

Farid al-din Mas‘ud Ganj-i-Shakar (571–664/1175–1265)

Popularly known as Baba Farid, he is one of the distinguished medieval Muslim mystics in the Indian world, most revered in the Punjabi communities and sects of South Asia. In a book on prominent mystic poets of the Punjab, Baba Farid is the first in the list, and elsewhere he is described as “the pioneer of Punjabi Sufi poetry”¹.

Baba Farid’s grandfather, Qadi Shu‘ayb, had emigrated with his family from Kabul to Lahore in 552/1157, to escape the incessant wars between Ghazna and Kabul. He came from an illustrious scholarly family that could apparently trace its descent from one of the earliest Sufi ascetic-saints Ibrahim Adham (d. ca. 165/782) and from the second caliph ‘Umar b. Khattab, known as al-Faruq (hence Baba Farid was known as Faruqi).

Lahore had become a second capital under the Turkish Ghaznavids, whose cultural language was Persian, and was even known as ‘little Ghazna’; Persian was the language of the Muslim elite. When Lahore and Multan were conquered by Muhammad Ghuri (ruler from Afghanistan to Pakistan and India) in 1186, Muslim domination in northern India was secured. In 1193, the court was moved to Delhi, which then became the centre of Persian poetry in the subcontinent until the end of the Mughal empire.

Disappointed with the worldliness of Lahore, Shu‘ayb moved to Qasur, a town 34 miles south-east of Lahore, and was then appointed by the sultan as qadi of a small town in the district of Multan called Kahtwal. Shu‘ayb’s son Jamal al-din Sulayman, who would become Baba Farid’s father, succeeded his father as qadi. Baba Farid was the second of 3 sons: his first teacher was his mother, Qarsum Bibi, a woman of great piety who encouraged him in prayer and devotion. His exact date of birth is a matter of conjecture, anything from 1172 to 1180.

A major transformation occurred at the hands of an eminent mystic called Jalal al-din Tabrizi, a companion of Shihab al-din Suhrawardi in Baghdad, Baha’ al-din Zakariyya (the teacher of ‘Iraqi) in Multan and Qutb al-din Bakhtiyar Kaki (d. 634/1236) in Delhi: while on his way to Delhi, Jalal al-din Tabrizi passed through Kahtwal and enquired if there was any mystic in the town. He was told no but there was a very devout chap Mas‘ud, the son of the Qadi, who was always busy with devotions behind the mosque. On the way to see him, Jalal al-din was given a pomegranate, which he took as a present for Baba Farid: breaking it open, he offered it to him. Baba Farid was fasting, so he refused it. After Jalal al-din left, Baba Farid found one seed lying on the ground, which he picked up and kept to eat when he broke his fast. This single seed caused a sudden spiritual illumination within him. He deeply regretted not having accepted the whole fruit, which would have given him more spiritual blessings. Later when he met his future master,

¹ L. S. Buxi, *Prominent mystic poets of the Punjab* (Delhi, 1994); Saeed Ahmad, ‘Baba Farid: the pioneer of Punjabi Sufi poetry’, in *Sufism in Punjab: mystics, literature and shrines*, ed. S. Singh and I.D. Gaur (Delhi, 2009).

the deputy of Mu‘in al-din al-Chishti and one of the great Chishti saints, Qutb al-din Bakhtiyar, and told him of the incident, the latter said: ‘All the spiritual blessing was in that one seed; it was destined for you and it reached you. There was nothing in the rest of the fruit.’ This remark led to the practice among Chishtis of eating the whole pomegranate in order to ensure that one does not miss the ‘sacred’ seed.

