

Khawaja and Sufism: Representing Islam in the Time of Disruptions

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Abstract

The Islamic fabric of Sufism mixing with contemporary customs, has contributed to build a stronger social cohesion. The Dargah of Moinuddin Chisti, located in Ajmer, has been an enigmatic center which is 'marked out to manifest' the true representation of Islam by brushing aside the bleak images painted illicitly after the 9/11 and 26/11 events. Sittings in the Dargah corridor have resulted in exchange of ideas with the bond of humanity across the country and continues as a chain (silsila) to the times down. With this viewpoint, this work delves into exploring the dimensional aspects of Sufism featured by the Ajmer Khwaja which led to rapid acceptability of Islam over passing all barriers of diversities. In addition, the analysis tries to shed light on the enigmatic influences of Khwaja's spirituality and its pragmatic vitality for solace of all the modern times' woes.

Keywords: Sufism, Islam, Khwaja, interfaith dialogue, pluralism

Introduction

The rapid spread of Islam across the Indian Sub-continent became possible due to the ecstatic attraction and mystical gravity of Sufism in the early centuries. In contrast to the contemporary turmoil-torn atmosphere of North Indian states, due to political clashes and social impediments, an amicable tradition of syncretism was boldly established in the historic track of Ajmer, Rajasthan, with the arrival of Khwaja Gareeb Nawaaz Moinuddin Chisti (1143-1236 CE) in the twelfth century. Then after, the Dargah vicinity stood as a resilient realm of interfaith dialogue, pluralism, religious and cultural tolerance. The form of Sufism preached by Khwajaji, as called with reverence by admirers, in the subcontinent still remains bold to represent the Islamic teachings in these times of disruptions.

Spread of Islam and Sufism

Scholars have opined differently regarding the arrival of Islam in the Indian Sub-continent. However, unlike other regions, the advent of Islam here is more dynamic. Renowned orientalist Thomas Walker Arnould articulated in his work *The Preaching of Islam: A History of the Propagation of Islam Faith* explicitly counted some primary means for the rampant spread of the religion above the canvas.

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He says:

“The spread of this faith over so vast a portion of the globe is due to various causes, social, political and religious: but among these, one of the most powerful factors at work in the production of this stupendous result, has been the unremitted labours of Muslim missionaries, who, with the Prophet himself as their great example, have spent themselves for the conversion of unbelievers.”¹

Actually, rulers are basically accredited with political and territorial expansion while the religious establishment is attached with the works of *Da'i* preachers and Sufis. At the same time, diplomatic trade ties also shared a major role in the spread of Islam. Within the first millennium after the Prophet Muhammad, the religion penetrated through Arabs and entered three continents.²

The discussion on Islam among Indians fanned years before the invasion of Muhammad bin Qasim in 712 CE. Muslim conquerors didn't show a keen interest in religious conversion, rather they focused on territorial expansion as the timely administrative tenet was. In addition, core teachings of Islam too didn't call for compulsory conversion.³ In contrast, historical works like *History of India, as Told by its Historians* (Elliot) and *Ancient and Medieval History of India* (Rawlinson 2001) counts a more primitive proximity of Arabs with Southern India. In these accords, the trade ties between Malabar and Arab were explicitly described. Obviously, along with goods, ideas were also shared.

After the establishment of Arab rule in India, Sufis also entered the region earlier in the 12th century and settled here. Sufism came with pragmatic values of life holding a message of equality, brotherhood, tolerance, religious harmony and cultural coexistence. In the diverse land of India, multiculturalism of Sufism attracted the indigenous inhabitants. Furthermore, the indigenous people were under the harsh grip of hierarchical inequality and discrimination based on caste and creeds.

Obviously, soft power is to co-opt rather than coerce. This is what Sufis applied to call the people for truth. At the same time, people accept *appeal* rather than compulsion. Therefore, the contributions of Sufis are seen in far-flung regions of Arabia for disseminating the teachings of Islam in comparison to the factors of territorial expansion.

