

# Sarmad of Kashan: Jewish Saint, Persian Poet

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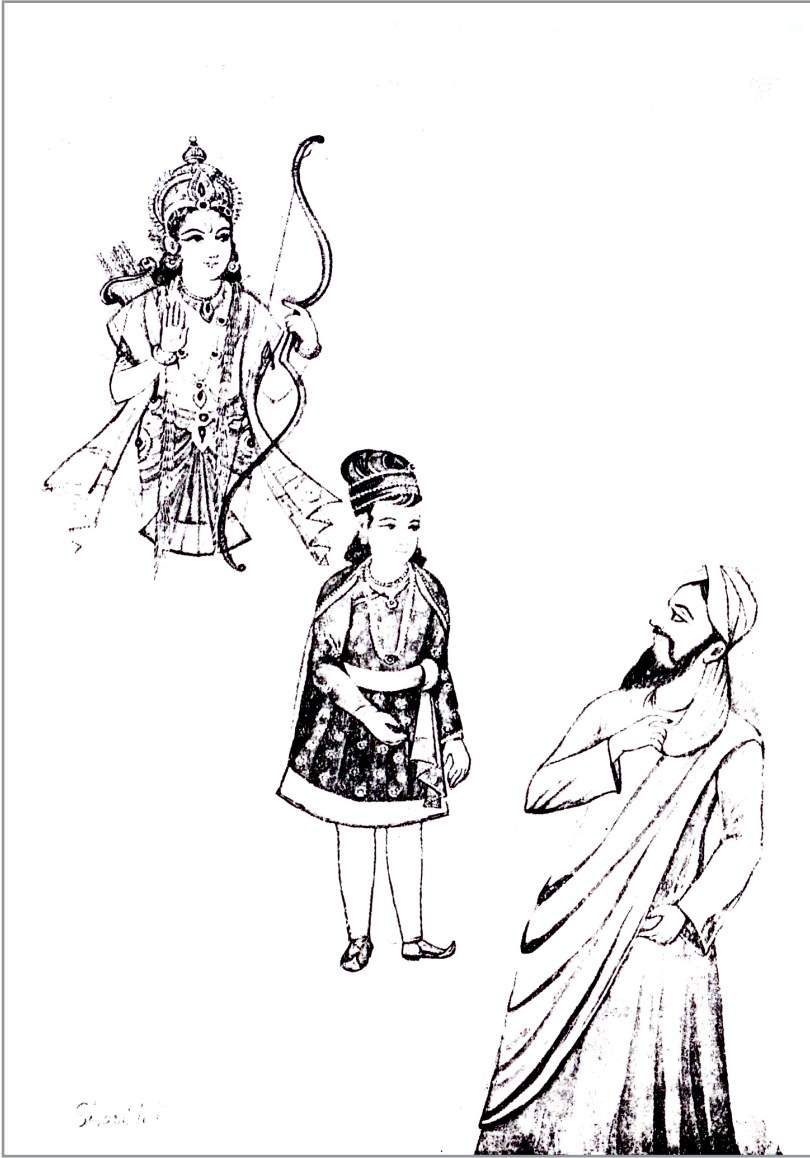
In the middle of the seventeenth century, during the reign of the Safavid dynasty in Iran, and the Moghul Empire in India, Muhammad Said Sarmad left Iran for India in his quest for the “Divine Truth”. As an Iranian Jew who had converted to Islam, he apparently had not found the answer to his inquiries in either his birth or adopted religions, nor in the philosophical training received in his homeland. Sarmad is an example of someone who went beyond all traditional barriers looking for self-realization through unity with God. Let us see *who* he was, *what* he had to say, and *why* he said it.

An evaluation by Walter Fischel of the social and historical background of Iran and India within the years of 1550-1700 suggests that three major historical events fundamentally transformed the political, cultural and religious order of Islamic and Asiatic world during the sixteenth century:

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Introduction "I know not if in this spherical old monastery (world) My  
God is ABhai Chand or some one else," *Sarmad His Life and Rubais*,  
Courtesy of Lakhpat Rai.

the rise of the Safavid dynasty, which introduced Shi'a Islam as the state religion in Iran in 1502; the appearance of the Portuguese in Asia and their colonization on the coast of India in 1510; and finally, the establishment of the Moghul dynasty in India in 1526.<sup>1</sup> Two of the above elements, the rise of the Safavids, and the Moghul Empire, had a direct impact on Sarmad's life as he lived through the reign of two crucial historical periods of Shah Abbas I in Iran and Shah Jahan in India.<sup>2</sup>

### Sarmad's life in Iran

Sarmad's life started as a Jew in Kashan. He was born into a "family of learned Yahuds, of a class whom they call Rabbanim."<sup>3</sup> However, his destiny was to end dramatically being executed as a "dangerous heretic" in Delhi, far from his native land Iran. If we count back from the time he was executed in 1661 at the age of 70, he would have been born around 1590. Sarmad's tomb still stands in front of the Great Mosque of Delhi. His *nom de plume* "Sarmad" means everlasting, perennial or eternal. His Jewish name, however, is not known and the name Muhammad was probably adopted at the time of his conversion to Islam before his arrival in India.<sup>4</sup> While still in Iran, Sarmad was fortunate to find two renowned scholars as his teachers, Mulla Sadra and Abul Qasem Mir Fenderski.<sup>5</sup>

Nevertheless, in spite of Sarmad's conversion, except for one case where he is erroneously referred to as an Armenian, he is mostly known as a Jew.<sup>6</sup> Some of

<sup>1</sup>Walter J. Fischel, "Jews and Judaism at the Court of the Moghul Emperors in India" in *Proceedings of the American Academy for Jewish Research* (American Academy for Jewish Research, New York: 1948-49), 138.

<sup>2</sup>The Portuguese colonization, and contact with the western world, as motivation for Sarmad's migration to India is a remote element.

<sup>3</sup>M.G. Gupta, "The Yahuds", in *The Dabestan or School of Manners*, trans. David Shea and Anthony Troyer, intro. A.V. Williams Jackson (Washington and London: M. Walter Dunnell Publisher, 1901), 299. *Dabestan al-Madhaheb*, or *School of Religious Doctrines*, is one of the few original and the earlier sources which talks about Sarmad. Fischel refers to *Dabestan* as the third and most detailed treatise dealing with comparative religions written in the Persian language in India during the Moghul rule. See *Jews at the Court of Moghul Emperors*, "Ma'asir-ul Umara," in *Biblioteca Indica*, vol. 112 (Calcutta, 1888), 165. It represents one of the most interesting literary productions com-

posed in the Persian language in India, sixty years after Akbar, at about 1660. The identity of the author is not yet definitely established, although most of the scholars agree that his name was Mubad Shah, born in Patna at the beginning of the seventeenth century, and originally a Parsee. See also M.G. Gupta, *Sarmad, The Saint: Life and Works* (Agra: M.G. Publishers, 1991), 2. However, Gupta in his quotation from *Dabestan*, vol. II., implies on page 293 that Moshin Khan is the writer.

<sup>4</sup>Fazl Mahmud Asiri, "Rubaiyat-e Sarmad" in *Visva Baharati II* (Santiniketan: Visva-Baharati, 1950), iv. Asiri confirms the conversion before his departure from Iran, but does not mention a date. M.G. Gupta, in *Sarmad, The Saint*, gives the date of 1615 for his conversion: see M.G. Gupta, *Sarmad, the Saint: Life and Works* (Agra: MG. Publishers, 1991), 2.

