

## Khaneqah A Phenomenon in the Social History of Iran

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translated by Morteza and Omid Honari

Let me begin with a very beautiful Persian script that states: "At the head of the door of Sheikh Abol-Hasan Kharaqani's Khaneqah was written:

Whoever  
enters this house,  
give him<sup>1</sup> bread,  
ask not of his faith.  
For whoever is worthy of  
a Soul granted by the Almighty,  
is certainly worthy of Bol-Hasan's bread.<sup>2</sup>

I believe that no phrase as humanely charming has appeared in any culture. This is probably much more comprehensive than Saint Benedict's (480-543 AD) attributed phrase, that says in one of his decrees: "All guests who knock at the door should be welcomed as the Christ himself."<sup>3</sup>

My article is about *Khaneqah*. But specifically from the perspective of their social service. For you know, much has been written about Khaneqahs, and a few books too. Well, the Khaneqah is a great phenomenon that has hitherto existed in our country, Iran, for thousands of years; and even so before Islam. What is known as *Hekmat-e Khosrovani* (The Royal Philosophy) is a reminder that Persian mysticism existed long before Islam. After Islam, though, Khaneqahs flourished everywhere. And I have even heard that they are in operation here, in Sydney.

I have analysed this phenomenon from a very delicate point of view. For these khaneqahs, in contrast to our presumptions and that which we previously thought of them, are not places where some Sufis (Islamic mystics) gather and lay out their fur rugs and recite some poetry and dance with their heads and then get up and leave. This isn't so. Khaneqahs have fulfilled other obligations throughout history, as I shall point out.

A thousand years ago, when some weary, exhausted and thirsty traveller of miles reached one of the towns on the coasts of the Iranian Desert, which covers about a third of the country's area, they were assured of shelter and were given pleasant hospitality in a Khaneqah for three days. One of these Khaneqahs was in the village of Bastam, North of the Kavir, in which Sheikh Abol-Hasan Kharaqani lived; at the fore-gate of which was written the above golden phrase. This was done at a time when in some cities if a Bateni (or Isma'ili Shi'a) was found, they would be ripped to pieces with shoemaking tools.<sup>4</sup>

<sup>1</sup> In Persian, *he* and *she* are generally not differentiated, but instead are both referred to as *ou* or *vey*, and can also poetically refer to the Beloved and/or God. Here, for the sake of translation, 'he' has been used [Trans.].

<sup>2</sup> M.E. Bastani-Parizi, *Hamase-ye Kavir* (Epic of the Desert) (first edn.), pp 404.

<sup>3</sup> W. and A. Durant, *The Story of Civilization*, New York, 1942, vol. 4, p 669.

<sup>4</sup> There is a narrative of the famous Persian Sufi and traveller, Naser Khosrow, related to this topic, which can be found in the *Travel-Book of Naser Khosrow*. Naser Khosrow begun travelling in 437 H/1045 CE. It says: "Naser Khosrow stopped off in Neyshabur to have his shoes repaired. When in the shoemaker's shop, he heard much noise coming from outside. Then the shoemaker and his pupils rushed out of the shop, holding their tools in hand. When they returned, blood covering their tools, Naser Khosrow asked what had happened. The shoemaker told him that a follower of Naser Khosrow had been seen outside, and he was killed by the people. Naser Khosrow, demanded his shoes back immediately, and said that he would not, even for one second, remain in the city where Naser Khosrow's name is mentioned..." [Trans.].

**What is Khanqah?**

The Khaneqah is an ancient and deeply rooted phenomenon in the Persian culture. It is also called *zavyeh* (corner), *gusheh* (also corner), *langar* (anchor), *rabat* (guest-house), and *pir* (guide). It is a centre connected with special beliefs, but they are never outside religion and faith.

One may spend days and nights there, but the Khaneqah is not a caravanserai. Those who go to Khaneqahs combine a stop-over with participation in Sufi rituals and refreshing exercises of self-discipline and moral purification. There is praying in Khaneqahs, but the Khaneqah is not a Mosque. In fact, in cities, the keepers of Mosques are often quite hostile towards Khaneqahs. That is possibly why Khaneqahs flourish in towns and villages *around* rather than *in* cities, where Mosques are usually found. This is possibly why khaneqahs are sometimes called *zaviye* and *gusheh*, meaning ‘corner[s]’.