Commonly, Sufis tend against the rampant conventional practices of orthodoxy even in religion and culture. Not to mention that they exercise the real essence of truth indeed. Just like a society, Sufi saints transferred the true sense of Islam to the local people. They yielded to locally acquainted instruments to keep sincerity and purity of faith transparent like vernacular music, art and language. The author of this paper has observed in his another

¹ Arnould, T.W. 1913. *The Preaching of Islam: A History of the Propagation of Islam Faith*. London: Constable & Company Ltd.

² Javad Hagnavaz, “A Brief History of Islam (The Spread of Islam),” *International Journal of Business and Social Science (IJBS)* 4 (2013): 213-017.

³ Qur'an (2:256)

work how the 17th century Azan Fakir Shah Miran left ‘an inerasable sketch in developing religious tolerance, especially in the North-Eastern region of Assam’.⁴ In this way, vernacularization of Islamic faith has been largely centered in the spread of Sufism breaking down the hegemony of Arab-Persian influence, and bringing back people into the original track.⁵

Their roles for the spread of Islam are more vividly evident in different regions of the Indian Subcontinent. Subtly, their influences are still rampantly seen in concentrated places like *Mazaar* and continually spread via their existing *Silsilas*.

***Tasawwuf*: An Integral Part of Islamic Lifestyle**

With the advent of Islam, Sufism emerged as a resisting force against worldliness and materialism seeking union with the al-Mighty God. Unparalleled to the contemporary society of hectic life, greed and enmity, Sufis wielded the inner qualities of love, forgiveness, equality, inter-faith understanding and communal harmony for an ecstatic existence. Actually, Sufis are great promoters of plural society in India as well as other parts of the world with cultural and religious assimilation. (Mondal 2023)

Sufis are those who practice Sufism or *Tasawwuf*. Literally, Sufism is replaced with Mystics in English but it has more, looking into various pragmatic dimensions, expounded meanings. Some have argued against the legality of *Tasawwuf* in Islam and claimed it as an innovation or deviation. However, revisiting a traditional lineage of *Tasawwuf*, scholars have traced it back to the period of Prophet Muhammad.

There are varying opinions regarding the term *Tasawwuf*. The most repeated conclusions give these explanations:

1. It is derived from *safa* (cleanness/calmness) which indicates ‘the cleanness’ of their soul and body.
2. Similarly, it’s related with *suf* (soft wool) as the Sufis used to wear clothes made of wool.
3. *Saf* means line or row, more concisely prayer line. Sufi is derived from this root word as they always stood in the first line of prayers expecting for communion with God leaving all things aside.
4. Most importantly, *Tasawwuf* is connected with the *Ahlu al-suffah* (People of the Porch)⁶ referring to the destitute group of the Prophet’s companions who cornered

⁴ Mondal, Md S. 2023. “Azan Fakir and Mystical Soft-Power of Sufism in the North-eastern Indian State of Assam.” Islamonweb English.

⁵ Begum, Tania. 2020. “Vernacularization of Islam and Sufism in Medieval Assam: A Study of the Production of Sufi Literature in Local Languages.” *International Journal of Research and Innovation in Social Science (IJRISS)* 4.

⁶ Khanam, Farida. 2006. *Sufism And Introduction*. N.p.: Goodword Books.

themselves in the Prophet's Mosque and engaged in worship having no concern about worldly matters.⁷

Likewise, as Sufism is an experimental or practical phenomenon, a proper and fixed definition of Sufism has become difficult. Rather, it varies to different scholars on the basis of their pragmatic touch. Mostly, Sufism is defined as Islamic mysticism or asceticism.⁸

For a clear concept, Sufism can be generalized as a mystical form of Islam which is based on spirituality expecting the companionship of Allah and restraining from the matters of contemporary life. It's based on philosophy of austerity, humanity, sincerity, love, devotion and other virtues attributes. *Zuhd* (detachment), *ihsaan* (good deeds) and *ibada* (worship) were mentioned as the core elements of Sufi practices. In contrast, it was also applied for *perfection*; not abstention from materialistic favours only. By a mystical force, Sufis took syncretic approaches of spirituality and real tenets; all people irrespective of status and religions flocked together to their threshold even after their demise. Sufi, saints, *sheikhs*, *pir*, *murshid* are simplistic exchangeable and shorthand alternatives but each has distinctive definitions. P.M Curie has outlined a comprehensive description on these terms in the first chapter of his work on Khwaja Moin al-Din Chisti.⁹

Focusing on derivations and cross definitions, it can be argued that Sufism was an integral part of Islamic life even in the period of Prophet Muhammad. Later, it evolved in concurrently different forms in different parts of the world.