<sup>5</sup>Asiri, "Rubaiyat-e Sarmad", iii.

<sup>6</sup>Fischel, *Jews of Moghul*, 160. See also "Ma'asir-ul Umara", *Biblioteca Indica*, 226-7, which refers to Sarmad as an Armenian.

his titles are “The Jewish Saint,” “Sarmad the Jew,” “The Jewish Mystic” or the “Hebrew atheist.”<sup>7</sup> However, no matter what religion he was affiliated with, it made no difference to him in the end.<sup>8</sup>

Intellectual freedom, economic conditions and Hindu spiritualism were among the attractions for the caravan of Iranian intellectuals traveling to India in the 17<sup>th</sup> century, some by the sea and some via the Silk Road in the North.<sup>9</sup> In spite of the massive forced conversion of Jews, as well as all non-Shi’ite Muslims during the Safavids, there is no evidence to suggest that Sarmad historically or intellectually could belong to any of such forced converted groups, since his conversion was voluntary and took place at least four years before the first round of Jewish conversions in 1619. However, having left Iran in 1632, he must have witnessed the forced conversions of Jews during the Shah Abbas I period.

Sarmad’s exposure and interest in spirituality and mysticism may have had different causes. It could have resulted from the hardship he experienced in his environment, his education, the nature of his character, or all of the above. Sarmad’s knowledge of the Jewish Kabbalah (Mysticism) is not clear either. Although he was a contemporary of Rabbi Moshe Levi, a Kabbalist at the time of Shah Abbas I (1581-1629), we have thus far no proof that Sarmad had exposure to Kabbalistic thoughts and if he had, what the consequences would have been.<sup>10</sup>

Based on all the above evidence, we tend to assume that Sarmad, after having studied Jewish theology and the Torah in order to widen his views, took up the study of the New

<sup>7</sup>Fischel, *Jews of Moghul*, 160.

<sup>8</sup>Gupta, *Sarmad the Saint*, 2. While Moshin Khan, in *Dabestan*, and Waleh Daghestani, in *Riaz-ul Shu'ara*, report him to be a Jew, Sher Khan Lodi in *Merat-ul Khayal*, Thomas William Beal and Mirza Mohammed Abdul Qadir Khan state that by birth he was Christian. MJ Seth, however insists that Sarmad never changed his faith and that he was a foreign Jew and continued to be such until the end. Sarmad’s religious affiliation is best expressed in his own quatrain (Asiri, “Rubaiyat-e Sarmad”, 57; 48):

O Sarmad, thou hast won a great name in the world,  
Since thou hast turned away from infidelity to Islam,  
What wrong was there in God and His prophet,

That thou hast become a disciple of Lachhman and Rama

سرمد به جهان بسی نکو نام شدی  
از مذهب کفر سوی اسلام شدی  
پس چه خطا دیدی ز الله و رسول  
برگشتی مرید لچمان و رام شدی

To argue that Sarmad was a follower of the concepts of Rama and Lachhman is far-fetched. However, what he probably means is that he turned himself to conquer the forces of mind and attention (Rama and Lachhman) in order to merge into the “truth.” For further detail refer to Gupta, *Sarmad the Saint*, 195-96.

<sup>9</sup>Asiri, “Rubaiyat-e Sarmad”, iv.

<sup>10</sup>Habib Levy, *History of the Jews of Iran*, vol. III, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Beverly Hills, Iranian Jewish Cultural Organization of California, 1984), 261-266.



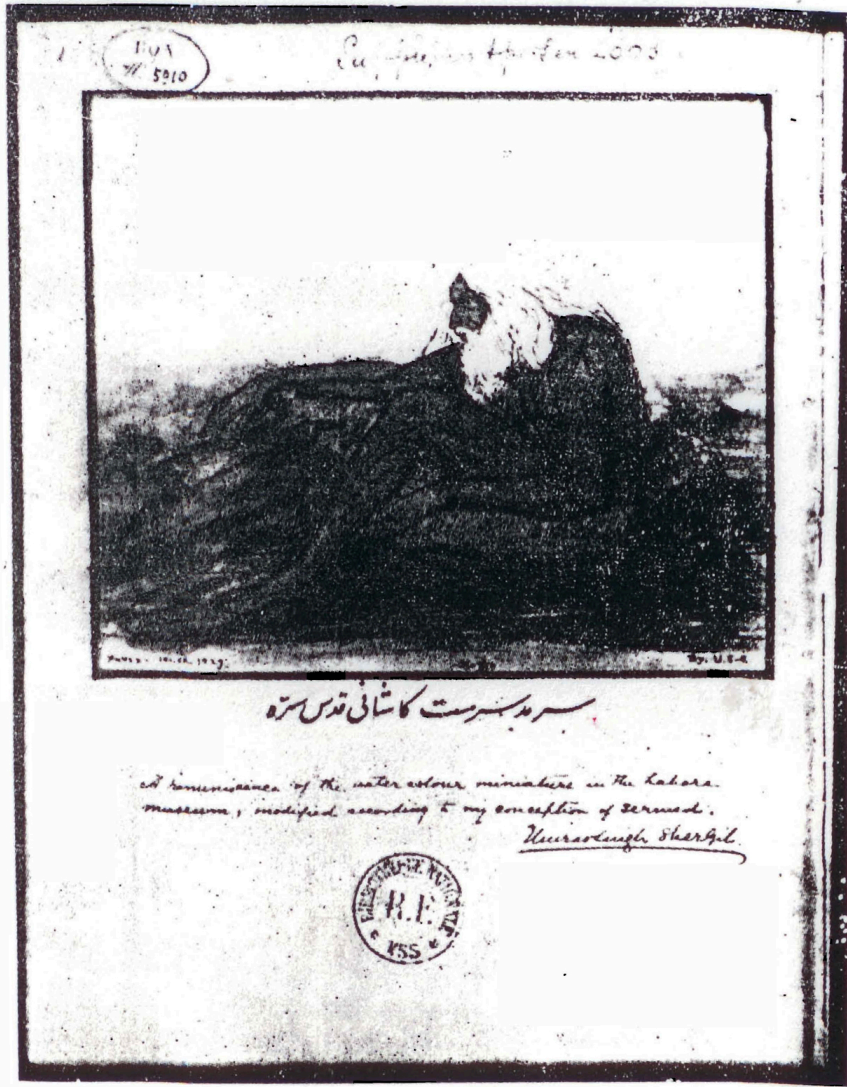
Became a Devotee of Lachhman and Rama, *Sarmad His Life and Rubais*, 236, Courtesy of Lakhpat Rai.

Testament and other books of Christianity, yet “still felt that his present attainments were not sufficient to satisfy his innate urge for wider knowledge.”<sup>11</sup> His next step was to turn to Islam, the religion to which he eventually converted and about which he acquired sufficient knowledge. Also, in Arabic and Persian language, he attained a level of perfection equaled by very few of his contemporaries. He was fortunate enough to have two renowned scholars as his teachers, Mulla Sadra (d. A.H. 1050/1640) and Abul Qasim Mir Findereski (d. A.H. 1050/1640).<sup>12</sup> Both scholars were amongst the foremost thinkers of the School of Isfahan.<sup>13</sup> An examination of the two

<sup>11</sup>Asiri, “Rubaiyat-e Sarmad”, iii.