It is narrated that the cloak that Sheikh Ahmad Jaami wore when he guided people in such a context had a patch of the Prophet’s (S)<sup>5</sup> shirt stitched on to its collar, signalling marginality. Bayazid Bastami was exiled from his city seven times, with the accusation that: “you are wicked”; to which he responded:

Good on the city in which I am the wicked one  
(*Neika shahra ke badash man basham*).

**Where Does the Budget Come From?**

The budget for the Khaneqahs has been provided by the people, by Sufis and from the *vaqf*<sup>6</sup> devoted to the specific Khaneqahs. Most Sufis, of course, work and spend their income in their Khaneqah.

The Khaneqah of Sheikh Obeyd-Ollah Ahrar in Trans-Oxiana, Central Asia, has a 600 page book of documentations of its properties and lands. This was recently published by the Russians. Sheikh Ahmad Jaami, the ninth century (fifteenth century CE) Persian poet, says about the very same Khaneqah:

A thousand farms under cultivation it has;  
All provisions of the journey to Paradise.

In spite of all the wealth, the Sheikhs and Masters of Khaneqahs themselves lived on very little and in poverty. Sheikh Ahmad Jaami did not eat any meat for seven years after Mallek Arqun robbed Neyshabur and took herds of people.<sup>7</sup> An inventory of the *vaqf* properties of Sheikh Safi-Odin Ardabili is a small book on its own.

Almost all Sufi sects and Khaneqahs of contemporary Iran link themselves in one way or another to the Khaneqah of Shah Ne’mat-Ollah Vali.<sup>8</sup> He lived at the time of Tamburlaine (d. 1405 CE), whose golden saying is infamous:

Whoever is rejected by all Guides,  
is accepted by me.  
I will enhance them to their aptitude.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> (S) here stands for *Salavat-Ollah-e ‘Aleyh-e va Aleh*, meaning “Peace Be Upon Him and His Family”, in Arabic [Trans.].

<sup>6</sup> *Vaqf* is a property, house, farm, camel or any possession devoted by the owner to a specific purpose. The word “*vaqf*” literally means “stoppage” as the transfer of its ownership is stopped for eternity.

<sup>7</sup> This was a negative reaction against that cruel ruler.

<sup>8</sup> Shah Ne’mat-Ollah Vali died in 834 H/1431 CE in Mahan of Kerman, and was buried there.

<sup>9</sup> J. Aubin, *Resale-ye Manaqeb-e Shah Ne’mat-Ollah Vali*, p 112. .

This is a very important and valuable saying. He might not be able to achieve it, but even saying this needs very broad vision and a great perception of life.

Shah Ne'mat-Ollah's mausoleum in Mahan, Kerman, one of the most exquisite of its kind, was built 600 years ago. The courtyard of the mausoleum is surrounded by 44 rooms, all built to accommodate pilgrims. Whoever goes there can be hosted and fed for three days. The main buildings of the huge complex were built by Ahmad Shah of Dakan, the king of India; this indicates the great influence of Khaneqahs.

In Kerman, some hundred years ago, people went to consult the Late Zoriasatein Shirazi, who was a poet, went to the Khaneqah, accepted Sufism, and wore cloth. Those have their rituals. One night someone comes to Zoriasatein with the request that "I want to become a Darvish". The Late Zoriasatein accepted him immediately, and told him that, on the day after tomorrow, he was to make his ablation, get clean, bring some *nabat* (crystal sugar) and do the preparation for the initiation rituals.

These rituals sometimes take a while, as people have to participate in sessions and activities of the Khaneqah before getting accepted as a Sufi. But in this instance the man was accepted immediately. After he left, someone told Zoriasatein that this man was an ill-behaved butcher and had a bad reputation, creating thousands of problems for people. The man received the acceptance. Three-four days passed when and at a Friday night gathering, a follower spoke up saying: "Master, the Butcher who received acceptance a few days ago, drank alcohol, sanctioned the Bazaar, attacked and injured two people with knife. Zoriasatein rose immediately and gave two-*rakat* prayer in gratitude. He then said to his people that: "On his forehead, he have been destined to kill fifteen people, but as he had become a Darvish, he injured only two.