Sufistic Legacy in Indian Diversity

Indian tradition is adorned with cross-cultural stances. Islamic cult of Sufism has an inerasable sketch in the development of religious tolerance especially in the North Indian regions. It has impacted inter-bonding of different religions and diplomatic politics, literal enrichment and cultural integration. The region had become a safe abode following love, harmony and mutual understanding. Unfortunately, some years were of contrasting incidents where communalism, religious disagreement and political barbarism arose, inflicting the centuries old heritage of peaceful co-existence. It's high time to revisit the moral lessons of those social servants.

Sufism in India is more dynamic; attributed with some distinct characteristics. Indian tradition and Islamic convention, in many parameters, are both deeply based on peace and harmony. They have effectively established the soundly bound of inter-cultural adoption through soft self and social traction like Sufi and Bhakti Movements. Multicultural waves and different traditions make India an ocean of unified diversity and peaceful coexistence. The Islamic fabric of Sufism, mixing with contemporary customs, has contributed to build a

⁷ Mokhammad Rohma Rozikin, "Critical Analysis of Tasawwuf Schools," Indonesian Journal of Islamic Mysticism (IJIM) 9 (2020) 259-279.

⁸ Ahmed, Mubarak. 2017. "What is Sufism." *Tony Blair Institute for Global Change*.

⁹ Currie, P. M. 2006. *The Shrine and Cult of Mu'īn Al-Dīn Chishtī of Ajmer*. N.p.: Oxford University Press.

stronger cohesion of societal anthropology. In means of language, literature, arts, music and life-styles; Sufis and Sadhus have made it possible.

After the arrival of Khwaja Moin al-Deen Chisti in Delhi during the reign of Iltumish (1211-1236) and then to Ajmer of Rajasthan, made it his homeland, and didn't return to his birthplace (born in the Persian region of Sistan and brought up in Khorasan) or anywhere else. He embraced all people of the locality at first and conceived them as his own kith and kin. Getting off own Persian, he spoke their language, ate their foods, sang their music and taught them ethos of spirituality and brotherhood– not in theological terminology but, in pragmatic essence also. That's why, the epoch and land turned into a kingdom of peace and communal harmony and still the legacy of his Silsila is making a unique exhibition of unity, love and Ganga-Jamuni *Tehzeeb* (culture).¹⁰

Sufism deftly assimilated the Islamic tenets with different vernacular traditions and cultures. This helped local people to know Islam closely and accept it. Thus the religion influenced the Bhakti movement in the Indian subcontinent and made a reach to all sorts of people from all social strata specially the denied and enslaved one. Like Khwaja, Bulleh Shah, Nizamuddin Auliya (d. 1325) and Amir Khusrau (d. 1325), Azan Fakir of Assam are some of many names from Sufi lineage. Their impacts in cultural syncretism stand as a connecting bridge and manifestation of peace.

Khwaja Garib Nawaz: A Profile of Peace and Plurality

The epoch period of Khwaja Muin al-Din Chisti in India was a bright exhibition of mystical Islam. Khwajiji spent time here nearly a half of his whole lifespan, setting up in the Ajmer of Rajasthan, teaching the natives, spreading love and truth. Impressed and sparked with his mystical fire, people flocked to his door. Since then, he became a 'one of the most outstanding figures in the annals of Islamic mysticism'.¹¹

Khwaja Muin al-Din Hasan was born in 1141 CE in Persian region of Sanjar¹², modern-day Iran. The lineage of his father Sayyid Giysuddin and mother Sayyida Bibi Umm al-Wara, known as Mah-e-Noor directly reached to the Prophet Muhammad, peace and blessings of Allah be upon him, through Hasan and Husain (May Allah be pleased with them). Since his childhood, he possessed a sublime personality characterized with love, piety, modesty, generosity, courtesy and helpfulness. He earned primary education from his house as the contemporary tradition was as well as his father was an educated and well revered person of the region. It is said that he completed the memorization of the Quran when he was only nine. Later, he was admitted to the local education system of Maktab where he received another traditional knowledge.