<sup>12</sup>Asiri, “Rubaiyat-e Sarmad”, iii. Mulla Sadr al-Din of Shiraz, commonly known as Mulla Sadra, was a great philosopher and free thinker of the early seventeenth century. After his father’s death, he migrated to Isfahan and studied with Mir Damad and Sheikh Baha’i. He subsequently retired to a secluded village engaged in meditation. For further details refer to Prof. Edward G. Browne, *A Literary History of*

*Persian* (London: T.F. Unwin, 1902), iv. Abul Qasim Mir Findereski (d. 1050/1640) was noted for his poetry and philosophy. He was very careless about appearance, dressing like a “darvish”, avoiding the society of the rich and the noble. He journeyed to India and there imbibed Zoroastrian and Buddhistic ideas which led him to declare against pilgrimage to Mecca. For further details, see Browne, chap. iv.



Painting by Umrao Singh Shergill, *Sarmad His Life and Rubais*, 9,  
Courtesy of Lakhpat Rai.



Painting Lahore Museum, *Sarmad His Life and Rubais*,  
Courtesy of Lakhpat Rai.

scholars clarifies some of the steps Sarmad took in his life. Sarmad was impressed by the philosophical rationalist background from Mir Fendereski, but it was the illumination philosophy of Mulla Sadra which directed him towards the mystic path of seeking the “divine truth”. Sarmad was no different from his mentor, Mulla Sadra, in being accused of infidelity for his mystic beliefs. However, Mir Fendereski’s general careless appearance, attitude towards breaking religious rituals, as well as his trip to India could have affected Sarmad’s style of living.

<sup>13</sup>Ted Honderich, ed., *Oxford Companion to Philosophy* (London: Oxford University Press, 2005), 421. As Hossein Ziai describes this period, both scholars belong to “the *period of revival*, with the Safavid rule in Iran: “He further adds that the ‘foremost thinkers of this period included Mir Damad; his acclaimed pupil Mul-

la Sadra, and other members of school of Isfahan; and Mir Fendereski and Shaykh Baha’i, who excelled in scientific and mathematical discoveries. All contributed to what became a systematic reconstruction defined by Mulla Sadra as “metaphysical philosophy.”



نسی دانم درین چرخ کهن دیر  
خدائی من ابھی چند است یافیدر

*Sarmad His Life and Rubais*, 8, Courtesy of Lakhpat Rai.

Sarmad's study with the two renowned Muslim scholars was his first step towards breaking traditions. It shows that he was not a person to bend to rituals if he could not find them helpful in his eternal search. On his path to find an answer to his perplexing questions, he would be willing to break from any tradition and institution. Indeed he was someone who "rejected the archaic and the obsolescent, obscurantism and fanaticism, sectarianism and cant."<sup>14</sup>

## Sarmad's Life in India

There is nothing to suggest that Sarmad had married or maintained a family in Kashan. Waleh Daghistani, a contemporary of Sarmad, refers to him as a trader with a great reputation in his profession of trading textiles, ceramic wares, carpets and richly decorated pottery. Trading instinct and his longing for oriental scholarship and mysteries must have attracted him towards India. Thus in 1632, he went by sea, and landed in Thatta تته (in Sind) which was then a flourishing trade center.<sup>15</sup> Soon after his arrival in India (Thatta), he became besotted with a Hindu boy named Abhay Chand, who at first, did not respond in kind<sup>16</sup>. His platonic love for the young boy resulted in his renunciation of the world and a madness which overtook Sarmad, causing him to throw away his clothes and walk naked.<sup>17</sup> In view of the massive evidence in hand, it can be interpreted that it was Abhay Chand who caused the sudden spiritual change in Sarmad.<sup>18</sup>

However, this intellectual relation in time was soon reciprocated. While Abhay Chand became a medium of communicating Hindu cultural concepts and religious ideas to Sarmad, the latter introduced him to the principles of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, as well as Hebrew, Arabic and Persian language. Abhay Chand, out of love for his mentor, accepted Islam but the conversion was only formal for neither Sarmad nor Abhay Chand had any religion in a technical sense.<sup>19</sup> Whether this relationship was that of a *Morshid* to a *Morid*, a mentor to a disciple or of a father to a son, the two never left one another's sides until Sarmad's execution.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>13</sup>Ted Honderich, ed., *Oxford Companion to Philosophy* (London: Oxford University Press, 2005), 421. As Hossein Ziai describes this period, both scholars belong to "the *period of revival*, with the Safavid rule in Iran: "He further adds that the 'foremost thinkers of this period included Mir Damad; his acclaimed pupil Mulla Sadra, and other members of school of Isfahan; and Mir Fendereski and Shaykh Baha'i, who excelled in scientific and mathematical

discoveries. All contributed to what became a systematic reconstruction defined by Mulla Sadra as "metaphysical philosophy."

<sup>14</sup>Gupta, *Sarmad the Saint*, 3; 32.

<sup>15</sup>Gupta, *Sarmad the Saint*, 3.

<sup>16</sup>Gupta, *Sarmad the Saint*, 3

<sup>17</sup>Gupta, *Sarmad the Saint*, v.

<sup>18</sup>Gupta, *Sarmad the Saint*, 2.

<sup>19</sup>Gupta, *Sarmad the Saint*, 8.

<sup>20</sup>Gupta, *Sarmad the Saint*, 10.



“Now do tell me, Whether I should cover up your sins or my own body?,”  
*Sarmad His Life and Rubais*, 47, Courtesy of Lakhpat Rai.

The other relationship Sarmad developed in India was with Dara Shikuh, the Crown Prince of the Moghul court and the son of Shah Jahan.<sup>21</sup> Sarmad left for Lahore in 1634 and from there to Hyderabad (1647).<sup>22</sup> There is no trace of Sarmad in Heydarabad 1649-1657, but his reputation had reached Delhi before his arrival. Dara soon established contact with Sarmad and was impressed by his spiritual attainments.<sup>23</sup> However, Sarmad’s nudity and beliefs led Dara’s brother, Aurangzeb, to regard him as an atheist and an infidel (*kafar*).<sup>24</sup> It appears that Dara Shikuh must have revealed to Shah Jehan something about the spiritual grandeur and perfection of Sarmad which persuaded the emperor to summon him and question him about his nudity and his ability to divine future events, as confirmed by historians including Sher Khan Lodan and Wale Daghistani.<sup>25</sup>

Sarmad’s response to these concerns about these reputed miracles was that the only misdemeanor that he could be accused of was his nudity, a lifestyle which he refused

<sup>21</sup>Asiri, “Rubaiyat-e Sarmad”, x.

<sup>22</sup>Gupta, *Sarmad the Saint*, 11.

<sup>23</sup>Gupta, *Sarmad the Saint*, 12.

<sup>24</sup>Gupta, *Sarmad the Saint*, 12.

