

THE CULT OF BABA GHOR AND ITS ROLE IN SHAPING IDENTITIES IN GUJARAT

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Abstract: Baba Ghor's cult is a very popular one in Gujarat, but there is not much information available about it. There are no primary sources that mention about Baba Ghor and his followers. The passing references about the cult often come from the much later colonial authorities. In order to reconstruct the history of Baba Ghor's cult, one has to rely on folk legends and narratives offered by the followers of the cult. In this paper, the people of African descent are referred as Badshah, a term which they like to use for themselves. The paper is an attempt to reconstruct the history of the cult by taking into account a few legends that were narrated by the followers of the cult. This paper is heavily based on the field research conducted at various places that are attached to the cult of Baba Ghor in Gujarat.

Keywords: Badshah, Urs, Jambur, Dargah, Ratanpur

Abyssinian presence in Gujarat can be traced in colonial and postcolonial writings in two different contexts (a) in connection with a craft, i.e. agate mining, and the carnelian mines in Ratanpur, a village in a small former 'Princely State' of Rajpipla, ruled by a Rajput king, near the port of Cambay; (b) in connection with syncretic religious practices and a regional cult of *faqirs* (religious ascetics). In both contexts, a saintly person called Baba Ghor figures prominently. In the sixteenth century Ludovico Di Varthema mentions the presence of 'cornelians' in Cambay.¹ Even in the reign of Akbar, the Mughal Emperor, measurement of coins was done by an agate known as babaghori. These stones were said to be made in the vicinity of Ratanpur. According to Francis 'in Ratanpur (...) stones are dug with primitive tools in much the same way as thousands of years ago. The stones are made into beads in the celebrated city of Cambay, the chief beadcutting centre of Gujarat'.² The mines are situated on the hill that is surmounted by a *dargah* (tomb built over the grave of a revered Sufi) of a saint named Baba Ghor who is said to have invented the craft of agate

¹ Ludovico Di Varthema, *Itinerario de Ludouico de Varthema*, c. 1510, tr. J.H. Jones, *The Travels of Ludovico Di Varthema*, London, 1863, p. 107.

² Peter Francis, Jr., *Indian Agate Beads, World of Beads Monograph Series 6*, New York, 1982, p.3

cutting.³ The first author who mentioned about Siddis or African immigrants was Lieutenant Fulljames who in 1832 claimed that a ‘peer’s tomb is situated on a hill and there reside only a few Sidees’.⁴

In the colonial writings on Gujarat, Badshahs are never mentioned without Baba Ghor. The first historical record of the presence of Baba Ghor is attributed to the sixteenth century historian Ad Dabir who claimed that Mahmud Khilji (1436-1469), the first Khilji ruler of Malwa, paid his respect to the tomb of an Abyssinian saint named Gori Pir during a military campaign in South Gujarat.⁵ In 1880s, the tomb of Baba Ghor was identified by the British officers who surveyed the area for the rich agate mines. The legends that are circulated claim that Baba Ghor was an Abyssinian military leader who came on a mission to India from Abyssinia. He arrived in India via Arabia to kill a demoness. In this task he was helped by his brother Habash Khan and sister Mai Misra. The battle took place where the *dargah* of Baba Ghor is situated i.e. Ratanpur, and Baba Ghor won this battle. On the way, some of his Siddi soldiers and their women stayed back and they are the ones who are venerated today at different local shrines.⁶

Legends about Baba Ghor claim that his real name was Mubarak Nob. Before coming to India, he spent some time in Mecca and Basra (lower Iraq), where he studied with a Sufi of the Rifai order, who gave him the honorific title Baba Ghor (master of deep meditation). Baba Ghor is believed to have arrived in India in the fourteenth century. The legend also presents Baba Ghor as a sufi mystic and a merchant engaged in the agate bead industry. The legend also has that Baba Ghor, while cooking meals over stone hearth, found that some of the stoves of the hearth began to shine like diamonds and became translucent due to heating. Later, he entered the business of extracting semi-precious stones especially agates, locally known as aqīq. He engaged in the excavation of stones, baking and lapidary. His younger brother Baba Saban undertook trading with African and Arabian countries.⁷ Later, Baba Ghor along with his brother Nagarsha Pir, were worshipped by the Badshahs as their saints while Baba Saban went back to Abyssinia. Baba Ghor’s

³ Helene Basu, ‘Slave, Soldier, Trader, Faqir: Fragments of African Histories in Western India (Gujarat)’, in *The African Diaspora in the Indian Ocean*, ed. Shihan de Silva Jayasuriya and Richard Pankhurst, Asmara, 2003, p.235.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 237

⁵ Beheroze Shroff, ‘Sidis of Gujarat-A Building Community: Their role in Indian History and Contemporary Times’, *Frontiers of Embedded Muslim Communities in India*, ed. Vinod K. Jairath, Routledge, 2011, pp. 70-71

⁶ Helene Basu, ‘Slave, Soldier, Trader, Faqir: Fragments of African Histories in Western India (Gujarat)’, in *The African Diaspora in the Indian Ocean*, op. cit., p. 244.