¹⁰ Bhura, Sneha. 2022. "How Ajmer Sharif Dargah empowers seekers of all hues." *The Week*, September 11, 2022.

¹¹ Nizami, K.A. n.d. "Chisti." in *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, E.J.Brill II.

¹² Some sources state the birthplace as Sistan or Sajistan

He underwent several hard experiences as his father passed away when he was fifteen in 1155 CE. Generally, the little Hasan was engaged in his household works like watering the orchid garden left by his father. In consecutive years, he saw the plight of his people inflicted by the invasion of Mongols who ransacked Khorasan and other Central Asian regions. However, as it was destined, he came across several Sufi saints of his time, even the greatest of all Abd al-Qadir Gilani in 1156 CE in Baghdad who foretold, “This young man will be a great figure of his time. He will be a source of inspiration and a centre of devotion and the focus of affection to myriads of people.”¹³ These meetings with mystic persons made a turning point in his life that led him to the same stream. Seeking spiritual guidance, he set for journeys across the epicenters of Islamic civilization like Baghdad, Samrakand, Bukhara, met with distinguished scholars and attained the companionship of contemporary Sufis. On his way to Baghdad, he also met his spiritual master *Shaikh* Usman Harawani in the Persian city of Harawan. The title of ‘Chisti’ is linked to the master who attained it from the founder of Chisti School of Sufism Abu Ishaq Shamsi, a tenth century spiritual scholar. Furthermore, it is said that the Chistiya Order is actually an offshoot of the order Adhamia linked with the eight century personality Ibrahim bin Adham. Many miraculous events (*karamaat*) are mentioned in their accounts. He spent the next twenty years under his guardianship traveling together even far beyond Makkah and Madina. Then after, the separation was so heartbreaking for both.

Now, the gulf in the life of Khwajaji created by separation was refilled by his successor Qutub al-Din Bakhtiyar Kaki (1113-1235 CE). Now the companionship for spiritual journey was of master and disciple. He crossed the city of Balkh, the Buddhist centre and resting place of Ibrahim Adham, and camped in Multan. Here, he was introduced to Sanskrit and Hinduism the atmosphere of proximity. Then he headed to the Indus city of Lahore, the resting place of Ali al-Hujairi (1009-1072 CE).

Approximately in 1192 CE, Khwaja Muin al-Din Chisti arrived in India. There are varying observations which find the cause of his travel to the far south. Mehru Jafar has stated a very constructive argument in his book which indicates the spiritual mission of Khwajaji:

“Muinuddin wandered into India in search of the elusive mystery of the self because he had heard that Hindu philosophy encouraged meditation on the nature of the cosmos and creation. He had also been told that India is perhaps the source of the idea of tolerance towards different ways of worshipping the mysterious.”¹⁴

However, most repeated opinions and popular beliefs say that he was commanded by the Prophet himself in his dream to ‘proceed to India and show the true path to the people there’

¹³ “Moinuddin Chisti,” Sufiwiki,
https://sufiwiki.com/content/moinuddin_chishti/

¹⁴ Jaffer, Mehru. 2008. *The Book of Muinuddin Chishti*. N.p.: Penguin Books.

when he went to Madina for *Ziyarah* (visiting) during the Hajj pilgrimage. That's why he was widely recalled as '*Naib al-Nabi*' or viceroy of the Prophet in the country.