At the age of 18, Baba Farid went to Multan to study: he committed the entire Quran to memory and could recite it once in 24 hours. When Qutb al-din Bakhtiyar came to the town, Baba Farid joined him and accompanied him to Delhi. Bakhtiyar installed Baba Farid in his *khānqah* (lodge), where he underwent training. It seems to have been harsh in the extreme. It is reported that he accomplished a special kind of retreat known as *chillah-i ma‘kus*, in which a rope is tied round the feet and the person suspended upside down over a well for forty days and nights of worship: this he did away from public gaze in a little village called Uchch, where he asked the muezzin to suspend him at night over the well in the mosque, and then pull him up at dawn so that he continued his devotions on the floor, without anyone else knowing. He was advised by Bakhtiyar to fast according to the principle of *ṭayy*, lit. ‘voluntary fasting’, in which one fasts for 3 days with nothing taken except a few drops of water at *iftar*, and to only break the fast when something is brought from an unforeseen source (the *ghayb*): the first time he tried this, someone brought him bread on the third day, which he ate, but shortly afterwards he saw a revolting sight which made him vomit up what he had eaten – his master told him that being brought bread by a drunkard was unfit to break the fast, which was why had been made to vomit it up again. The second time, he picked up a few pebbles and put them in his mouth, and they turned into sugar – it was for this reason (according to one explanation) that he was called Ganj-i Shakar (the treasury of sugar).²

In one famous incident, when Mu‘in al-din Chishti visited, Baba Farid received a unique blessing from both his master and his master’s master.

After completing his training with Bakhtiyar, Baba Farid was sent to live in Hansi, at that time a small settlement (an important strategic town later), where he hoped to live a quiet life of contemplation. Bahktiyar nominated him as his successor prior to his going (perhaps much to the dismay of older ‘more worthy’ disciples), and gave him his prayer carpet and staff. He also told Farid that five days after his death he would receive the *khirqā* (cloak), *dastār* (turban) and

² In other versions: it was his mother who put sugar under his pillow whenever he did his prayers, and when she stopped doing so after a certain time, the sugar miraculously kept on coming; on his way to his teacher, he slipped and fell in the mud, some of which went into his mouth and turned into sugar, and was told that ‘no wonder if the Almighty turns your whole being into a treasure of sugar and keeps it always sweet’. Offerings of sugar are always made by the faithful at his shrine in Pakpattan.

wooden sandals (*na'layn-i chubin*): 'My place is yours', he told Baba Farid, assuring the succession of the Chishti order.³

While he was in Hansi, a curious event thrust him into the limelight: an eminent mystic and speaker named Mawlana Nur Turk came to give a sermon in the mosque, and as soon as Baba Farid entered in very nondescript tattered clothes to hear him, he exclaimed: 'O Muslims, the appraiser of true speech has arrived!' He then proceeded to lavish praises on Farid, making him so famous in Hansi that people began to throng round him in large numbers.

One night he had a dream that his master was calling him to his presence, so the next day he set off for Delhi. On the way he was told that his master Bakhtiyar had died. He reached Delhi on the fourth day and was given the mystic regalia: he then proceeded to his master's house and sat in his place. Apparently Bahktiyar had also wanted him to marry his widow, but he felt unable to do so. He stayed in Delhi for a brief time, but found the capital a place of aimless engagements and uncondusive to contemplation. One day a man came from Hansi to see him, spent a long time getting access, and then eventually threw himself at his feet, saying 'Access to you was easy when you were in Hansi, but it is very difficult here.' This apparently brought him to a definitive decision: he would abandon Delhi, the place of his master, and return to Hansi. 'My master's blessing', he said, 'will accompany me whether I am in the city or in the wilderness'.

He left the disciples in the hands of another master (who later got involved in difficulty after allowing a *khānqah* to be built by the local ruler – this went against the norms of Bakhtiyar and Mu'in al-din Chishti, who advocated strict poverty and detachment from being indebted to people in power). He returned first to Hansi, then Kahtwal and finally to Ajodhan (modern Pakpattan = 'Ferry of the Pure', named after Baba Farid), a place known for its illiterate, bad-tempered and superstitious Hindu inhabitants. For a time he lived in isolation under trees outside the town, and then he opened the gates of his house to anyone and everyone who wished to see him. 'Come to me one by one so that I may attend to you individually.'

