



*Excerpt*

# Embattled Saints

## *My Year with the Sufis of Afghanistan*

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By Kenneth P. Lizzio

### **Taken from the Introduction**

One day, a member of my staff entered the office. Looking behind him conspiratorially, he closed the door. It was Sayyid Bacha. Though of average size and not particularly muscular, enormous block-like fists betrayed his pugilistic prowess. Bacha had been former national boxing champion of Afghanistan so he was something of a celebrity. He possessed a great deal of self-confidence not only because of his athletic fame, but because he was a *sayyid*, a descendant of the Prophet. He had attended a French lycée in Kabul and, like myself, spoke French fluently. I spoke halting Persian, so we usually conversed in French.

Over time I noticed Bacha was using our common language to forge personal ties with me. Increasingly, he was using these ties to by-pass his immediate supervisor, Izzatullah. I was becoming concerned that his behavior would be viewed as favoritism by the rest of the staff. I was about to broach the subject when he cut me off.

“*Agha* (Mr.) Ken,” his voice was low and guarded. “Don’t talk openly about Sufism in this office or anywhere else for that matter. There are many Afghans around here who don’t like Sufis...like Izzatullah.”

In any other case, I might have dismissed his remark as an attempt, so common in this tribal culture, as simple slander. But Izzatullah had once been a commander in the Hezb-i Islami (Party of Islam). The HI, as it was known, was an Islamic party that had earned a reputation during the war as the most ferocious of the several Afghan *mujahiddin* parties that had sprung up after the Soviet invasion. The CIA had funneled the lion’s share of one billion dollars in weapons for the Afghan resistance to the HI. Only later was it learned that the HI’s reputation was due chiefly to the public relations skill of its head, Gulbuddin Hekmatyar, who for a time had joined ranks with the Taliban after the war’s end. The HI was, however, ferocious in its opposition to one thing – Sufism. Sufism

as such did not figure explicitly in the Qur'an or in accounts of the Prophet's life. For this reason, like other fundamentalist groups, the HI regarded it as an accretion and a heresy (*bid'a*).

Afghans are among the most gracious and congenial people on earth. They are also a warrior people quick to act out grievances. It was conceivable that a member of the HI would harm me for my Sufi sympathies. Already the staff was issuing veiled threats to burn the office down – a disturbingly common Pashtun tribal practice called *lashgar* – in protest over a tryst between the front office secretary, an Afghan woman named Jamila, and a Pakistani employee. Indeed, the Afghan staff had razed the CARE office in Peshawar in protest over a similar affair involving honor. More worrisome was the fatal shooting of an Afghan-American two weeks earlier in a street not far from my office. The reasons were unclear but worrisome. So as I turned these things over in my mind, I thanked Bacha for his advice and moved to open the door lest the staff think a cabal was being hatched. As I reached for the door, Bacha put his hand on my shoulder reassuringly,

“If you want to meet some Sufis, I'll take you, but don't talk about these things around here anymore.”

A few weeks later Sayyid Bacha took me to meet Shaikh Ismael Khan, an Afghan shaikh of the Suhrawardi order of Sufis. Shaikh Ismael was living in Nasir Bagh, one of the largest refugee camps set up for the millions of Afghans who had fled to Pakistan during the Soviet occupation, and were coming again in new waves as the civil war raged. Located north of town, the camp was home to thousands of Afghans huddled together and living in squalor. Widowed women could be seen wandering the nearby streets, begging with one hand and clutching a baby with the other. These Afghans had been living as refugees so long that an entirely new generation was being raised in the camps. And it was in these camps that the Taliban were being groomed.

When we arrived, Shaikh Ismael was standing in front of his house. It was a simple mud structure. After the formal greeting – shaking with both hands clasped and touching the right to the heart – he led us into a prayer room adjoining the house. The room also served as the neighborhood mosque. Ismael was tall and erect with a long grey beard. He appeared to be in his sixties. He was clad in a *khirqa*, a cloak of a type believed to have been worn by the Prophet that Sufis wear. He had a long white turban. Inside the mosque there was no furniture, save some cushions against the walls and reed mats to cover the clay floor. Ismael called out, a young boy appeared, and the shaikh instructed him to fetch us food and water.