### Khaneqahs and Kings

Some Khaneqahs have received special prominence for the fame of the Masters or other reasons. From time to time kings and rulers paid homage to Khaneqahs. Sultan Mahmood Ghaznavi visited Khaneqah of Sheikh Abol-Hasan Kharraqani and had a pleasant discussion with the Sheikh<sup>10</sup>. Sultan Toqrol Saljuqi also went out of his way to see Baba Tahir *Oryan* (The Naked) in Hamadan.<sup>11</sup> Sultan Sanjar Saljuqi also visited the Khaneqah of Zahid Ahoon Push.

There were also a number of kings, princes, and politicians who, after becoming disillusioned with politics, sought refuge in Khaneqahs. Some examples are: Moeid-Odin Reyhan Saljuqi who "untied his hair<sup>12</sup> and took residency in a Khaneqah". Sultan Jalal-Odin Kharazm-Shah, after the victory of Moguls, was driven to take refuge in a Khaneqah, and repaired shoes for living. There are scores of examples of such cases in history.

One of the most important social services of Khaneqahs was in providing refuge for escapees and refugees of war, and caring for the injured. Consider a case. Sultan Masood Ghaznavi conquered the Castle of Mihanah after 40 days of fighting. Months before, a woman follower of Sheikh Abu-Sa'id Abol-Khayr (d. 1047 CE) had promised a jar of ghee to the Khaneqah. It is a tradition that people promise something for a wish. There was a woman in Kerman, whose hens stopped laying eggs. She made a promise that, if her hens laid any eggs, she would give the first batch to the Khaneqah. The point that I want to make here is people used to make this kind of vow which is called *nazr*. The woman, however, had taken the ghee to the Khaneqah, and Sheikh Abu-Sa'id had told her that the ghee was not needed. She was to take it back and wait to be told when it was needed. Sultan Masood conquered Mihanah, entered the town, and ordered his soldiers to chop one hand off 40 people of the town who had resisted his occupation. Sheikh Abu-Sa'id Abol-Khayr asked that the woman to

<sup>10</sup> Tarikh e Banakati, p 225.

<sup>11</sup> Bastani-Pariz, *Asia-ye Haft Sang*, p 151.

<sup>12</sup> A Persian expression, referring to one who became a Darvish: Darvishes commonly being characterised as having long hair [Trans.].

bring that jar of ghee. The Sheikh used the boiling ghee to treat the mutilated hands of the victims, and cared for these people.<sup>13</sup> Can we find any better treatment of stopping bleeding of hands mutilated by the ruler, who “does not bleed”?<sup>14</sup> This, anyhow was the best treatment of such injuries at that time. Khaneqahs played the role of hospitals for a thousand years before the time Florence Nightingale and the formation of the Red Cross.

There was a severe drought in Torbat Jaam. Sheikh Shahab-Odin, the grandson of the Sheikh Ahmad Jaami ordered all grains and other harvested products to be collected from all surrounding villages and towns, and redistributed among the people in return for receipts, which were to be repaid. When the drought was over the Sheikh ordered all the receipts to be washed away in water! When asked: “Why did you collect the receipts, only to wash them away?” He replied: “To make sure that people do not over-use, and do not selfishly store any of the equal distribution of the food”.<sup>15</sup>

This Khaneqah of Ahmadiyah still exists in Torbat Jaam, and a large proportion of its *Vaqf property* is in Herat, Afghanistan. When Homayoon Shah of India escaped a revolt, he sought refuge, with a large group of his faithful followers, in Iran; and he stayed for a period of time in this particular Ahmadiyah Khaneqah.<sup>16</sup> Homayoon wrote this poem on the wall,<sup>17</sup> a delicious poem:

O, Thou whose grace is forgiveness of everyone,  
To Thou is open the Hidden-Inners of everyone,  
Whose gate-way is the Mecca for everyone,  
Thou whose kindness is caring of everyone.

