular visitor of the dargah told other visitors that whenever he entered the shrine of Nagore Shahul Hameed, he heard his voice on his tomb. A pirzada told that many of older generation had seen the saint. It was a common belief among the devotees and disciples that the saint appeared during the festivals or funeral rites of holy persons who had lived sinless.¹⁵⁹ Unfortunately, this is not so common today because not many are interested in spiritual attainment. That the confidence of one middle aged woman that she had on many occasions seen the saint walking around the dargah of Nagore cannot be certainly believed. Others have seen the saint in dreams. A woman told she saw the saint in dream every time she recites the Quran on the side of tomb where his head is supposed to lie. Still others talked of an experience of the personal presence of the saint every time they entered the shrine.¹⁶⁰

¹⁵⁸ Interview with Chandru, a businessman, in the dargah of Naina Muhammad, Pasipattinam on 21.01.2007.
¹⁵⁹ Interview with a pirzada in the dargah of Nagore on 28.10.2007.
¹⁶⁰ Interview with Mumtaj Begam, the woman visitor in the Nagore shrine on 28.01.2007.
Because of the saint's personal holiness and close association with God, the *dargah*, the place where he is most certainly present is called holy courtyard. Pilgrims and *pirzade* stress the holiness of the place by pointing to the behaviour of all who enter the *dargah*, contrasting it with the behaviour of people who visit the tombs of political heads or non-saintly persons. In tombs of these persons people walk around with their shoes on and their heads uncovered. They talk loud and laugh showing absolutely no respect for the great person buried there. But in *dargahs* it is different. Everyone who enters, even tourists, come in removing their shoes, covering their heads and talking in low tones, without being told. They walk around the *dargah* or the inner shrine with respect and most pray, instinctively feeling the presence of the holy person. While ordinary sweepers clean the entire courtyard, small buildings, if any, and the tomb structures of the disciples of the saint, it is a task reserved only for all the *pirzade* each on an alternative day to clean the inner shrine. However, the *pirzade* and pilgrims do not dwell only on the fear element pertaining to the holiness of the place. They are quick to point out another element which exists side by side and is much more in evidence that is love. Pilgrims talk of the saint loving them personally, as they are, with all their problems and defects. The love is not restricted to a few but extends to all, even those who do not visit the *dargahs*. Often, cures from various illness and solutions to problems are taken as proofs of the saint's deep love for those who visit him. Usually the saint waits for persons to approach him first. Even then, some do not have their petitions granted. Such persons console themselves by saying that the saint is testing them and assure themselves of the saint's love for them by repeating to themselves the good things the saint has done for others. But in rare instances, it is too believed by the pilgrims, the saint approaches persons even before they know of his existence. One woman told that some years ago she told a terrible problem and she did not know
what to do. One night whilst in the midst of those problems, she saw a very old man in a dream telling her not to worry, for all problems would go. Then she awoke and inexplicably experienced deep peace and contentment. And just as the man in the dream had said, the problems really disappeared. Hearing of this famous dargah she decided to pay a visit to it. When she arrived there she recognized it as the surroundings of the old man in her dream. And she realized that the old man who appeared to her was none other than Shahul Hameed of Nagore. Ever since she had to come to visit the shrine once every month. Whether the pilgrims approach this shrine first or vice versa makes no difference to the pilgrims. In both cases they see the saint as loving them first. Moreover, they see his love as undeserved and for that reason all the more profound, for they cannot lose his love because of their own unworthiness. This makes pretence before him superfluous. Thus the place where he dwelt, the dargah is the place where they can be themselves. Those who are in pain cry out aloud without shame. Some pilgrims go so far as to openly admit their sinfulness, begging the saint for forgiveness and peace. Together with this deep sense, of being loved as they are, is a deep assurance of being protected by the saint from reprisals. A few denounce the pirzade and their malpractices to their face and the pirzade only try to laugh it away. This deep undeserved and protective love for them, the pilgrims point out is in accordance with the life of the saint by saying that he gave up marriage in order to be more available to serve the poor and the needy and he regularly received sums of money but always distributed it to the poor who would crowd his khanqah keeping nothing for himself. He adopted one Yusuf and brought up as his own son. The foster son and the grand children took the responsibility of spreading the gospel of the saint throughout Tamil Nadu.