<sup>25</sup>Gupta, *Sarmad the Saint*, 12.

to relinquish.<sup>26</sup> Here Sarmad tries to say that “ Saints do not believe in showing miracles. It is the followers of a faith or a saint or guru who begin to attribute all sorts of miracles to it or him, presumably to impress the common people who may be drawn by them.”<sup>27</sup>

Dara Shikuh had a great regard for Sarmad and always regarded him as his *pir* or mentor. This friendship between Dara and Sarmad was based in their mutual liberal religious outlook and mystic views which ultimately led to the tragic end of both of their lives. Dara worked with Sarmad studying Vedanta,<sup>28</sup> Hindu religion and philosophy, and Sanskrit literature. Both men valued toleration and had intense feeling of hostility towards bigotry and fanaticism.<sup>29</sup> Both held the individual soul as a drop from the divine ocean to which they were destined to return. Both believed in the doctrine of annihilation (*Fana*) which led to eternal existence (*Baqa*), the mystic belief that one must pass away from self (*fana*) in order to live essential unity with God (*Baqa*).<sup>30</sup> Sarmad preached that the relationship between the lover and He, the my beloved, is like that between “word” and its “meaning”, between shell and pearl, husk and grain and subject and object. If I am the word, He the meaning; if I am the shell, He the pearl and if I am the husk, He the grain, and If I am the eye, He is the sight.<sup>31</sup>

## Sarmad’s Death

Although Sarmad was charged mainly for apostasy, his death had political motives because of his close relation with Dara Shikuh who was executed by his brother Urang the year before and did not want Sarmad to be a center of opposition to him. Out of the nine charges against Sarmad, three were related to faith: nudity, apostasy and refutation of the ascent (*me’rage*) of Mohammad.

As for nudity, Islam does not hold it to be sin. In his own defense, Sarmad argued that that he had nothing to hide, besides, “that mode of life was not totally forbidden, for the prophet Isaiah . . . used to go about naked in his old age”:

<sup>26</sup>Gupta, *Sarmad the Saint*, 13.

<sup>27</sup>Gupta, *Sarmad the Saint*, 32.

<sup>28</sup>Vedanta represents the philosophical portion of the ancient scriptures of India, the Vedas. Specifically, it refers to the final portion of the Vedic literature, the Upanishads, but it also includes the Bhagavad Gita, the great epics of India, as well as the Puranas, as well as many other texts, hymns, and writings. The basic teaching concerns the ultimate identity of the individual soul with the Supreme Soul. The goal of Vedanta is

for the seeker to have the direct experience of his or her true nature, and it is held that each and every one of us is qualified to have that highest illumination, if we are willing to put forth sincere and intense effort. Vedanta is one of the six orthodox systems of Indian philosophy the one which forms modern school of Hinduisim. See [vedantadc.org/what-es-vedanta](http://vedantadc.org/what-es-vedanta).

<sup>29</sup>Gupta, *Sarmad Tthe Saint*, 14.

<sup>30</sup>Gupta, *Sarmad the Saint*, 10.

<sup>31</sup>Gupta, *Sarmad the Saint*, 125; quatrain no. 145.

He who gave thee the kingly crown,  
 Provided me with all sorts of vexations;  
 He grants dress to sinners to hide their sins,  
 To the immaculate, He only gives the garment of nudity.<sup>32</sup>

As for apostasy, he did not recite the whole “Kalima”, regarding the Unity of God, he replied that he was “just in the dark about the existence of God. He would recite the whole of it after he had seen Him with his own eyes.”<sup>33</sup> Sarmad firmly believed that what one utters must be only that which one has realized.<sup>34</sup>

As for the third charge, lack of recognition of the physical ascension of the prophet Muhammad (me’rage), as speculated, “Sarmad might have explained his position about the concept of unity (*wahdat -ol wujud*), i.e. the existence of *hag* [divine truth] everywhere and everything.”<sup>35</sup>

In his argument with the clergy in this respect Sarmad says;

“He who understood the secrets of the Truth,  
 Became vaster than the vast Heaven,  
 Mulla says ‘Ahamad went to Heaven’,  
 Sarmad says ‘Nay, Heaven came down to Ahmad.’”<sup>36</sup>

The concept of unity which is repeated by Dara Shikoh also depicts man’s relation with God as that between the sun and its rays or drops of water and the ocean. That is, the soul of a true believer is in perpetual communion with his beloved Lord who abides in his heart alone.<sup>37</sup>

In spite of his defense, Sarmad was found guilty of apostasy, sentenced to death and beheaded in front of Jami‘ Mosque in 1661.<sup>38</sup> He was buried near the spot he was executed, where his tomb is still today a center of attraction and pilgrimage.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>32</sup>Asiri, “Rubaiyat-e Sarmad”, xv; ‘Emran Salahi, *Royay-e Mard-e Nilufari* (Tehran: Nahid Pub., 1370 S.H), 57.

آن کس که تو را تاج جهان بانی داد  
 ما را همه اسباب پریشانی داد  
 پوشاند لباس هر که را عیبی دید  
 بی‌عیبان را لباس عریانی داد.

<sup>33</sup>Asiri, “Rubaiyat-e Sarmad”, xv: The Arabic word “Kalima” refers to Ala- Elaha, ella- Al-lah” meaning there is no God except Allah.”

<sup>34</sup>Gupta, *Semrad the Saint*, 46.

<sup>35</sup>Asiri, “Rubaiyat-e Sarmad”, xv.

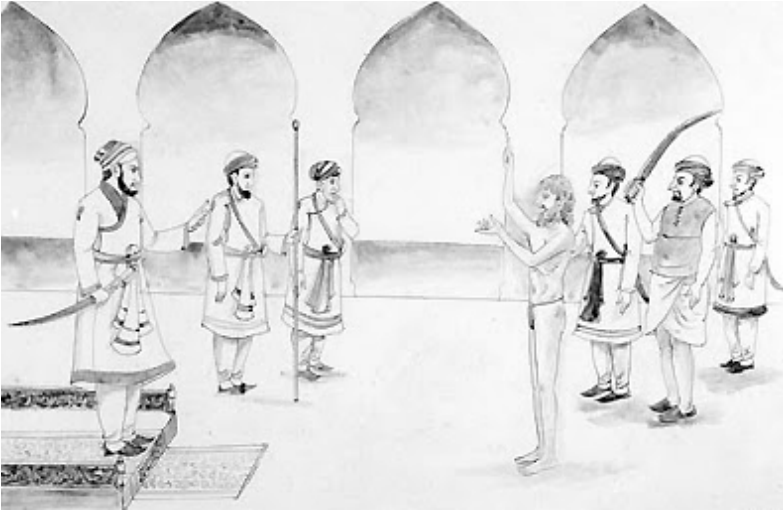
<sup>36</sup>Asiri, “Rubaiyat-e Sarmad”, 22; Salahi, *Royay-e Mard-e Nilufari*, 59.

هر کس که سر حقیقتش باور شد  
 خود پهن تر از سپهر پهناور شد  
 ملاً گوید که بر شد احمد به فلک  
 سرمد گوید فلک به احمد در شد

<sup>37</sup>Gupta, *Sarmrad the Saint*, 14.

<sup>38</sup>Fischel, “Jews of Moghul”, 173.

<sup>39</sup>Fischel, “Jews of Moghul”, xv.



“It is long since the name of Mansur passed into oblivion, I wish to exhibit the gibbet and the rope again,” *Sarmad His Life and Rubais*, Courtesy of Lakhpat Rai,



“My Friend the naked sword has come, I know Thee, in whatever guise Thou comest,” *Sarmad His Life and Rubais*, 57, Courtesy of Lakhpat Rai.