Mohamad Homayoon, *Wanderer of the Endless Wilderness*, 14 Shaval 951. (30 December 1544).<sup>18</sup>

### **The Khaneqah: a Stage for Art**

The Khaneqah is not an art gallery, a performing arts centre, or a dance and ballet theatre. But Khaneqah praying is accompanied with some aspects of the performing arts. Sufi poetry is sung with delightful music, and is escorted with the flute and *daff*.<sup>19</sup> In some Khaneqahs *somâ* or Sufi song and dance is performed with great skill and charm. Some elements of this is still performed in the Khaneqah Mowlana in Konya. One can also listen to the Sufi music in the Eastern Kaviri city of Torbat Jaam. This aspect of the Khaneqah has evidently been considered by some religious circles as the Khaneqah's point of weakness. It is known, however, that during the Iranian Constitutional Revolution (1906), after Tehran was conquered by the Constitutionalist Mojahedin, the first group who organized a charity concert, and collected money for the martyrs of this revolution, was the Sufi Order of Safi-Ali Shah, in Zahir-Odowlah's House. In this ceremony Darvish Khan played Taar and Aref Qazvini sung his poetry.

Give today the good news  
To the Sufis of Ruins,  
That the Sheikh of the city  
Fell from the grace.

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<sup>13</sup> Bastani-Parizi, *Nay-e Haft Ban*, p. 50, originally from Tarikh e Banakati.

<sup>14</sup> “A hand mutilated by the King, does have blood”, a saying implying cruelty of politicians and people in positions of power (Trans.).

<sup>15</sup> A. Fazel, *Sheikh Ahmad e Jaam*.

<sup>16</sup> The Mosque and praying chamber of this Khaneqah was built by an architect from Kerman, namely Ostad Masood Kermani. It is known as “the Kermani Mosque”. It has nine metres length and six metres width. It was built in 712 H/1312 CE. I am saying this, as I have sworn not to participate in any seminar, or to write anything unless I make it relevant to Kerman.

<sup>17</sup> Writing names and graphitise on walls of Khaneqahs, Mosques, caravanserais, coffee-houses, guest-houses, and prisons was always, and is a tradition: and has formed an important part of history (Trans.).

<sup>18</sup> See Bastani-Pariz, *Nun-e Jow*, p. 701.

Zahir-Odowlah herself was a Qajari princess.

### **Khanekah: a Shelter of a Different Kind**

The Khaneqah has also been a refuge for those who repented their sins. It was the doors of Khaneqah which was open to them, when no other accepted them. Rabe'h Aduyeh was a woman who had escaped from captivity and was forced into prostitution, or as 'Attar says: "went into entertainment".<sup>20</sup> Then she repented in the hands of the great Sufi, Hasan Basri. She resided in a convent before travelling to Mecca for pilgrimage. Rabe'h, like Saint Francis, lived with many animals, including many gazelles, jebeers and wild asses. The same story is said about Hoor, a corrupt entertainer, who repented in the hand of the son of Sheikh Ahmad Jaam, and transformed his house into a Khaneqah, endowing all his belonging into it <sup>21</sup> .

The Khaneqah is a place of repentance of a different kind, also: Fozeyl-ben Ayaz was a bandit who blocked the routes and robbed caravans around the city of Marv. One night as he was approaching a Caravan, he heard a verse from Qur'an being recited [in or near a Kaneqah]. His mentality changed; he repented and spent all his life paying off all his wrongdoings. Towards the end of his life, he went on a pilgrimage to Mecca, and resided there. It is in his mystical and poetical verse that he says:

I have no envy of the Prophets,  
as they, too, shall be questioned on Judgement Day.

I have no envy of the Angels,  
as their fear of God is more than that of the Humans.

I envy the one who has not been born to a mother,  
and shall never be Born.

### **Khanquah: the Refuge from War and Drought**

When the troops of Tamburlaine had seiged the city of Yazd, and as the food supply was running out, people were facing starvation and death. The defending forces of the city began evacuating the city, starting with the women, elderly and children. This is one of the strangest phenomenona of history, and it has been repeated in the Iranian history some times. The warriors threw out their relatives and elders and women and children.