The North-West frontier was ruled by the Chauhan Dynasty of Rajputs during that period. There was also a flux of confrontations between three powers viz. Persian Muslim rulers, Central Asian Mongols and the internal dynasties of India. Khwajaji could recall his old days witnessing the disruptions in his land.¹⁵ In this chaotic situation, Khwaja Muin al-Din Chisti set his foot here and trekked the way down through sandy-sunny deserts to Ajmer which was under the young ruler Prithviraj Chauhan who was in direct fight with Muhammad Ghori. After his arrival in the territory of Prithviraj Chauhan, occurrences of several miracles were reported. Along with this, his words of wisdom, sincere behaviors and fearless stances attracted the locals to royals there in earlier times and stood as public limelight. Over passing all obstacles, he made it his homeland and made it a kingdom ruled by heart. People in huge numbers flocked to his doorstep and drank his water of sanctity. Islam was flowing fast through inland India with a different current. Still his glorious legacy profusely sustains in the Sufi Order of Chisti that he established in India and the resting place of Dargah in Ajmer.

Timely Woes and their Solutions

Unfortunately, antagonist elements timely emerged in late years splitting this pluralistic fabric of the region. Communal violence invoked, people felt helpless and displaced, inter-religious harmony was disrupted and unity of humanity lost. Consequently, violence begets violence. In order to stabilize the disruptive situation in the land of Ganga-Jamni tradition, it's needed to take a heed again to the sufistic lessons taught by spiritual leaders like Khwaja Garib Nawaz. The heart and mind of its people have to be instilled again with the lessons of Sufism and its Indian reflection of the Bhakti Movement. It is the only solution to share their Shirni or Prasad again with each other. Then there will be sooner or later again the colours of inter-religious unity, tolerance and communal harmony.

Religious Guidance and Spiritual Relationship

Khwaj Muin al-Din Chisti is well celebrated by all for his true presentation of Islamic faith blended with hues of Sufism. When the early 13th century was under the savage of political and religious conflicts, Khwajaji came with antonyms of hatred, greed and animosity. In one frontier, conquerors hardly managed to gain the control of land, Khwajaji could rule over hearts of millions peace, love, modesty and spirituality in the other corner. He bound people with two relationships: firstly, with the Creator, the God and secondly with each other.

P.M Currie quoted from the famous mystical book written by 11th century Ali al-Hujairi about the religious significance of sufis and saints in Islamic theology:

¹⁵ ibid

“God has caused the prophetic evidence to remain down to the present day, and has made the saints the means whereby it is manifested, in order that the signs of the Truth and the proof of Muhammad’s veracity continue to be clearly seen.”

Then the author vehemently asserts explaining the role of Sufis:

“The sainthood in Islam is essentially a relationship - the relationship of the saint to Allah... The accepted signs of this relationship (eccentricity, asceticism, descent, learning, spiritual discipline, expertise in ecstatic techniques, etc.), where visible, are sufficiently all-embracing and elastic not to disqualify any individual on the ground of his personality, and where they are absent, they can be soon be supplied.”¹⁶

Social Harmony and Cultural Integration

When Khwajaji arrived in the 13th century Ajmer, it was under the Hindu ruler Chauhan Dynasty. He already learned their language and different aspects of their culture. Initially, he faced several repercussions but he accepted and welcomed them with pleasure. To make time with people there, he spoke their language, ate their food and sang songs in their tone. A perfect example of social harmony and cultural integration was shown by this strange Sufi from Persia in the heated land of India.

Even the Chistiya Order of Sufism integrated multiple aspects of plurality in compliance with regional culture for more wide and open acceptability. Ghulam Rasool Dehlavi writes in his article published in the Sunday Guardian that the noble teachings of Khwaja Garib Nawaz included ‘love for all, malice towards none’ and ‘serving all creations of God with unconditional love’.¹⁷ In another piece, the author affirms, “Of all Sufi orders which flourished in India, the Chisti cult gained much momentum establishing its centers all across the country and attracting an unprecedented number of non-Muslim devotees particularly from among Hindus and Sikhs. For many of them, the shrine of Hazrat Moinuddin Chishti is an abode of spiritual solace as well as a destination of interfaith harmony.”¹⁸

This legacy of co-existence influenced the Indian communities too much. Later, Sufis and followers of the Chisti Order consolidated this fabric of mutuality in their actions. The impressive impacts of this humanistic nature helped to attract not only regional and national but international peace seekers. It was recorded in the website of Thomas Cook, “around

¹⁶ Currie, P. M. 2006. *The Shrine and Cult of Mu‘īn Al-Dīn Chishtī of Ajmer*. N.p.: Oxford University Press.