We sat at the end of the mosque that faced the *qibla*, the direction of Mecca, two thousand miles away to the south west. On the wall hung a plaque with the inscription, “*Allahu Akbar*” (“God

is Great”). Speaking in Persian, the shaikh said he was from the Gardez region of Afghanistan. He had emigrated to Peshawar in 1982, three years after the Soviet invasion of his country. He brought his wife, six children, and several members of his extended family. The conditions in the camp were difficult but, God willing, they would one day return to Afghanistan where life was once good and where *shari’a* (Islamic law) would one day prevail again.

Ismael had a warm, avuncular manner, and I immediately felt at ease in his presence. The boy reappeared with a platter of cucumber salad, yoghurt, a flat-bread called *nan*, and some beef kebabs setting it out on a plastic mat. Ishmael ate little himself, preferring to tear a piece of *nan* or slide off a piece of grilled meat from the skewer and hand it to me.

Eventually we got around to Sufism. He said he was a shaikh initiated in all four of the orders in Afghanistan. Sufism, he lamented, had not only been weakened by the Soviet invasion but by corrupt practices within Islam. He said that there was the son of a leading Qadiri shaikh who practiced with women in the nude. This sounded wildly implausible, but I chose not to pursue it as I had many questions on other things. When I asked about his own Sufi teaching, he said that he had discontinued practice after repeated threats from the HI. When we finished our meal, bowls of water were brought out and we washed our hands. Ismael then recited a short prayer. As we rose to leave, I asked if I could return. Ismael said I was welcome in his home any time.

Ismael had struck me as deeply pious. But his fear of the HI seemed uncharacteristic of Sufis. Since its inception in the 7<sup>th</sup> century, Sufism had faced opposition from many quarters, but stalwart defiance had always been its hallmark. I wondered if all Sufis in Peshawar were cowering under the menace of the HI or if Ismael were merely an exception.

A few weeks later, Bacha came to my house to tell me he had learned of another Sufi, this one a master in the Chishti order, living nearby on the Grand Trunk Road. But the shaikh, I discovered when I visited, had actually died some years earlier. His disciples, one of whom was the former President of Peshawar University, were meditating on a set of photos of the deceased shaikh. Like Ismael, they seemed deeply pious. But their shaikh was dead. It seemed too abstract. I wanted to encounter a *living* Sufi.

One Saturday afternoon Bacha showed up unannounced at my house. He was on his way to the market to buy groceries and asked if I wanted to join him. I asked why his wife did not accompany him, even though I knew the answer. Bacha said that he did not want his wife to leave the house. The traditional place for a woman, he said, was in the home. “You know,” he remarked proudly, “only three men have seen my wife’s face: her brother, her father, and me.”

On the way to the market we talked about Sufism. I expressed my disappointment with the Sufis I had thus far met. Bacha was perplexed. Had I not met genuine Sufis, he asked. And were not at least some of these practicing? And had they not invited me to join them? Yes, yes, but something was missing, I said. I was trying to explain the difference between ritual observance of the law and mystical experience when he blurted out,

“Now I see! You want something *living*! Why didn’t you say so? In that case,” he said, “you must go see the *Pir-i-Kunduz*.” He is the one for you.

The term “pir” means old man in Persian and is an honorific given to spiritual masters in Sufism. Pir-i-Kunduz, meant this Sufi was from Kunduz, a province in the far north of Afghanistan. Pirs always had their names attached to a place name perhaps the better for seekers to find them. As it turned out, the Pir was now living in the Khyber Agency, not far from Peshawar.

Despite its proximity, visiting the Khyber was not for the fainthearted. It is the most lawless and dangerous of Pakistan’s seven tribal agencies, and quite possibly one of the most lawless regions of the world. Few foreigners venture into the Khyber or any of the other tribal agencies unless properly introduced. Tribal skirmishes, smuggling, kidnapping, heroin trading, and just plain xenophobia made the agencies inhospitable places even for Pakistanis. On a weekly basis the local papers carried articles of individuals who had been abducted for ransom or revenge. Those who were kidnapped usually disappeared without a trace.

On occasion, pressured by the U.S. government, the Pakistani military conducted raids on suspected heroin houses, razing them to the ground with bulldozers. The tribes usually retaliated by kidnapping outsiders in the hope of discouraging the government from future threats to their territorial sovereignty. With their international complications, kidnapped foreigners were particularly vexing to the Pakistani government. Even Pakistanis from the settled areas – areas under complete government control – avoided the agencies. In the face of these perils, the prospect of meeting the Pir seemed as remote as Kunduz itself. But when I raised my concerns, the ever-confident Bacha assured me that if I went with him no harm would come to me. I had already come so far to meet a Sufi. It seemed worth the risk.