There was starvation in the city from which about 30,000 people died. The evacuees sent out had no place to go. They reached the vicinity of the village of Bondar Abad. There stood the Khaneqah of Haj Mahmood Shad the son of Dada Mohamad. He received them and cared for them in the Khaneqah Sarab-Now for three days, and gradually sent them to the other villages and towns to be saved. Villages and towns gradually became saviours and refuges of these wanderers.

Oveys the son of Amirku of the Timurid Dynasty attacked Kerman in 819 H/1416 CE, beseiged the city of Bam and conquered it. He ordered his solders to kill all the men, to take all the women prisoners, to destroy all the houses and crops of barley. People sought sanctuary in the Khaneqah of Shams-Odin Mohamad Bami for whom Oveys had some respect. In this Khaneqah people were fed and looked after; crushed wheat and barley was cooked as soup for them everyday. A child was so hungry he was reported to have eaten bowels of 1 *maan* (= 3 kilograms) of very hot soup, without

<sup>19</sup> A type of large, flat-faced drum up to a metre in diameter.

<sup>20</sup> From Farid-Odin 'Attar, *Tazkarat'Ol Owlia* (The Recital of the Saints). 'Attar, Persian poet and Sufi, compiled a biographical book of all the great Sufis.

taking any notice of its burning heat.<sup>22</sup> When soldiers were taking some prisoners with them, Shams-Odin followed many soldiers around, pleading for the freedom of captives. As most of the captives were women and children, he carried the children on his shoulders, ensuring their safe salvage.

It is reported in one of the documents from a Sufi of Bam, that the annual kitchen stock of his Khaneqah was 1000 maans of meat, 1000 maans of flour, 400 maans of rice; and for cooking halva, 300 maans of sap and ghee.<sup>23</sup> When Aqa Mohamad Khan, the Founder of Qajar Dynasty, had Kerman under siege for four winter months in 129 H/ 1794 CE, people were living on cooked leather, lambs' dung, dates' stones and boiled saw-dust. Some 10,000 sick and poor people were driven out of the city. This is a very strange phenomenon, that defenders would drive out their parents and small children as they could both fight. *Driven out* means surrendering them to the enemy, who were waiting just outside.

Mozafar-Ali Shah, the successor of Moshtaq-Ali Shah who had been stoned only a few years before, was the Master of a Khaneqah, and he took these refugees to the Eqta' of Baft, some 150 kilometres away, saving many of them.<sup>24</sup>

This kind of tradition is still continuing. During the recent Iran-Iraq War, a large number of refugees from the war-torn area of Khuzestan, who were dispersed after Iraqis' chemical bombardments, went to the Shrine of Sultan Sa'id in Baydokht of Gonabad, in Eastern Iran. They took refuge in this Shrine, which is adjacent to a Khaneqah, and also in the Ferdows court-yard, and Kowsar court-yard. These refugees received some bread and kerosene every day from the Master of the Khaneqah. Some of these refugees still live there and have not returned to Khuzestan yet. Every Friday these people sit with the Sufis of the Khaneqah, to eat the traditional bread and grape syrup with them.

### **Khanqahs Free Slaves and Captives**

One of the very special tasks of Khaneqahs has been freeing of slaves and captives, and that can itself be the theme of a paper. Our example starts with the freeing of a girl, which has an artistic connotation, too. Sheikh Abu-Sa'id Abol-Khayr (Died 440 H/ 1048 CE) was passing through the Slave Bazaar of Neyshabur, when he saw a girl singing the following poem, while playing a harp:

Today; in this city, a Sweetheart like me, there is not;  
Brought to the Bazaar, but a buyer there is not;  
To the one who is the buyer, my will is not;  
To that whom I desire, buyer is not.

The Sheikh sat there and asked the price. He was told the price was 1000 dinars (gold coins). The Sheikh asked a follower who was passing by to bring his unpaid duties. The money was provided, the girl was freed and went to the person she had desired.<sup>25</sup>

Also we know that as Tamburlaine was returning to Samarkand, his capital, after conquering Asia Minor, Georgia and Syria, around 804 H/1401CE. He was taking 30,000 captives with him and wanted to get them to Samarkand. Of course they were a burden, too. It was the soldiers who wanted to take the captives. Soldiers consider them as their own property. They were men, women, boys, girls. They would sell them as much as they could, and take the rest with themselves.

