

MYSTIC GOES POP

Packaged Sufism sells. From music and fashion to even psychoanalysis. The recent Jahan-e-Khusrau was yet another instance of this fad.



RITUAL AS PERFORMANCE: Sufis of the Mevlevi order have devised elaborate whirling dances as a spiritual practice



ECSTASY OF SURRENDER: Abida Parveen casts a spell with her magical rendering of Sindhi and Punjabi Sufi saints

■ by S. KALIDAS



NAMI DANAM
chi manzil bood
shab jaay ki man
boodam/
Baharsuraqs-e-bis-
mil bood shab jaay
ki man boodam/
Pari paikar nigaar-
e sarw qadde laala
rukhsare/
Sarapa aafat-e dil
bood shab jaay ki
man boodam/

Khuda khud meer-e majlis bood andar
lamakan Khusrau/
Muhammad shamm-e mefil bood shab
jaay ki man boodam.
(I know not what place it was where I
passed the night just gone;

All around me were bodies half-slaughtered writhing in a dance; There was the beloved nymph, her body a cypress tree, her face tulip red; Ruthless wreaking havoc in every heart; God himself was the master of this ceremony in that otherworldly place, O Khusrau; Muhammad was the lamp that lit up this party, where I passed the night just gone.) —Hazrat Amir Khusrau

In the tantalising party that is Sufism, Amir Khusrau may have been dazed by a mystic haze. But all of Delhi (at least all People Like Us) knows where it spent three balmy spring nights in simulated Sufi rapture last week. The traffic jams near Humayun's Tomb gave the first indication. To reach this "realm of the heart", one had only to follow the

endless line of jamewar shawls, black sherwanis and brocade-silk saris. Or be led by the wafting perfume of European colognes mingling with Indian *ittar* to the "Sufi Sign-up" at the entrance. Lighting the path discreetly were electricity-fed oil lanterns leading to Arab-ki-Sarai, a cloistered quadrangle lit up in not-so-subtle hues of red, blue and pink.

Welcome to Jahan-e-Khusrau, the exquisitely designed celebration of the Sufi spirit, choreographed by filmmaker Muzaffar Ali in association with the Delhi Government. As the faithful trudged the winding walk from the parking lot, a matronly lady remarked, "You know this walk is in itself quite like a pilgrimage." Indeed there was much that was sanctimonious about Jahan-e-Khusrau. As Sheila Dikshit, Delhi chief minister and Ali's biggest supporter for

this event, put it, "We are supporting it because this is sacred fusion music. It is just the sort of spiritual balm that is needed in the country today." She was referring to the cynical orgy of Hindu-Muslim violence in Gujarat.

Going by the august line-up of participants, this "gathering for peace" was impressive: whirling dervishes from Turkey, Abdul Karim Al-Kabaly's group of musicians from Sudan, Mahsa Vahdat and others from Iran, Sultana Choudhuri with Bauls from Bangladesh, Nurul Hasan Qawwal from Awadh, Samandar Manganiar from Rajasthan, Ghulam Nabi Namtahali from Kashmir and the two leading popular divas of the sub-continent—Abida Parveen from Pakistan and our own Shubha Mudgal.

Like any true Sufi, Ali must be a tormented soul. Only the battle between

his penchant for marketing and his appreciation of beauty rages not necessarily in his heart but in what he considers his act of creation itself. It is not enough for him to recognise and respect artistic worth alone. He needs to better it through excessive ornamentation, slicker presentation and cut-and-paste editing. Maybe he thinks his culturally naive cocktail crowd adores just that. As a fashion photographer cooed, "It's called styling."

AND a bit of hype always helps. So if, as a critic points out, "He lays claim to music direction without knowing notes and rhythms, to translation without knowing Persian, to dance choreography merely by designing costumes" ... well, the man is at

least charged and driven. And in this *raqs-e-bismil* (agonised dance of the grievously wounded) the only thing slaughtered is the innocence of his well-heeled believers.

"Why complain about those who are out to sell Sufism to the English-speaking elite today?" asks Hasan Saami Nizami, a practising Sufi and an inheritor of the Sufi tradition of Hazrat Nizamuddin Aulia whose shrine lies across the road from Ali's venue. "Have you not seen the many peddlers in my shrine? Sufism was being sold even in Nizamuddin's time. If the product is a good one, as Sufism certainly is, what's the harm?" he adds with a smile. Beside love (*ishq*), informs Nizami, knowledge (*ilm*) and intelligence (*aqil*) are equally important to Sufism.

Sufism as it existed in India especially, was both ingenious and assim-

Photographs by BANDEEP SINGH

HEALING DANCES

THE SUFISTICATED

Sufi psychology inspires New Age healing through cathartic dance movements

SUFIS SEE THE WORLD ONLY as an appearance, *majaaz* or illusion. But don't we all know how baggage-ridden this "appearance" becomes, defeating explanations that textbook theories offer. Sufi dancing, now practised as a form of psychotherapeutic healing, comes to the rescue of those struggling with definitions. It may induce in some the experience of the ultimate truth. "That truth which harmonises intellectual, emotional and physical aspects of being," says Delhi-based psychotherapist Akash Dharmaraj, who claims to be the only Indian mental health professional, practising this form of healing.

Sufi dances, especially the symbolic whirling movements, were always believed to have therapeutic qualities. People in traditional societies would flock to the dargahs to be "cured" by Sufi saints. Others claimed that it helped them achieve a mesmeric oneness with the universe. These were brought to the western world by the 20th century mystic—Gurdjieff's

work with the Sufi brotherhood. These are now being reinterpreted as therapeutic interventions. "It is not just any formless dance," explains Dharmaraj who has been facilitating group healing through Sufi dances for the past one year. "It is a dance that helps one break out of automatic, pre-learned ways of being," she adds.