161 Interview with Khaderbi, a woman visitor in the dargah of Nagore on 28.01.2007.
Today the pilgrims point out that the saint, though being dead, behaves as a living saint and continues to feed the poor and the hungry through the rich pilgrims who visit his abode of burial. It is far more important, the pilgrims say, that he makes them acceptable to God. This holy man, who is very close to God and still deeply concerned for them and for their welfare understands their plight for he was a man like them. Therefore, he is able to take their case to God, intercede on their behalf and make them more acceptable to him. People come in large number to say the opinions in the prayers in the mosques attached with the dargah more particularly on Thursday, Friday and Sunday evenings believing that he prays with him but unforeseen and makes up for defects and deficiencies in their prayers. Some pilgrims and some pirzade talk of the strength the saint has given them to follow more strictly the tenets of Islam thus enabling to be more pleasing to God. He is, in effect, the mediator between the pilgrims and God.

The pilgrims' response to the saint is evoked in the form of love, gratitude, reverence often expressed also by the distribution of alms. The saint's love for them, the pilgrims say, has evoked from deep within themselves a deep love for him. Their regular visits to the shrine is one expression of this love they bear him. One said in the dargah of Kunangudi Masthan that he made it a point to come here as often as he can because he loves this saint who loves me so much. Another pilgrim in the dargah of Peer Muhammad said that he comes to give attendance to the saint. He wanted him to know that he has not forgotten his love or taken it for granted. Many devotees in different dargahs have said that they feel a deep sense of happiness and peace whenever they are there, close to the saint of a particular dargah. One woman, a relative of a patient in the dargah of Peer Muhammad told when she was interviewed that she felt the supporting presence of the saint wherever
she was. But all the same she just had to come there to visit him and express her thanks and love for him. Very important to these people is the "urs", the feast day or festival on the death day of the saint, for that is his big day and keeping away from him on that day would be the most unpardonable of offences.

Once entered the dargah premises, the pilgrims kiss the steps leading to the shrines of Tamil Nadu and the thresholds of the doorways to their shrines. On entering the dargahs they spread the odorous flowers on the tombs and after greeting the saint, walk around the tombs at the end of which they kiss the chadar and the small fence or any mark surrounding the tomb, sometimes touching their eyes and cheeks against these. Before leaving the shrine they lift the chadar on that side of the tomb where the feet of the saint are supposed to lie and pull it over their heads, touching their faces to the tomb. Once outside of the shrine they light incense sticks explaining all these actions as manifestations of their love for the saint. Offering fatiha with incense sticks inside the inner shrine is done by the men only but in the inner shrine of female saints it is done by the women and men. This mode of prayer outside the main shrine and anywhere at the courtyard of the dargah is done by both men and women. Finally they go to the side of the shrine where the head of the Sufi is supposed to lie and recite a part of the Quran, saying that the saint loves to hear it recited to him, for, it is the word of God. It is a common sight in the Tamil Nadu dargahs that the male pilgrims recite the Quranic version sitting on four sides of the grave knowing or not the significance of sitting on the side of the head or due to the lack of site near the grave. The visitors explain that when someone loves another he wants to touch him, kiss him and be with him all the time doing him

162 Interview with Mehraj, the relative of a patient in the dargah of Peer Mohammad on 04.02.2007.
163 Personal visit to all the dargahs on 11.02.2007, 18.02.2007 and 25.02.2007.
services that he likes. So it is between them and the saint. They tell that they do not worship the saint knowing that worship is due to God alone but they love him deeply and are ready to do anything for him.

The *dargah* visitors as a gratitude to the mystery of the *dargahs* manifest their love for the saint by putting into the collection box whatever they can afford. They know that the money is not only for the maintenance of the *dargah* but also for the upkeep of the *pirzade* who look after the *dargah*. The people say that they are the blood relatives of the saint keeping away their failings, if any. And they serve an important function by maintaining the *dargah*, keeping order and praying for them. Finally, they give food, clothing and money to the poor and beggars saying that in this they continue the work of the saints and in the bargain becoming instruments of his love for them drawing closer to God. For the pilgrims, *pirs* and *pirzade* the mystery of God's love for man manifest in the saints' love and concern for them is the realization of salvation. The entrance into this mystery is not a matter of human intelligence or mere rationality, but a gift to be received with gratitude, in faith and with a pure heart which every pilgrim could have.