## Sarmad's viewpoints and contributions

As a humanist, a Sufi and a poet, Sarmad started his literary work in India in the Persian language. Thus, in India, he is mainly regarded as a Sufi or a saint who used Persian poetry as a means of communication. However, Walter Fischel perceives Sarmad, although living in the Moghul India, as someone who “entered the annals of Persian literature as a composer of Persian Sufic poetry.”<sup>40</sup> In the meantime, Fazl Mahmud Asiri, professor of Urdu and Islamic studies, values Sarmad as someone who contributed to the Indian intellectual life. He believes that Sarmad's quatrains “were preserved and treated as the sacred relics of a great martyr in India.”<sup>41</sup>

In general, Sarmad's life style, philosophy and works have had influences upon Judaism, Indian culture and Iranian literature, all in varied and different ways:

### Judaism

Sarmad contributed to Persian Judaic and Jewish literary areas simultaneously. The Judaic aspect was his participation in the preparation of the Jewish section of *Dabestan al-Madhaheb*, (School of Manners), a book which was an attempt to study the beliefs of the five great religions of Judaism, Hinduism, Zoroastrianism, Christianity and Islam as well as other sects of Asia.<sup>42</sup> Based on the repeated acknowledgments of the author, the chapter about Judaism is the result of the intellectual co-operation of Sarmad with the author of *Dabestan al-Madhaheb* (Mohssen Fani).<sup>43</sup> Sarmad's literary contribution to Judaism was to integrate Jewish subjects into Persian literary works through his teaching of Hebrew and Persian to Abhay Chand. The result was the translation of the first six chapters of the book of Genesis entitled “*The Book of Adam*” into classical Persian by Abhay Chand. The book is assumed to be the oldest known translation of the Pentateuch into Persian language and script and was undoubtedly corrected and edited by Sarmad as well as the author of *Dabestan*.<sup>44</sup> As Walter Fischel states about Sarmad's contribution to Judaism: “In spite of the ancient history of the Jews in Iran, [before Sarmad] the

<sup>40</sup>Fischel, “Jews of Moghul”, 161.

<sup>41</sup>Asiri, “Rubaiyat-e Sarmad”, ii.

<sup>42</sup>Asiri, “Rubaiyat-e Sarmad”, 165. *Dabestan al-Madhaheb* was composed sixty years after the death of Akbar, the great liberal Moghul emperor, in 1660 at the time of his grandson Aurang Zeib. This book is one of the most significant Persian literary works composed in di-

aspora. Due to the religious oppression at the time of Aurang, the author was too afraid to put his name on the book. However, according to Walter Fischel, most scholars agree that the editor was Mubad Shah, an original Parsee, born in Patna at the beginning of the 17<sup>th</sup> century.

<sup>43</sup>Gupta, “The Yahuds”, 299.

<sup>44</sup>Fischel, “Jews of Moghul”, 160.

subject of Judaism had never penetrated into the fabric of Persian thinking.<sup>45</sup> The majority of Jewish subjects used before, except a few written in Mediaeval times, were mostly written in Arabic language or in Judeo-Persian script.

### Indian culture

The appearance of Sa'id Sarmad, with his mystic views, "on the scene of the Indian court, had an effective influence on the intellectual and religious life of India."<sup>46</sup> In his extensive work on Sarmad, M.G. Gupta of Allahabad University, India, refers to him as the "Saint." As a saint, Gupta believes that Sarmad's "faith was the faith of love - that is eternal, infinite and pure without violent demonstration." Time and time again he told the mullas and qazis that love is the purification of the heart from self. He believed that love strengthens and elevates character, gives higher motive and nobler aim to every action of life and makes man strong, noble and courageous.<sup>47</sup> Gupta further adds that:

"The true measure of loving God is to love Him without measure, Divine love is a sacred flower, which its early bud is happiness, and in its full bloom is heaven; it is the crowning grace of humanity and the holiest right of the soul  
Sarmad held that love flows downward. The love of parents for their children

has always been far more powerful than that of children for their parents. And who amongst sons of Adam can ever love God even with a millionth part of the love which He manifests to us His creation?"<sup>48</sup>

### His impact on Iranian literature

Although Sarmad lived most of his literary life in India, he is still considered to be a composer of Persian mystic poetry. Following the example of Omar Khayyam, he chose *rubai's* or quatrains to express his sufic philosophy and religious beliefs.<sup>49</sup>

With the Thoughts and ideas of others I have no concern:  
Though in style of Ghazals I am a follower of Hafez,

<sup>45</sup>Fischel, "Jews of Moghul", 162.

<sup>46</sup>Fischel, "Jews of Moghul", 137-177.

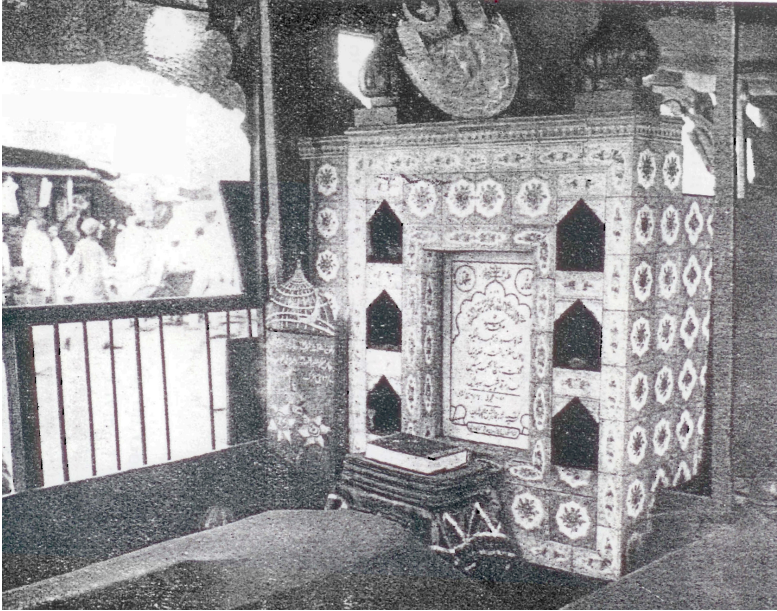
<sup>47</sup>Gupta, *Sarmrad The Saint*, 7.

<sup>48</sup>Gupta, *Sarmad the Saint*, 8.

<sup>49</sup>Fischel, "Jews of Moghul", 161-2; Asiri, "Rubaiyat-e Sarmad", 39; Salahi, *Royay-e*

*Mard-e Nilufari*, 98.

با فکر و خیال کس نباشد کارم  
در طور غزل طریق حافظ دارم  
اما به رباعی ام مرید خیام  
نه جرعه کش باده او بسیارم



*Sarmad His Life and Rubais*, p. 68, Tomb of Sarmad in front of Delhi Jame' Mosque,  
Courtesy of Lakhpat Rai.

As for quatrains, I am a disciple of Khayyam.  
But I have tasted little the wine he offered.

His over three hundred Ruba'is, are listed in the European and Indian libraries and museums. Except for one short sonnet, we have no record of Sarmad writing in this form. Nevertheless, the quality of his quatrains are sufficient to give us knowledge about his work with regard to form, diction and theme. Sarmad's rhetorical figures such as metaphors, imageries, allegories, puns, as well as his mystic meta-language are shared by other great Iranian mystic poets. However, the few biblical references and allegories that are used only have classical rather than any religious significance.

