

The abiding legend of Suthra

Lahore.

By Majid Sheikh

IF you roam around the old walled city even today, the likelihood of coming across a Suthra Shahi Fakir is reasonably high. They wear an iron bangle on their wrist on which they bang, with great skill, a stick to create a beat for the hymns they sing.

These fakirs exist all over the subcontinent, from Bengal to the Frontier, with their numbers in Pakistan being highest in Sindh. Today our children have probably no knowledge of these unique people, though in India they have some major 'Suthra Shahi' ashrams in Delhi, where, they claim that the ancestors of Suthra Shah of Lahore still carry forward the great tradition of "always speaking the truth, always remaining spotlessly clean, and of devoting their lives to spiritually enriching their souls".

Our interest lies in their origins, for this entire movement started in Lahore. My search started after reading a 'farman' issued by the Moghal Emperor Aurangzeb who decreed that every shopkeeper in his realm was ordered to pay Ghangar Shah alias 'Suthra' one and a quarter rupee ev-

ery year if he so demanded. That tradition still exists inside the old walled city, though the 'fakirs' take only a rupee now, where once they never took more than a paisa.

When you approach the main entrance of the Lahore Fort, to the left, well beyond the entrance, is a set of huge banyan trees below which is a beautiful domed structure. This is the Samadhi of Ghangar Shah alias 'Suthra'. Just who was Baba Suthra Shah?

According to legend, Suthra Shah was born in 1672 in the village of Berampur in the house of Nanda Khatri near Amritsar. He was born with a full set of 32 teeth, a full-grown moustache, and had a huge black mark on his forehead. By any standard he was considered a 'freak' birth that would bring the village bad luck. His father consulted the local pundits and astrologers who suggested that the child be left outside the door steps, so that either he be taken away by other humans, or some animal, or would just die of starvation. But fate had other things in store for this child.

It so happened that the sixth Sikh gu-

ru, Guru Hargobind, on his way back from Kashmir passed through the village and saw the child. The guru stopped and asked his followers to immediately take away this 'gift of god' with them to Amritsar. His disciples refused, saying that he was 'kuthra' or dirty. The guru replied that his knowledge told him that the child was 'Suthra' or clean and that he would grow up to be a man with immense spiritual powers and would transgress all religions. The disciples then obeyed and he grew up under the guidance of the sixth Sikh guru. The name given by the Sikh guru stuck, and has been since so called.

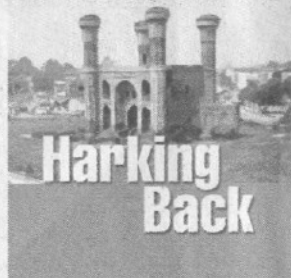
With time Suthra Shah, as he was known, founded his own sect, which exists even today among Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs. They are called Suthra-Shahi fakirs. Guru Hargobind also called him a 'sidha' saint. Ultimately he came to

Lahore and built himself a place outside the Masti Gate. He made four 'chellas', or followers, they being Bawa Nihal Shah, Baba Gulab Shah, Baba Didar Shah and Baba Jhangar Shah.

The reign of Aurangzeb saw the Hindus, especially their holy men, being persecuted, with the emperor getting removed every day one and a quarter maunds of sacred threads (janeos), erasing the tilaks from their foreheads, and compelled Hindu fakirs to show him miracles. Those who failed met a sad end. It was in these circumstances that the

emperor, on learning about Suthra Shah, desired that he be searched out. Guru Hargobind learned about this wish of the emperor and he sent the Suthra to Delhi.

On his arrival the emperor was amazed to see 'Suthra' in very clean clothes. According to one account the emperor asked him how he was, to which



Shahi Fakir

Suthra Shah replied: "I am still not persecuted by your orders". The fearless fakir impressed the emperor by his honest and biting answers to every question. In the end the emperor ordered him to show him some miracle. Suthra said that he would soon see more miracles than he had ever seen.

Suthra got made a pair of shoes, 1 ¼ hands (almost five feet) long, at a cost of 1 ¼ lakh rupees. One night he put one of these shoes in the Delhi mosque, together with a lota. Next morning when people came to pray, they prostrated themselves before the lota and shoe, considering them to be sacred. Their fame spread throughout the city and to the emperor. One day Suthra tied the other shoe to a stick and walked his way through the city, crying that he had been robbed of the other shoe. News of this event reached Aurangzeb who sent for the boy and asked him whether the shoe found in the mosque was his. He said it was, whereupon the emperor said that if it were found not to fit him, he would be beheaded. The boy agreed and, calling

on his guru's name, put on the shoe, which he found a little too small. At this his face lit up, so that the emperor in amazement asked him what he desired.

Suthra Shah Fakir warned Aurangzeb against further persecution of Hindus, and the emperor agreed. Moreover he decreed that all his subjects should at every wedding pay one gold mohar and 1 ¼ rupees per shop to the boy, who refused to accept more than 1 ¼ rupee at each wedding and a piece from each shop.

There are so many stories that one has heard about the miracles performed by Suthra Shah Fakir. In one such story which we heard from our father in our youth, which one still disbelieves, was how he was able to detach the head of naughty boys from their body till they agreed to behave themselves. It probably was one made up to scare us, but it tied in so well with other such stories we heard from other people. Even today Lahore carries on this tradition of 'suthrey shahi fakirs', which has carried on to every corner of the subcontinent. May it always continue?