⁷ Ram Krishna Trivedi, *Census of India 1961, Volume V-Part VII-A (1): Agate Industry of Cambay*, New Delhi, 1964, p.55.

original shrine is located in Ratanpur where he settled in the last years of his life, while his brother Nagarsha Pir's *dargah* is situated in Jambur.

In the year 1814, John Copland visited Ratanpur and reported that 'on the summit stands the tomb of the tutelar saint of the country Baba Ghor, to whom adoration is paid more as a deity than a saint, under whose particular protection are the cornelian mines'.⁸ The commerce in agate beads goes back to the Indus valley civilization, but Baba Ghor seems to have initiated the agate trade between East Africa and India, which led to the opening of seams in places like Ratanpur (gem city) in Gujarat.

One of the most important places that is attached to this cult is Jambur, which in importance stands next only to Ratanpur. Jambur is a small village near Gir. It is also known as India's own little Africa, being inhabited by the people of African origin. There is a famous *dargah* of Nagarsha Pir, brother of Baba Ghor. There is also a *mazar* of Baba Ghor and his sworn sister Mai Misra. Badshahs (people of African descent) here believe that they came to India as slaves and soldiers in the army of the king who took hard labour from them and did not give them proper food. So, they opposed the king and shifted to Jambur.⁹

In Jambur people pay their respect to the cult of Baba Ghor. On the occasion of *Urs* (death anniversary of a Sufi), people perform a *Dhamal* dance (traditional 'African' dance). The *Urs* of Baba Ghor, Nagarsha pir and Mai Misra is celebrated on the same day. Shabbir Shah Anwar Rifai, caretaker of Baba Ghor's *mazar* in Jambur related to us the following legend:

'Nagarsha Pir who was like an elder brother to Baba Ghor blessed him (Baba Ghor) so that his own *Urs* would be celebrated after the *Urs* of Baba Ghor. This is the reason that on the occasion of *Urs* people first visit Baba Ghor's *mazar* in Jambur and offer prayers to him. People also sacrifice goat and offer coconut, sandal, rosewater to Baba Ghor. The goat itself gives permission for its own sacrifice. We bathe the goat and set it free. The goat itself goes to the *mazar* of Baba Ghor and shakes its head; this is taken as a sign of its sacrificial permission. Then, it is sacrificed'.¹⁰

Shabbir Shah further furnished to us the following tradition:

'Baba Ghor was an Abyssinian. His full name is Sayyid Ahmed Nabil Rehmatula. He was a Christian by birth. He possessed a huge farm in Abyssinia but his soul always told him to go to India. Baba Ghor came to India via Iran and it is in Iran that he met a Rifai Sufi who instructed him in the Rifai *silsila* (order) and Baba Ghor converted to Islam. Rifai Sufi named him Baba Ghor. He named him Baba Ghor as Baba Ghor always liked jungles and Ghor means jungle. In India, Baba

⁸ 'Account of the Cornelian Mines near Baroach', *The Asiatic Journal and Monthly Register for British India and its Dependencies*, 9 (1) (1820), p. 561

⁹ *Badshah, Samir, and friends. Interview with Sweta Bhardwaj, Jambur, April 3, 2017.*

¹⁰ *Shah, Shabbir. Interview with Authors, Jambur, April 3, 2017.*

Ghor met Baba Garib Nawaz. Baba Ghor hails from Rifai Giroh Sufi *silsila*. The *mazar* of Baba Ghor in Jambur is situated on the same place where Nagarsha pir and Baba Ghor used to meet to discuss religion. Baba Ghor used to make beads. He used his skill at this to earn some livelihood so that he did not need to ask for favour from others.¹¹

In the above mentioned statement made by Shabbir Shah Rifai some new concepts emerged. In this version, Baba Ghor was a farmer who is religious, and he was not a soldier. Nagarsha Pir is his sworn brother, and it is possible that they probably united due to their ethnic similarity. Another important connection made is the one between Baba Ghor and Sarkar Gharib Nawaz (Mu'inuddin buried at Ajmer), founder of Chisti *silsila* in India as it is believed that on his arrival in India, Baba Ghor was guided by one of the most influential Sufis of the time and this story further strengthens the cult of Baba Ghor, as it traces Baba Ghor's connection with the renowned Chisti sect.