¹⁷ Gulam Rasool Dehlavi, “Celebration of Divine Love through Sacred Arts,” in *Culture*, The Sunday Guardian, <https://sundayguardianlive.com/culture/celebration-divine-love-sacred-arts>

¹⁸ Gulam Rasool Dehlavi, “Visiting Sufi Shrines is an Uplifting Experience of Religious Harmony and Social Amity, Say the Hindu, Sikh and Christian Visitors at Ajmer Dargah,” in *Islam and Pluralism*, The New Age Islam, <https://www.newageislam.com/islam-pluralism/ghulam-rasool-dehlvi-new-age-islam/visiting-sufi-shrines-uplifting-experience-religious-harmony-social-amity-say-hindu-sikh-christian-visitors-ajmer-dargah/d/34798>

150,000 pilgrims visit the *dargah* every single day as a mark of their gratitude towards the shrine.”¹⁹

Ceaseless Effects and The Dargah Vicinity

Ajmer Sharif, as sanctified by followers say, stands as a limelight of sufistic manifestation in the Indian state of Rajasthan. Devotees across the world, irrespective of class, faith and religion, throng to the resting *maqbara* (tomb) of Khwaja Gharib Nawaz each day in a large number. Leaving all the unwanted activities aside, the spot has been a resilient realm of interfaith dialogue, religious tolerance and cultural integration. Traditionally, the dargah of Khwajaji like other sufi-saints, has assumed much reverence even from rulers, leaders and locals since medieval times.

In these times marked with communal separation, the Dargah plays a big part to foster religious harmony and mutual cohesion. One of several spiritual activities, *Qawwali* is an enigmatic attraction here. When degradation of specific languages has become a stereotype in the country, Qawwali recited with multilingual mash-up establishing again an exemplary scene of cultural integration. Similarly, custodianship of the Dargah administration consists of people from several sections including non-Muslims.

With the dramatic changes of world order, psychology of humans is immensely affected. At a sheer pursuit of inner bliss, victims of tensions tend to seek solutions with spiritual touches. With a broad prospect, multiple ‘peace conferences’²⁰ are organized by the shrine authority where delegates from multi-religious communities participate and promote religious harmony and universal brotherhood standing against terrorism, communalism, fanaticism and politics of hatred.

All these factors effectively help in healing panacea to currently prevailing politically caused social and communal menaces that spoil the beauty of India hued with multiculturalism. In addition, it has been an enigmatic center which is ‘marked out to manifest’ the true representation of Islam by brushing aside the bleak images painted in manipulation. Multiple interfaith dialogues and intellectual sittings taking place in the Dargah corridor have resulted in exchange of cultural hues with the bond of humanity across the country and continues as a chain (*silsila*) to the times down. Even promoting *bhakti* and spirituality, the integrated Sufism of Khwaja released a counter force of tranquility against hatred and intolerance. The Dargah vicinity of Khwaja Sheikh Muin al-Din Chisti stands as a resilient realm of interfaith dialogue, pluralism, religious and cultural integration.

¹⁹ *Ajmer Dargah in Rajasthan*. Thomas Cook. Retrieved (25 Jan. 2023) from <https://www.thomascook.in/places-to-visit/ajmer-dargah-in-rajasthan-14541>

²⁰ “Spiritual heads, religious leaders attend meet in Ajmer,” in *India*, The Indian Express, <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/spiritual-heads-religious-leaders-to-attend-meet-in-ajmer-for-peace-conference-4541410/>

Conclusion

Indian tradition is adorned with cross-cultural stances. One of the greatest Sufi icons, Khwaja Gareeb Nawaz Moin al-Din Chisti who settled in Ajmer of 13th century Rajasthan set forth a new model of religious harmony and multiculturalism which is inevitable for universal peace. In addition, Khwaja played a major role here to represent Islam in a time of disruptions. His legacy prescribed in his Chisti *silsila* still remains an indispensable factor in the development of religious tolerance especially in the North India, where contrasting incidents like communalism, disagreement and political animosity arose, inflicting the centuries-old heritage of religious harmony. It's high time to revisit the moral lessons of this great soul.

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