

The Case of the Women Sufis

Chandan Gowda

Mastani Maa, a Sufi saint, was usually found praying or meditating or doing *zikr* (a devotional exercise of rhythmic repetition of God's name or a short prayer). Her love of God was boundless. When Mastani Maa's visitors found her doing *zikr*, they often seated themselves opposite her and started meditating upon God themselves.

One day, a group of men, women and children dropped by to see her. Finding her engaged in *zikr*, they sat down opposite her and began to meditate. They did not break for food or water. Around midnight, Mastani Maa opened her eyes. She was moved to see that her visitors had waited this late, without having food or water, to meet her. Asking them to put the empty earthen pot lying in a corner on the stove, she directed them to fill it with the leaves, stones and soil from the courtyard and cook them in water. She then beseeched God for help. Soon afterwards, rice was seen boiling inside the pot. Mastani Maa's visitors looked at her questioningly. She reassured them, 'There is nothing unique about this. It is all God's love. He provides food through stones, soil and leaves, doesn't he?'

Mastani Maa lived in Bengaluru. It is not clear when she lived here or where she came from. Since she belonged to the Majzoob Sufi order, she wore thick iron bangles and anklets. She gave her blessings to all, irrespective of the communities they belonged to.

Hazrath Khwaja Qaseer, a famous contemporary Sufi saint in Bangalore, had sent his disciples to attend her funeral. When they let him know that her face had



Figure 1. Mastani Maa Dargah (also known as Dargah Hazrath Mastani Amma) (Source: Rana Kauser)

turned yellow after her death, he felt certain that she was a great Sufi. Her tomb, which is in a side alley of Tannery Road, continues to attract many of the faithful in the present (Figures 1 & 2).

I learnt about Mastani Maa and her miracle in writer Fakir Muhammad Katpadi's *Sufi Mahileyaru* (Women Sufis, Navakarnataka Publications, 2010). Katpadi's account offered a new slice of Bangalore's history. While little is known about the two dozen Sufi saints whose *dargahs* exist in different parts of the city, the lack of an adequate account of Mastani Maa, or of Saiyada Bibi and Saiyadani Maa, the other women Sufis from Bangalore, whose *dargahs* exist, respectively, in City Market and in Richmond Town, is to be regretted a bit more since the official annals do not easily recognize women as Sufi Saints. Indeed, the Sufi is usually imagined as a male saint.

The leadership of the various Sufi orders, where disciples learnt the techniques of attaining the mystical experiences of the divine, have usually resided in men. When women did become, on a rare occasion, the heads of any Sufi order, their powers were curtailed in various ways. For instance, they could teach but not initiate disciples, or, they were allowed to initiate only female disciples. The Bektashi order in Ottoman Turkey was the lone exception: men and women had equal rights of spiritual apprenticeship and organisational leadership.

Women Sufi saints are found all over the Islamic world, including the Middle East, North Africa, the Indian sub-continent and South-East Asia. Not all of them, though, had had formal training within a Sufi order. While some women Sufis remained unmarried, several of them achieved sainthood alongside fulfilling familial obligations, as mothers, sisters, daughters.

Rabia al-Adawiyya, who lived in Basra, Iraq, in the eighth century and whose powers of devotion freed

her from slavery, is perhaps the most well-known among women Sufi saints. Like Rabia, several women Sufis gained local recognition for their spiritual merits and came to be later venerated as saints. Annemarie Schimmel, the famous scholar of Sufism, mentions a delightful example. Lalla Mimunah, a poor woman in Western North Africa, asked the captain of a boat to teach her the ritual prayer. But she forgot what he taught her soon afterwards. To relearn it from him, she ran back to reach the departing boat, praying throughout, 'Mimunah knows God, and God knows Mimunah.' Her faith had let her run on water. She is revered as a saint in North Africa.

Besides North Africa, Schimmel notes, Anatolia and Iran have a large number of shrines of women saints. Women devotees visit there for help in resolving family problems. But the largest number of women Sufi saints, she adds, are found in India and Pakistan, especially in the regions of Sindh and Punjab. Men are not admitted to many of the shrines that have been built for these saints. Legends on the lives and deeds of these saints are very many. Schimmel records an unforgettable one: 'As elsewhere in the Muslim world, we find in Sind whole groups of women saints, like the *haft affa*, "the Seven Chaste," who escaped a group of attacking soldiers and were swallowed by the earth before their virtue could be touched.'



Figure 2. Devotees at Mastani Maa Dargah (Source: Rana Kauser)

In his major study, *Karnatakada Sufigalu* (The Sufis of Karnataka, Kannada University Press, 1998), Rahamath Tarikere, the literary critic, identifies several women Sufi saints in the state: Saidaani Bibi of Mangalore; Niyaamatbi of Gauribidanur; Zarinaabi of Kadur; Bibi Fatima of Gulbarga; Saidaniamma of Ramadurga; Mustanimaa of Harapanahalli and Bagur. Their *dargahs* continue to be living spaces in the present. The policemen of Mangalore are fond of Saidaani Bibi. They celebrate her *Urs* (the death anniversary of a Sufi Saint).

On occasion, Tarikere notes, women who cannot be traced to any specific Sufi order, have come to be regarded as Sufi saints. Mastani Maa of Bagur exemplifies such an instance. While walking her way home, she accidentally encountered the man she had been betrothed to. She was deeply embarrassed at this chance encounter. After looking around desperately for a place to hide, she jumped into a well to avoid facing him and lost her life. The local people built a tomb for her right beside the well. Worship continues to be offered to her here. It is easy, Tarikere cautions, to merely conclude that the myth around her serves patriarchal ideals, but why people create and worship deities is hard to understand. A sense of mystery will need to find space in our interpretive efforts.

Tarikere writes, 'No "history" of the achievements of these women saints from Karnataka exists. But their influence on the places they lived in is large.' Getting a sense of this influence is to touch on the other lineages of our moral worlds.

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Chandan Gowda holds the Ramakrishna Hegde Chair in Decentralization at the Institute for Social and Economic Change, Bengaluru. To think without using the categories: social, economic and political, that would be the thing.