This account given by Sabbir Shah is also significant as the Rifai order actually existed in Iraq until the fifteenth century. It was founded by Ahmad al- Rifai in Iraq and also had its influence in Egypt. The Sidi Rifai is otherwise called the lineage of the order of Baba Ghor.¹² The story told by Shabbir Shah also gives some idea to reconstruct Baba Ghor's journey to India. So, it can be assumed that perhaps, Baba Ghor, who originally hailed from Abyssinia, first went to Egypt, and then to Iraq and Iran, from where he reached India, where he spent the rest of his life.

Mai Misra, the sworn sister of Baba Ghor, appears to be equally important in legend. It is believed that she came from Egypt, and Misra in her name refers to 'Misr' or Egypt.¹³ Mai Misra killed a demoness named Makkhan Devi. Mai Misra is said to be as powerful as her brother Baba Ghor. It is said that when Baba Ghor could not kill a female demon Makkhan Devi, he was helped by Mai Misra, who took this task on herself and killed the female demon.¹⁴ It is also believed that Makkhan Devi was actually a goddess, and the hill had long been an important centre of her worship.¹⁵ Later, Mai Misra developed her own following; and is particularly worshiped for securing fertility. Apart from people of African descent, people from other cultural background also pay respect to her cult.

The legends of Baba Ghor help form a sense of brotherhood among the Badshah fakirs. Baba Ghor is worshipped as *Kulpir* (ancestral saint) by the Badshahs of Gujarat. Several Badshahs often work at his *dargah* and make their earnings from gifts by pilgrims. As the legend of Baba Ghor empowers Badshah *faqirs*, thus Badshahs' racial difference becomes a sign of a spiritual power and healing abilities. This power of Badshah fakirs become a source of healing not only for

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² 'Mai Misra's Khicari: Remembrance and Ritual Re-presentation in the Sidi (African-Indian) Sufi Tradition of Western India', *Symposia: The Journal of Religion*, 9 (2018), p.2.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p.3.

¹⁴ Edward E. Curtis IV, *The Call of Bilal: Islam in the African Diaspora*, Chapel Hill, 2014, p.96.

¹⁵ 'Baba Ghor and the Ratanpur Rakshisha', *JESHO*, 29 (2) (1986), p.202.

their own *jamaat* (which can be defined as caste, *qaum* or community) but also for outsider. Gujarati Badshahs distinguish themselves from other people of African diaspora in India by tracing their strong Sufi practices linked to the cult of Baba Ghor. Badshahs in Gujarat perform sacred music in praise of Baba Ghor and Mai Misra, and on occasion of *Urs*, they perform the *goma* or *Dhamal* dance.¹⁶

In Gujarat Badshahs play *Malunga*, (a single-stringed braced musical bow) which is popular in many East Asian communities. Rattle or *Jhunjhuna* is the instrument of Mai Misra. The Gujarati Badshahs respect these instruments and never touche them unless they are pure. It is considered that if a sexually impure person touches these instruments, Mai Misra and Baba Ghor would surely punish him.¹⁷

Today, Baba Ghor shrines are located in various parts of Western India. In Gujarat their shrines are located in Ahmedabad, Surat, Junagadh besides other places. Each shrine practices its own ritual routine of *Urs* celebrations. Shrine rituals are performed by various actors. Each ritual role is assigned to some persons who held permanent positions; for instance the head of the shrine (goddivaras), shrine keepers (mujavar), *kotwals* (ritual guard) perform different duties. In Ahmedabad, Hamida Siddi told that ‘almost every house of Patthar Kuwa, houses the *chilla* (wall niche) of Baba Ghor and his sister Mai Misra along with his brother Habash Khan. From all over generation they have been worshipping Baba Ghor. Hamida and her brother Hasan Siddi are very well aware of their ancestry and claim to have come from Abyssinia. They speak Swahili in their household. They know Gujarati and Hindi. According to Hamida:

‘We play orchestra; sacrifice a goat on *Urs* celebration. Sandals, Rose water, and coconuts are offered to Baba Ghor and his sister Mai Misra. Our ancestors came with Baba Ghor from Abyssinian via Iran. Along with the *mazar* of Baba Ghor, we house a separate *chilla* of Mai Misra. Women are caretakers of Mai Misra’s *chilla*.’¹⁸

These rituals, duties are specific to the Badshahs only. In some rituals women are included while men are excluded and in others women are excluded while men are included. One of the main features of this cult is the existence of both male and female sphere. *Dargah* and *mazars* of Mai Misra are looked after only by women, and men are not allowed to enter the most sacred part of the *dargah*. At the *dargah* of Nagarsha Pir in Jambur, women are not allowed to enter, the caretakers being men. These caretakers include Badshahs as well as other devotees of Baba Ghor and devotees from other ethnical backgrounds also serve here. On the other hand in the shrine of Baba Ghor in Ratanpur, women are allowed to enter and offer prayers. Again men are *khadim* of

¹⁶ Beheroze Shroff, ‘Sidis of Gujarat-A Building Community: Their role in Indian History and Contemporary Times’, in *Frontiers of Embedded Muslim Communities in India*, ed. Vinod K. Jairath, Routledge, 2011, p.79.