### **Sarmad's spiritual views expressed in poetry**

Like other mystic poets, Sarmad builds a bridge between mysticism and poetic language to express his mystic thoughts and world views. As an illuminationist in speculative mysticism, he believes in the unity between the Creator and the creation and that there is no difference between them except for the level of purity and love. The higher the love and purity, the more chance of awareness of the relationship. Sarmad expresses such unity based on the levels of awareness.

O! One heedless of self like a book, should know  
 There are signs of God concealed in thee!  
 That is, the Truth is manifest in thee!  
 And thou careless of it – as a flask unaware of the wine it contains.<sup>50</sup>

The unity between the creator and the creation confuses Sarmad to the extent that he cannot differentiate between God and his beloved Abhay Chand. In a painting preserved in the Red Fort, Archaeological Museum in Delhi showing Sarmad and Abhay Chand are drawn with the following lines written in Persian language which translate as:

I know not if in this spherical old monastery (world)  
 My God is Abhay Chand or someone else.<sup>51</sup>

Sarmad believed that the gift of the passion of unification with the Beloved is not given to just any one. One requires a life time of commitment and the renunciation of the world and human bondages.

Sarmad, the pang of love is not granted to avaricious ones,  
 The passion of the moth's heart is not given to a gadfly.  
 To attain union with the Beloved needs a long time;  
 But this imperishable wealth is not given to everyone.<sup>52</sup>

The concepts of determination and pre-destination are a conflicting issue in mysticism. However, in Sarmad's case, we find him more submissive to God's will. The love that Sarmad preaches is absolute and consists of total giving, with his own life-style providing proof of such love.

By bestowing love upon me, He made my position high;  
 And relieved me of the obligations of the people'

<sup>50</sup>Asiri, "Rubaiyat-e Sarmad", 5; Salahi, *Royay-e Mard-e Nilufari*, 42.

ای بی‌خبر از هستی خود همچو کتاب  
 در جلد تو آیات الهی به حجاب  
 یعنی ز تو حق پدید و تو از اثرش  
 آگاه نه‌ای چو شیشه از بوی گلاب

<sup>51</sup>Asiri, "Rubaiyat-e Sarmad", vi; Lakhpat Rai, *Sarmad His Life and Rubain* (Gorakhpur : Hanumanprasad Poddar Smarak Samiti, 1978), 8;

Plate V, Abhay Chand and Sarmad.

نمی‌دانم در این چرخ کهن دیر  
 خدای من ابهی چند است یا غیر

<sup>52</sup>Asiri, "Rubaiyat-e Sarmad", 17; Salahi, *Royay-e Mard-e Nilufari*, 65.

سرمد غم عشق بوالهوس را ندهند  
 سوز دل پروانه مگس را ندهند  
 عمری باید که یار آید به کنار  
 این دولت سرمد، همه کس را ندهند

He made me burn as a candle in the house,  
And such burning revealed secrets to me<sup>53</sup>

### **Mansur Hallaj**

Sa'ad Sarmad shared the fate of other mystic, thinkers and poets in the Iranian literary tradition was executed for sharing the same mystical view. Mansur's execution in A.D. 922/1516 set the precedent for a holistic intellectual system which is more developed in the meta-language of the later mystics such as Rumi, Hafez and others. The comparison of Mansur with Sarmad reveals some similarities as well as differences. As illuminationists, they both ridiculed the clergy and the mullas. Neither of them submitted themselves to the power of the worldly authority. In the hand of clergy, they both welcomed death willingly. Mansur expressed the desire to go back to the eternal world by saying "I am returning home!", Sarmad thought of "life" as waking up from the "eternal sleep" for a second.<sup>54</sup>

There was an uproar and we opened our eyes from the eternal sleep,  
It was night of evil yet, we slept again.

However, their differences lie on their perception of their position in the path of love, Hallaj by proclaiming: I am the Truth, "*ana-l-Hagh*", actually believing that he had united with God. Whereas Sarmad never claimed to have reached that stage of unity because his physical body was still an obstacle.

It is reported that just before Sarmad was executed, a friend by the name of Shah Assadollah, approached him in an effort to spare his life and recommend that he cover his nakedness and utter the entire "kalima". In response, Sarmad recited the the following verse:

It is long since the name of Mansur passed into oblivion,  
I wish to exhibit the gibbet and the rope again.

### **Sarmad and other Persian poets and intellectuals**

Sarmad's place in Persian poetry can be seen more clearly when he is compared with other Persian poets in format, language and thoughts.

<sup>53</sup>Asiri, "Rubaiyat-e Sarmad", 22, Salahi, *Royay-e Mard-e Nilufari*, 62.

از منصب عشق سرفرازم کردند  
وز منت خلق بی‌نیازم کردند  
چون شمع در این بزم گدازم کردند  
از سوختگی محرم رازم کردند.

## Hakim Sana'i

In presenting the existential dilemma of obedience and choice, Sarmad shares the same question and biblical allegories as those of Hakim Sana'i, one of the pioneers of Persian mystic poetry in the eleventh century. In one of his sonnets, Sana'i refers to the fall of Devil from Heaven when he refuses to Salute to Adam, presenting the dilemma of choice and obedience. In this sonnet, Sana'i praises the Devil for not following the order of even God to salute to anyone else but Him.<sup>55</sup>

Both Sana'i and Sarmad praise Satan's loyalty and his extreme love for God as exemplified by Satan's refusal to bow to Adam despite God's order.

Talk not about Ka'aba and the temple with every one,

And in the valley of doubt, not kike deviated ones.

Learn the form of worship from Satan himself,

Take only one as the object of worship; bend not before any other.<sup>56</sup>

## Omar Khayyam

The relation between Sarmad and Omar Khayyam is the relation between a disciple to a teacher. As mentioned above, Sarmad admits himself that even though their thoughts are not the same, yet in form of quatrain he follows Omar Khayyam.

With the thoughts and ideas of others I have no concern;

Though in style of ghazal I am a follower of Hafiz,

As for quatrains, I am a disciple of Khayyam,

But I have tasted of the wine he offered.<sup>57</sup>

As Assiri argues, Sarmad stated this statement just out of respect for Kahyyam and his style is not the true copy of Khayyam. Nevertheless, in the expression of unity,

<sup>54</sup>Asiri, "Rubaiyat-e Sarmad", xvii; Salahi, *Royay-e Mard-e Nilufari*, 29.

شوری شد و از خواب عدم چشم گشودیم

دیدیم که باقیست شب فتنه، غنودیم

<sup>55</sup>دیوان حکیم سنایی غزنوی، محمد تقی مدرس رضوی، چاپ پنجم، ۱۳۶۲، ۸۷۱، مطلع غزل:

با او دلم به مهر و مودت یگانه بود

سیمرغ عشق را دل من آشیانه بود

<sup>56</sup>Asiri, "Rubaiyat-e Sarmad", 48; Salahi, *Royay-e Mard-e Nilufari*, 33.

سرمد تو حدیث کعبه و دیر مکن  
در وادی شک چو گمراهان سیر مکن  
رو شیوه بندگی ز شیطان آموز  
یک قبله گزین و سجده بر غیر مکن

<sup>57</sup>Asiri, "Rubaiyat-e Sarmad", xxix; Salahi, *Royay-e Mard-e Nilufari*, 98.

