

# Historical Background of the Criticism of the Islamic Saint Cult in South Asia

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## ● Research Background

One of the factors in the spread of Islam in South Asia was the activity of Sufis. Influential Sufis were regarded as saints and, after they died, their graves became shrines. Many people would gather at the graves seeking intercession and performing “un-Islamic” practices were performed there. Criticism of such practices appeared in the eighteenth century and gained momentum in the first half of the nineteenth century under Shāh Muḥammad Ismā‘īl, a leader of the *mujahidin* movement against the Sikh empire state in Punjab. His criticism had aspects of Islamic reform and revival, but met resistance in some Islamic groups and was the subject of much discussion and controversy. The South Asian Sunnis were divided as to whether or not to allow these “unlawful” practices at the Sufi shrines.

## ● Research Purpose and Aim

I went to Pakistan to visit the famous Sufi shrine, the shrine of ‘Abd Allāh Shāh Ghāzī in Karachi. I devoted my energy to finding the works of Shāh Muḥammad Ismā‘īl’s works and books written in Urdu books by the leaders of Islamic reform and revival movement of the nineteenth century. In conducting my literature research, I got advice from Dr. Moinuddin Aqeel, who is noted for his historical study of Indian Muslims of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries.

## ● Results and Achievements of Fieldwork

I was able to gain access to relevant literature in several important collections: the Dr. Mahmud Hussain Library of the University of Karachi; the library of Anjuman Taraqqī Urdū in Karachi; the Prof. Muhammad Iqbal Mujaddidi Collection in the Punjab University Library; and the private library of Dr. Aqeel, which contains several thousand books.

A great success in my research was to obtain a rare edition of Shāh Muḥammad Ismā‘īl’s *Taqwiyat al-Īmān*, published in Calcutta in 1857. Because of the turmoil caused by the Indian Rebellion of 1857, Indian books of that period are difficult to find. I also found *Majmū‘at al-Khuṭab*, *‘Abaqāt*, and other works by Ismā‘īl. Ismā‘īl’s grandfather, Shāh Walī Allāh, was himself one of the most influential Islamic thinkers, and I obtained letters and works by him. I also acquired the famous *Fatāwā-i Shāh ‘Abd al-Azīz* by Ismā‘īl’s uncle Shāh ‘Abd al-‘Azīz, *Hikāyāt-i auliya’* by his advocate Ashraf ‘Alī Thānwī, *Tahqīq al-fatwa fī Ibtāl al-ṭaghwā* by his opponent Fazl Haqq *Khairābādī*, and other materials that place the reform movement in its intellectual context.

In this fieldwork at the shrine of ‘Abd Allāh Shāh Ghāzī, this shrine was undergoing renovations. And many

people visited there in on the holiday of Eid al-Fitr.

- Implications and Impacts on Future Research

Through this research, I got Shāh Muḥammad Ismā‘īl’s works which I use in my thesis. In order to continue further study, I will collect Ashrāf ‘Alī Thānwī’s works which approve Ismā‘īl’s thought and Faḥr al-‘Alī Khairābādī’s works which go against Ismā‘īl’s thought. By analyzing these works, I can clarify aspects of his reform and features of criticize of Islamic saints cults in South Asia.



At a bookstore in Karachi



Entrance of the shrine of ‘Abd Allāh Shāh Ghāzī in Karachi.



Shrine of ‘Abd Allāh Shāh Ghāzī