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## At Babajan Dargah rests the legacy of an old saint

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PUNE: Branching out from MG Road, the RS Kedari Road is half-a-kilometre of fascination with temples, mosques, offices and various shops, all spilling over from the nearby Shivaji Market.

The road ends at the feet of the Dargah of Hazrat Babajan, whose tale began in Afghanistan, spanning across most of South Asia and the Middle East and ended in a crinkly old woman breathing her last among her followers. These admirers came from all sections of the society. Her wisdom went on to inspire another spiritual icon from the city.

She was born Gulrukh in a part of Baluchistan which now falls in modern-day Afghanistan, according to available records. In her native

Pashto, her name means "a rose-like face". There are quite a few accounts of the social stratum of her family. While some say her family was related to the then-Emir of Afghanistan, others believe she was of noble lineage, not necessarily royal in origin.

Historical accounts remain divided on her age too, with some placing her age at around 120 years at the time of her death. Others, like journalist Paul Brunton, held she was 95 when she passed away.

She was educated in Islamic jurisprudence. She could recite the Quran by heart and also spoke multiple languages. She did not conform to purdah which was prevalent among the feudal families at the time. She ran away from home on the day of her marriage. She was only 18.

Her journey through the next few decades would take her across the Khyber Pass to Peshawar, where she met a Hindu saint, interacted about spiritualism moving further south to Rawalpindi. Practising more penance over the next few years she came across middle-eastern lands like Syria and Lebanon. She took two Hajj journeys and later came back to Bombay and finally to the Charbawdi-Bhimpura slums in Pune Cantonment. There she taught spirituality to her followers under a neem tree. The base of that tree exists till date.

Here, Gulrukh would become Hazrat Babajan, without any possessions, living on alms from the followers she would gather from the impoverished locality. And her followers, according to an account from a British journalist who visited Pune in the 1920s, "were from all religious communities and economic backgrounds", including one whose name would be known the world over.

In 1913, a 19-year-old Merwan Irani came across Babajan on his way to college. He became curious to know more about the white-haired woman sitting under the tree. She was known amongst the locals as a Muslim saint, a witch or just crazy. Irani started visiting Babajan on a regular basis. His interactions with the wise woman led him to become the world-famous Meher Baba, and much of the information about Babajan now rests on his accounts.

Hazrat Babajan, an ethnic Pashtun, died thousands of miles away from her native place in Pune on September 21, 1931. She was buried near the neem tree which later came up to be a Dargah built out of white marble.

"The dargah was built shortly after she died. Only a few additions to the monument have been made over time," said Nasir Khan, one of the trustees of the Babajan Dargah.

For the people across all religions, rich or poor, their lives revolve around the Dargah.

" Babajan hi hain hamaare paas, aur kaun hai (All we have is Babajan)", said Munir Shaikh, a local trader. He added that all people went to the Dargah together for the festivities held there. "Everyone is the same for her," he added.