Ajodhan, where he lived for between 16 and 24 years (depending on reports), gradually underwent a remarkable transformation as its primarily Hindu inhabitants were drawn to Baba Farid's charisma and way of life. It was said that 'on account of his blessed presence Ajodhan became the spiritual centre of both India and Khurasan'. His modest dwelling became an island of calm and serenity amidst the surrounding turmoil and turbulence.

There are many stories told of Baba Farid, his daily routine, his family and his disciples. The most famous disciple was Nizam al-din Awliya⁴, who lived in Delhi, came to Ajodhan to spend

³ Later Baba Farid passed them on to Nizam al-din Awliya', who then gave them to Nasir al-din Chiragh of Delhi – the latter had them buried with him in his grave, thus ending the initial phase of the Chishti succession.

⁴ Author of *Fawā'id al-fu'ād*, containing many stories of Baba Farid – see bibliography for English translation.

three periods being trained with his master (including studying Quran and other books with him), and became his nominated successor. The stories that he tells of his master are in many ways the best source of what Baba Farid was like as a teacher. The last time he visited Baba Farid in 664/1265 (the year that Baba Farid died), he was told: ‘I have given you both the worlds. Go and take the kingdom of Hindustan.’ Baba Farid had a large family, and yet all were under the order of poverty, asking for alms in the manner of St Francis. They had to endure great hardship, especially during his last years when it seems that gifts towards the household dried up.

Although his asceticism was extreme and similar to that practised by yogis, he maintained complete equanimity. Like the Bhaktis, he stressed love of God as the basis of all human life: he is reported to have often said “May God give you love”, and “real life is that which a dervish passes in remembering God”. Once he was found by Nizam al-din Awliya’ passionately reciting in Persian: “I love none in the two worlds but You; I want only to live for You and to die for You”.

He very much emphasised being in the world and serving others, inculcating love and affection in people’s hearts, at the same time as seeking union with God. According to him, the root cause of all problems in the world is usurping someone else’s rights, since this encourages enmity. Once someone presented him with a knife, which he refused to accept. He said: ‘Bring me a needle, for I sew (and join); I do not cut (and divide).’⁵ His name became a by-word for non-violence: as the Mughal emperor Akbar II once remarked regarding someone’s hypocritical conduct, “Shaikh Farid in heart, but bricks in the armpit”.

This entailed a strict mode of behaviour towards the state, which for the early Chishtis meant a complete severance of relations with the government – ‘if you desire elevation in your spiritual rank, do not mix with the princes of the blood’. This was not always possible, and Baba Farid’s approach was measured: for example, when asked to recommend a certain case to the Sultan Balban, he wrote: ‘I put his case first before God and then before you. If you award him something, you will be thanked for it because you are the agent of this reward, but God in the real sense is the only bestower. If you refuse it, then you are helpless in this matter since God is the only refuser.’

Baba Farid is credited with four books: *Rāhat al-qulūb*, his sayings and advice apparently compiled by Nizam al-din Awliya’ (but possibly apocryphal); *Sirāj al-awliyā’*, his discourses compiled by his son Shah Badar; *Fawā’id al-sālikīn*, discourses of Bahktiyar written by Baba Farid; and his poetry in Persian and Punjabi. His fame and popularity rest on his Punjabi poems, partly because about 130 of them and four hymns are included in the Sikh scripture, the *Adi Granth*. Guru Nanak is said to have learned them directly from a descendant of Baba Farid in

⁵ Cf. Rumi’s line in the *Mathnawi*: ‘You have come into the world to join, and not to set asunder’.

Pakpattan. The poems are often included in the repertoire of the *qawwals*, the professional Muslim singers of devotional songs in the Punjab and surrounding South Asian areas. These Punjabi poems are known as *shalokas* or *slokas* (literally ‘the words of kings’), in fact rhyming couplets somewhat reminiscent of the Persian *ruba‘i*.

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