Tamburlaine reached the Khaneqah of Sheikh Safi-Odin in Ardabil (1253-1334 CE), the

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<sup>21</sup> Rowzat-Oriahin, p 68.

<sup>22</sup> Jean Aubin, *Resalat-e Maqamat-e Orafay-e Bam*, p 180.

<sup>23</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>24</sup> Bastani-Parizi, *The History of Kerman*(3rd edn.), p. 740.

<sup>25</sup> A saying of Sheikh Abu-Sa'id Abol-Khayr (cf. Iraj Afshar edn., p. 141).

Grandfather of the Safavi Dynasty. Sheikh Ali Siah Poosh, a grand child of Sheikh Safi-Odin was the Master at that time. Tamburlaine went and paid respect to the Master. The rulers would pay respect to Khaneqah to their own advantage. The Master did not take any notice of him. Tamburlaine asked why, as he went there to visit him. The Sheikh said: because those who are your captives are my followers and friends and must be freed.

Tamburlaine did not grant his wish, but told him that: "As many as can fit into this Khaneqah, would go free, for your sake". This Khaneqah and its Allah Allah dome exists in Ardabil.

The Khaneqah had a hidden door in addition to its main gate. The gate of the Khaneqah was opened to receive the captives: as they came in from the main gate, they were guided out to safety from the *back* door, until all the captives were freed. All the eleven main tribes of Shamlu and Afshar Abu and others who became supporters of Shah Esma'il Safavi, the Founder of the Safavi Dynasty, were the successors of those who were freed at this Khaneqah.

This narrative has some elements of truth in it. The truth, however, is that freeing captives and prisoners has always been a function of Khaneqahs.

I wish there were a few of these Khaneqahs after the war between Iran and Iraq, in both countries, that could free 30-40,000 prisoners of war of both sides. All the regional fights of the twentieth century need such Khaneqahs and their ways. We know only Khaneqah of Baydokht in Gonabad as hosting refugees in this way.

I would like also to mention that a Master of one of these Khaneqahs 700 years ago in Semnan at the northern coast line of the Kavir, did not consider captive freeing enough. Sheikh Ala-Odowlah Semnani (d. 736 H/1236 CE) considered making a heart happy, as the highest purpose in life:

If you built a hundred houses with devotion,  
Tis not better than making one person happy.  
If you make one free person captive of your grace,  
Tis better than freeing a thousand slaves.

As I begun my talk with a saying from Sheikh Abol-Hasan Kharaqani, I will finish by another narrative from him:

I have reached where  
my Thoughts have turned into Knowledge;  
And the Right Path has turned into kindness upon people;  
I have not seen anyone kinder than myself, to His people.

Saying:

I wish I could die instead of every person,  
So that people would not see death.

I wish I would be questioned instead of every person,  
So that would not see the questioning of Judgement Day.

I wish I would pay for all the people's wrong-doings,  
So they would not suffer in Hell.<sup>26</sup>

It shows the highest level of Human Loving, from Sheikh Abol-Hasan Kharaqani who died on the

<sup>26</sup> Matjaba Minavi, *Ahval-o Aqval-e Sheikh Abol-Hasan Kharaqani*, p 49.

Tenth of Moharam 425 H/5th December 1033 CE at 73 years of age. The truth was spoken when it was said that:

If the Sufis found It, then they found it well;  
And if they have “spun us a yarn”, they spun it well.

**Translators' special notes:**

Professor Bastani-Parizi was born and raised in Pariz, a beautiful village at the top of a sky-touching rocky mountain, in the Kerman province of Iran. He has repeatedly said that he will never give a talk, write a paper, or a book, unless there is a mention of Kerman in it somewhere. Translating Professor Bastani's work is usually impossible. He has his own special style of Persian, which, like his accent, is full of humour and ironies. We have attempted to maintain that style in this translation. Bastani's strong sense of social justice, and his struggle to find an answer in history to the individual responsibilities of people, is a flowing theme in his works.