با فکر و خیال کس نباشد کارم  
در طور غزل طریق حافظ دارم  
اما به رباعی ام مرید خیام  
نه جرعه کش باده او بسیارم

condemnation of worldly things and the shortness of life there are similarities. They both admit the transcendent nature of God and the incapability of man to grasp Him as He is. Both Khayyam and Sarmad believe in Gods Providence and his forgiveness and mercy towards human sins.<sup>58</sup>

However, their approach to this issue is different. Khayyam, as a philosopher, argues that the commitment of sin is necessary for the manifestation of the mercy of God. Khayyam sins, but is not sorry for his sins.

Khayyam believes that sins are made to be committed so they might move God to mercy.

Who is there on the earth who claims to be sinless;  
How can one live at all without sins?  
I do wrong and thou givest punishment for it;  
Then where lies the differences between thee and me?

By contrast, Sarmad is apologetic and shameful about the commitment of sin and thinks of its consequences.

Every hair of my body is drenched deep in sin,  
From me proceeds all evil and from Thee, O God all good!  
How long shall I sin and thou will be kind?  
So disturbed I am at my sins and at Thy kindness?<sup>59</sup>

Sarmad and Khayyam also share identical views about predestination, inutility of worldly pursuits, hatred for hypocrisy and orthodoxy. Yet, their approach, as to how a person should face such issues as well as how one should spend life, is different. Khayyam believes that life should not be wasted away worrying about the future, since those events are pre-determined:

One moment in Annihilation's Waste;

<sup>58</sup>Asiri, "Rubaiyat-e Sarmad", xxix:

خیام:  
ناکرده گناه در جهان کیست؟ بگو،  
آن کس که گنه نکرده چون زیست؟ بگو؛  
من بد کنم و تو بد مکافات دهی!  
پس فرق میان من و تو چیست؟ بگو.

<sup>59</sup>Asiri, "Rubaiyat-e Sarmad", 46; Salahi, *Royay-e Mard-e Nilufari*, 115.

سرمد:  
شد بر تن من غرق گنه، هر سر مو  
از من همه زشتی است و نیکی ست آزو  
تا چند کنم گناه و او فضل کند؟  
شرمندۀ جریم خودم و رحمت او

One Moment, of the Well of Life to Taste.  
The Stars are seeing and the Caravan  
Starts for the Dawn of Nothing- Oh, make haste.

Sarmad, on the other hand believes life should be spent in solitude preparing ourselves for unification with God. The higher our knowledge of the Truth, the higher the value of mankind.

Affected thus with the excess of love take to solitude;  
Come out of worries and walk in the path of comfort.  
Be not agitated like a whirlwind,  
But sit at one place with a contended heart!<sup>60</sup>

### Mawlana Jalal al-Din Rumi

Among other Persian Mystics, Sarmad can be compared with Jalal al-Din Rumi on various grounds. Both Sarmad and Rumi came from families of religious scholars and both were Persian poets who lived in the diaspora. However, in Rumi's case the migration was not voluntary, but was a family decision motivated by the Moghul invasion; however, as we have already learned, Sarmad's departure was voluntary and was a step taken on his quest for Truth.

Rumi and Sarmad both experienced sudden spiritual changes in their lives. In the case of Rumi, the change was inspired by Shams-e Tabrizi and in Sarmad's case by Abhay Chand. Rumi and Sarmad saw the "abstract unlimited light" of Divine Truth in the "accidental limited form" of their beloved. Thus, they both called their beloved "the sun." Rumi spoke of Shams-e Tabrizi as "that Supreme Sun, the Perfect Light," and Sarmad refers to Abhay Chand as "the sun" when he sends the following quatrain to Muhammad Beg the Bakhshi and chronicler of Tattha.<sup>61</sup>

<sup>60</sup>Asiri, "Rubaiyat-e Sarmad", xxxii; 40; Salahi, *Royay-e Mard-e Nilufari*, 110.

خیام:

این قافله عمر عجب می گذرد!  
دریاب دمی که با طرب می گذرد؛  
ساقی، غم فردای حریفان چه خوری  
پیش آر پیاله راه که شب می گذرد.  
سرمد:  
از کثرت شوق دوست عزلت بگزین  
از رنج برآ، طریق راحت بگزین

پیوسته چو گرد باد، سرگشته مشو  
یک جا به دل جمع، فراغت بگزین

<sup>61</sup>Asiri, "Rubaiyat-e Sarmad", v; 38.

ای پیام ببر! ای باد به میرزای بخشی  
کای کرده فلک به زیر رأیت رختی  
آنو که گوئی! کواکب چو درم می پاشم  
خورشید مرا نیز به من می بخشی

O breeze convey this message to mirza Akhshi  
Who wields his power over higher heavens;  
Since thou couldst grant stars in place of dirhams  
Be kind enough to grant me **my sun**.

However, the two “suns” had different functions for their lovers. Shams-e Tabrizi acted as the *morshid* and the mentor for Rumi, whereas Abhay Chand was a *morid* and disciple. In addition, in the case of Rumi, the spiritual change was one sided. *Shams* was that “supreme monarch”, with whom Rumi united to annihilate himself in order to reach the eternal light. Whereas, in the case of Sarmad, the spiritual change, although different, was mutual. While Abhay Chand served as a spiritual catalyst to set off new trains of thought in Sarmad, he himself went through a drastic spiritual change.<sup>62</sup>

Both Rumi and Sarmad expressed their desire to join their eternal source. Rumi expresses himself by the following lines:

Listen to the reed, how it tells its tales;  
Bemoaning its bitter exile, it wails;  
Ever since I was torn from the reed beds,  
My cries tear men’s and women’s hearts to shreds.<sup>63</sup>

Sarmad expresses the same desire in the following manner:

Everyone asks for “wealth and faith” from God  
And Prays for the gift of the silver-skinned Beloved,  
But my pour heart desires neither of the two,  
It Cherishes union with Him and wants only that.<sup>64</sup>

## Hafez

Based on the meta language, rhetorical metaphors and thematic images, as well as his own testimony, Sarmad was mostly influenced by Hafez. As for the differences

<sup>62</sup>Asiri, “Rubaiyat-e Sarmad”, vi; 23; Salahi, *Royay-e Mard-e Nilufari*, 57.

مولوی:  
بشنو از نی چون حکایت می کند  
وز جدایی‌ها شکایت می کند  
کز نیستان تا مرا بُبریده‌اند  
از نفیرم مرد و زن نالیده‌اند

سرمد:  
هر کس ز خدا دولت و دین می طلبد  
یا سیم‌پری ماه جبین می طلبد  
بیچاره دلم نه آن و این می طلبد  
خواهان وصال است و همین می طلبد  
<sup>63</sup>Ehasan Yarshater, *Persian Literature*, Bibliotica Persica, 203.  
<sup>64</sup>Asiri, “Rubaiyat-e Sarmad”, 23; Salahi, *Royay-e Mard-e Nilufari*, 57.

between the two, we see Sarmad took the renunciation of the worldly attributes more seriously than Hafez or for that matter than Rumi. Hafez and Rumi both had families and children, while Sarmad's spiritual relation to Abhay Chand was the closest to what he could have had as a family relation. Rumi and Hafez, although neither of them believed in the formal religion of their time, did not renounce the religion they were born in and were careful not to be accused of apostasy. In fact, the choice of "Hafez" as a *nom de plume*, may have indicated the poet's concern in this matter. The search for the Truth for Hafez never sent him beyond the Iranian borders. Whereas for Sarmad, the renouncement of the worldly attachments included at first his religion and then his homeland. Hafez and Sarmad both had relations with royalty and the ruling authorities. In the case of Hafez, this relationship sometimes included his praise of the rulers, whereas Sarmad's relation with Dara Shekukh was more intellectual, based on mutual respect, and grounded in philosophical and religious issues.