¹⁷ ‘Gujarat Population: Musalmans and Parsis’, *Gazetteer of the Bombay Presidency* 9 (2) (1899), p.12.

¹⁸ Siddi, Hamida. Interview with Authors, Ahmedabad, March 30, 2017.

the *dargah*. While in the *dargah* of Mai Misra only women work as caretakers, women also work as caretakers in the *chilla* of Mai Misra. Thus, there is a division of gender in serving these holy pirs and every gender possess and maintains its own realm.

In Junagadh, the caretaker of the *mazar* of Mai Misra is a lady named Banu Badshah. Banu Badshah narrates a different story of Baba Ghor's birth. Banu Badshah told that:

‘Unlike others, Baba Ghor did not take birth from a mother's womb but he emerged from just ashes. He was raised by a foster mother named Rumana and a foster father named Gorisa. The reason behind the name of Baba Ghor could be attributed to his birth from Samaadhi, which in Arabic is called Ghor.’¹⁹

Banu Badshah was ignorant of Baba Ghor's early history and did not know about his connections with the Rifai and Chisti orders. Banu Badshah showed Nagada which they beat on the day of *Urs*. They also blow conch to make people aware of *Urs* celebration. They also play Miyadi. According to Banu Badshah on the day of *Urs*; goat, sandal, incense etc. are offered to the Sufis. People take in holy ash home as it is considered a blessing.

In Bhuj, people of African descent are popularly known as either Badshah bhai or Zamadar. There is also a *mazar* of Baba Ghor and Badshah live there. They too claim to have come with Baba Ghor. In Junagadh, local Muslims also participate in *Urs* and often come to seek the blessings of the pirs. If wishes come true, the original *dargah* of Baba Ghor in Ratanpur village is visited. It is some twenty-five kilometers away from Bharuch. The *dargah* of Baba Ghor is situated on a small hill and now some stairs lead to the *dargah*. Before going to the *dargah*, it is necessary to wash your mouth, hands and feet so water is available to perform these duties. Here, there are several small shops which sell flowers, rose water, *itar* (perfume), coconut, incense, *chadar* (sheet) etc. The *dargah* of Baba Ghor is a large open compound. People come here and cite prayers. People come here to make wishes and many others come here after the fulfillment of their wishes.²⁰

At the northern side of the *dargah* of Baba Ghor lie several small graves that are said to be of his Walis. Next to the *dargah* of Baba Ghor is the *dargah* of Mai Misra. At the *dargah* of Mai Misra, there is a big tree covered with nails on it. The number of nails shows the number of people, who are said to have been cured from the possession of the evil spirits.

Some miles away from the *dargah*, is a pond. It has water in its lower level. It is said that on the day of *Urs*, water automatically increases in this pond. This Oasis water is believed to have magical power. This town is named Ratanpur because Baba Ghor used to carve stones here that is called *ratna* (gem) in Hindi. From the *dargah* people take home; coconut, *bhabut* (holy ash) and holy water. Again, *Urs* is celebrated with great joy. A grand celebration is held on the occasion of *Urs*.²¹

¹⁹ Badshah, Banu. Interview with Sweta Bhardwaj, Junagadh, April 4, 2017.

²⁰ Sweta Bhardwaj, “Abyssinians in the Administration and Society of Western and Coastal India in Medieval Times” (M.Phil dissertation University of Delhi, 2017), 69.

²¹ Bhardwaj, *Ibid.*, p. 71.

These Badshah Bhai, many of them are aware of their ancestral land, for instance. Badshahs of Ahmedabad, Badshah of Jambur claim that they came from Abyssinia. Badshahs of Ahmedabad claim to have come with Baba Ghor while Badshahs of Jambur claim to have come as bodyguards in the army of the King of Junagadh. Others are ignorant of their original land but are aware about the fact that their ancestors came originally from Africa.

People of various religious backgrounds such as Muslims, Zoroastrians, Christian and Hindus visit the *dargah* and *mazars*. People come here to seek *barakat* (blessings of abundance) and *Karamat* (miracle healings).

Thus it can be said that there is still much to write about the cult of Baba Ghor; such as there are also legends about their matrimonial relations as celebrations are also held in the honour of the Mai Misra's marriage to a Sufi. Overall, the cult of Baba Ghor is significant enough which gives a feeling of 'Us' and unites all Badshahs together in the present times. Through the cult of Baba Ghor people get united and come in contact with local people and people of other cultural backgrounds who are also adherent followers of the cult. Even today in Gujarat, people respect Badshah and call them Badshah bhai. The cult of Baba Ghor gives identity to the people of African descent in India.

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