Each movement is designed to touch emotions. Every posture, gesture, rhythm has an appointed place, duration and weight. These are strong, bold geometrical movements, with rhythmic foot-stamping, swaying, chanting, whirling and breathing with pronounced sounds like "Ho" or "Yah". As the dancers dance, a lightening, loosening and relaxing process begins within. People often break into unstoppable tears, laughter or cathartic screaming. At the end, the dancers are encouraged to verbalise what they felt during the process. A trained practitioner then helps analyse and introspect on the journey of inner conflict that has been unleashed.

Feelings which are trapped in the

neuromuscular parts of the body are often manifested through postures. That is why a tense, anxious or angry body often becomes stiff. These high energy dervish dances help people vent volatile emotions through non-violent ways. The accompanying music too is specially composed. All this, in the presence of the mystical nine-point enneagram—a Sufi symbol (see picture) representing the relationship between cosmic structures.

Mandira Chowdhury, a *shagird* (student) of Sufi energy work says that it was through it that she had a direct experience of herself and, hence, of God. "During a whirling movement, I felt a heightened state of consciousness, helping me see myself as a part of the universe," says Chowdhury.

These dances are increasingly beckoning those in search of the soul's code. What is more, it gives them a *tariqah* (the Sufi method) as well. From the ancient dargahs to the 21st century psychotherapy clinics, Sufism has indeed become a whirling movement.

—Shefalee Vasudev

anything their work has encouraged many from beyond the Muslim world to explore this amazingly versatile area of mysticism and spiritual ecstasy.

TO these ranks, Ali would add the name of Kabir Helminski an American who "fell in love" with a *shaikh* (preceptor) of the Turkish Mevlevi order and became an initiated *mureed* (disciple). Today, Helminski is a *shaikh* himself and preaches Sufism in California. "He has made Rumi the highest selling poet in America today. Till a couple of years ago it was Shakespeare," claims Ali. One wonders if he means it as a metaphor or as a fact. But with several books and CDs to his credit, the softspoken yankee dervish is a man after Ali's heart. Together they plan to make a film on the life and poetry of the 13th century Anatolian mystic and poet Jalaluddin Rumi after whom the Mevlevi sect of Sufism is named. This festival is thus a byproduct of Ali's research for that more ambitious project.

We can revel in the age of packaged Sufism today. We are deluged with Sufi art, Sufi music, Sufi dancing, Sufi couture, Sufi medicine, Sufi food even Sufi psychoanalysis (see box). "The trouble is that most of these neo-Sufi *wallahs* are just out to cash in on a megabrand," says historian Saleem Kidwai, "If they genuinely delve into Sufi traditions and modernise them, a lot of good and some great art may well come of it."

Sufism lies eternally at the crossroads of cultural confluences and celebrating its dazzling diversity is the privilege of any pluralistic society. However, rather than foisting tokenisms like this ersatz *samaa* (mystic ceremony), it would be useful to reinvent and strengthen the annual *urs* of Amir Khusrau which has a 700-year-old tradition and real mass participation behind it. Otherwise for Dikshit and Ali the ominous words of Hazrat Nizamuddin could well ring true: "*Hanoz Dilli door ast* (Delhi is still a long way off)". ■



MYSTIC REALITY: Dharmaraj's *shagirds* stage a performance of Sufi-Gurdjieff dances

lative cutting across creeds, cultures and classes. The Sufis were the first to encourage local dialects—even Hindi is a Sufi construct—and in music, their contribution has been unmatched. From high classical forms like Khayal and Tarana to popular ones like the geet and qawwali, the gifts of the Sufis have been many and varied.

"The Sufis," argues sarod player Biswajit Roy Chowdhury, "were the original fusion artists." The qawwali is a fragrant fusion of Hinduism and Islam on one plane. On the other it embraces the popular and the classical in a passionate sweep. Its interface with western pop was but a logical progression, in keeping with the times.

In an age bereft of faith and abounding in turmoil anything even remotely supra-rational and pacifist in nature becomes a hot trendsetter. Along with Feng Shui and Vaastu, Sufi music and

dance are magnificent raw materials for the merchandising industry.

With the innocent but killing success of Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan through the 1980s and '90s, Sufi music hit the top of the pops. After his death, Abida Parveen, rooted in the Sindhi Sufi tradition of Shah Abdul Lateef Bitai, took over his mantle. Then Shubha Mudgal, who has no spiritual links with the Sufi



SIPRA DAS

tradition, picked it up. Ironically, she was initially singing these songs from a distinctly secular, left-wing platform of the Safdar Hashmi Memorial Trust. Then came her Magnasound hit *Ali More Angana*, whose brash producer (not Ali) tried to pit her as "India's answer to Pakistan's Nusrat!" But that is an episode that even Mudgal would best like to forget. Both Parveen and Mudgal are hugely moving voices. However, there are dozens of others who have hitched a free ride on the fast selling Sufi bandwagon with little justification.

Like the proverbial bad penny, good things too, have a habit of resurfacing time and again. From Samuel Taylor Coleridge and Edward Fitzgerald to Gurdjieff, and from Idres Shah to Deepak Chopra, the West has had its share of fascinating and popular interpreters of Sufism and Sufi poetry. If

FLOWING ELEGANCE: Meera Ali makes a Sufi-inspired fashion statement



HEMANT PITHWA

“ Sufism was being sold even in Hazrat Nizamuddin Aulia's time. ”

HASAN SAANI NIZAMI, Sajjada Nashin, Dargah Hazrat Nizamuddin