Submission to providence and predestination is a common theme among most mystics. However, they may vary in the degree and approach. On one hand, Hafez, in spite of his acceptance of God's will, saw some room for human's free will. On the other hand, Sarmad believed the power of free will could go only as far as the seeker's self-control over his worldly desires.

While Hafiz express obedience and predestination:

Be pleased with what the fate bestows us,  
Nor let thy brow be frowned thus,  
The gate to freedom here below,  
Stands not ajar to such as us.

Sarmad gives one some choice:

O Sarmad, be wise to cut short your complaints  
And do one thing out of these two:  
Either surrender your body to the will of God  
Or sacrifice your soul on the path of His.<sup>65</sup>

<sup>65</sup>Asiri, "Rubaiyat-e Sarmad", 23; Salahi, *Royay-e Mard-e Nilufari*, 57.

سرمد:

سرمد گله اختصار می‌باید کرد  
یک کار از این دو کار می‌باید کرد  
یا تن به رضای دوست می‌باید داد  
یا قطع نظر ز یار می‌باید کرد

حافظ:

رضا بداده بده وز جبین گره بگشای  
که بر من و تو در اختیار نگشاده‌ست

With regard to unity and the existence of God within oneself, Sarmad remind us of Hafiz who says:

My heart for years asked me Jam's cup to bring,  
A stranger was asked, though itself possessed the thing.<sup>66</sup>

Sarmad thinks of Abhay Chand as image of God by saying:

A sweet-statured one has reduced me to a very low position  
By the intoxicating cups of His eyes He has carried me away from myself.  
He is in my arms and I run about searching for Him.  
A strange thief has stripped me of my garments.<sup>67</sup>

Sarmad, like Hafiz, stresses on the existence of self between the lover and the beloved. In his own case he saw his corporal self that was standing between him and God not being able to recite the entire 'Kalima. In this respect Hafiz says:

There is no barrier between the lover and beloved  
Hafez you are your own barrier move to the side.

And Sarmad says:

It is impossible that you can embrace your Beloved;  
Take imperfect and immature idea out of your mind.  
The thing besides Him that you keep in heart,  
Is a veil between you and the Beloved.<sup>68</sup>

<sup>66</sup>Abbas Aryanur, *Poetical Horoscope or Odes of Hafiz* (Tehran, Elmi Publishers Institute, 1965), p.46.

<sup>67</sup>Asiri, "Rubaiyat-e Sarmad", 4; Salahi, *Royay-e Mard-e Nilufari*, 41.

حافظ:

سالها دل طلب جام جم از ما می کرد  
آنچه خود داشت ز بیگانه تمنا می کرد  
سرمد:  
خوش بالایی کرده چنین مست مرا  
چشمی به دو جام برده از دست مرا  
او در بغل من است و من در طلبش  
دزد عجبی برهنه کرده‌ست مرا

<sup>68</sup>Asiri, "Rubaiyat-e Sarmad", 26; Salahi, *Royay-e Mard-e Nilufari*, 73.

حافظ:

میان عاشق و معشوق هیچ حایل نیست  
تو خود حجاب خودی حافظ از میان برخیز  
سرمد:  
ممکن نبود که یار آید به کنار  
خود را ز خیال خام و اندیشه برآر  
هرچیز که غیر اوست در سینه نوست  
بسیار حجاب است، میان تو و یار

## Conclusion

Sarmad only faced one direction in life and that was to acquire knowledge about the existence of the “pure being” and unite with the “divine truth.” Some claim Sarmad to be a Jew, “Once a Jew, he remained ever a Jew,” reports Fischel from one of his biographers.<sup>69</sup> Some claim him to be Christian or Muslim. Sarmad’s religious affiliation is best expressed in his own quatrain:

Delighting in fondness, fervor and love,  
From confusions’ clamor I am free;  
I am an idol worshipper, an infidel and devoid of faith,  
I go towards the mosque, but as a Muslim do not treat me.<sup>70</sup>

As expressed in his poems, and displayed by the outcome of his life, Sarmad could bear no attachment to anything except the “Divine Truth”. His religious background, nationality, family attachments, physical appearance, and even his own life could not stand as obstacles for his thirst to realize and unite with what he was in search of. So the Sarmad who goes to India has no other motive than finding an answer to his unfulfilled inquiries.

Sarmad stood for tolerance, for understanding for realizing inner light, and he died defending these causes. He did not die for the sake of his ambition, but rather for the love of God. He was hailed as a great saint while he was alive and when he was being taken to the execution ground, thousands of people had assembled to witness the killing of a saint by the hypocrisy of a qazi and emperor; that perhaps best explains why Sarmad did not bother to defend himself. His response to Waleh Daghistani who advised him to disarm his enemies by putting on clothes and reading the Kalam shows that he was aware of the burden history had placed on his shoulders, the burden of renewing the legend of Mansur “reviving the tradition of the gallow and the cord.”<sup>71</sup>

Sarmad’s life and choices, in comparison to other Persian mystics, seem to suggest that he took his search for the Truth very literally. In the process of self-purification, he strove for the ideal absolute. He gave up everything including family, job, religion,

<sup>69</sup>Fischel, “Jews of Moghul”, 160.

<sup>70</sup>Gupta, *Sarmad the Saint*, 3. Salahi, *Royay-e Mard-e Nilufari*, 132. While Salahi has recorded this poem in plural form, Assiri’s translation is given in first person singular

شاه شاهانیم زاهد، چون تو نادان نیستیم  
ذوق و شوق و شورشیم، اما پریشان نیستیم  
بُت پرست و کافریم، از اهل ایمان نیستیم  
سوی مسجد می‌رویم، اما مسلمان نیستیم

<sup>71</sup>Gupta, *Sarmad the Saint*, 50.

country and even his life and remained most faithful and loyal to the mystical secrets of the Creator. Regarding his search for his Beloved, Sarmad looked beyond the limited standards of his time, into every place and school of thought available to him. His fulfillment was the attainment of selflessness through his renunciation of the world by choice. Sarmad never tried to make himself understood. A saint or martyr never asks for any concession. It is the cause, and not the death that makes someone a martyr. Sarmad died for Truth and Love, not for his faith or his country.<sup>72</sup>

*What* he lived for and *how* he lived, brings up the question of the degree of desire for purification in one's physical life towards a unification with the Divinity. Was his love for the "Divine Truth" any more profound than that of those who did not make ultimate sacrifices? His legacy also reveals the dilemma of the manner of existence, and level of renunciation of worldly attachments while one is imprisoned in the material world. How far can one go in his or her quest for unification with God? Who found a better solution: Sarmad, who did not put much value on the transitory life, or those like Khayyam, Rumi and Hafez who tried to compromise, and have both? As Gupta well describes it: After all love is giving totally, and taking totally; There are no half-way houses on the path of love. It is a river of fire which you have to cross by swimming every inch.<sup>73</sup>

<sup>72</sup>Gupta, *Sarmad the Saint*, 51.

<sup>73</sup>Gupta, *Sarmad the Saint*, 53.

