

SIGNIFICANCE OF SUFISM IN MEDIEVAL INDIA

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ABSTRACT: In the medieval period, religion provided the frame work of society at the community and state levels. The state allowed intellectual activity to grow, to begin with, but later curtailed it for reasons of state policy, even though confined to discrete groups and made subject of philosophical reasoning and logical disputation. As a result, religions failed to play the role of bringing about a harmonious process of living people therefore, had to develop their own beliefs and practices. Sufi and Bhakti represented people's revolt against the ossified practices, in search of, and as an endeavor to bring harmony in life. Sufism played the most important role in working out the great synthesis.

KEY WORDS: Orthodox, Islam, Sufism, Intellectual, Ulema, Humanity.

INTRODUCTION

Sufism (Tasawwuf) is the name given to mysticism in Islam. The term Sufism embraces the philosophy and practices which aim at direct communion between God and man, and those who practice Sufism are called Sufis. Scholars differ as to the derivation of the term Sufi, for it is not mentioned in the Quran or the books of Hadith, nor does it figure in the standard Arab dictionaries that were compiled as late as the 8th century A.D. According to Qushayri (d. 465/1074), author of al Risala, the word Sufi was used as a generic term to describe individuals adopting a particular religious attitude based on austerity and spirituality, and came into usage only at the beginning of the 9th century. This he explains simply: 'After the Prophet Muhammad, Sahabi (companion) was the only title given to the Muslims of that period. This was the highest title for them, and they therefore required no other title for their piety and religiosity. The next generation that received religious education directly from the sahaba was called Tabiin (followers of the companions), while the title Taba Tabiin (followers of the followers of the companions) was the title given to those who had received religious training from the Tabiin. According to Rabia Basri - "The best thing that leads man to god is that he must not care for anything of this world or next other than god", Ibn al-Jala "Sufism is a reality without a form". Sufism is a divine knowledge bestowed by God upon a selected few for the benefit of humanity. Here are some key principles:

1. Attain god through your spiritual master as your master is God.
2. Constant remembrance of Dhikr.
3. You must kill your animal spirit i.e. ego.
4. You may use devotional music to help strengthen your devotion.
5. Knowledge is not as important as direct spiritual experience.
6. Tremendous courage is needed to be a sufi.

The journey of Sufi usually consist of following stages:

- Fanna Fizzat. This is the first stage were Sufi aspirant destroy every wishes and feel that I am the creator of myself. Removal of the "Nafs" or the animal spirit so that our higher qualities come to the force.
- Fanafil Sheikh. At this stage one has to destroy himself and feels that if something exists in this world is only sheikh.
- Fana- fi- Rasool. If something exists in this world is Rasool.
- Fana Fillah. Whatever exists in this stage is God.
- Baqa Billah. This is the state where man comes back to his existence and God appoints him to guide the humans. This is the stage where the individual is the part of the world, unconcern about his or her reward or position.¹

THE SUFI MOVEMENT

Background-Rise of Islam:

You will recall that Islam was founded by Prophet Muhammad. Islam saw the rise of many religious and spiritual movements within it. These movements were centered mainly around the interpretation of the Quran. There were two major sects that arose within Islam – the Sunnis and Shias. Our country has both the sects, but in many other countries like Iran, Iraq, Pakistan etc. you will find followers of only one of them. Among the Sunnis, there are four principal schools of Islamic Law, These are based upon the Quran and Hadis (traditions of the Prophet's saying and doings). Of these the Hanafi school of the eighth century was adopted by the eastern Turks, who later came to India. The greatest challenge to orthodox Sunnism came from the rationalist philosophy or Mutazilas, who professed strict monotheism. According to them, God is just and has nothing to do with man's evil actions. Men are endowed with free will and are responsible for their own actions. The Mutazilas were opposed by the Ashari School. Founded by Abul Hasan Ashari (873-935 AD), the Ashari School evolved its own rationalist argument in defence of the orthodox doctrine (Kalam). This school believes that God knows, sees and speaks. The Quran is eternal and uncreated. The greatest exponent of this school was Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (1058-1111 AD), who is credited with having reconciled orthodoxy with mysticism. He was a great theologian who in 1095 began to lead a life of a Sufi. He is deeply respected by both orthodox elements and Sufis. Al-Ghazali attacked all non-orthodox Sunni schools. He said that positive knowledge cannot be gained by reason but by revelation. Sufis owed their allegiance to the Quran as much as the Ulemas did. The influence of the ideas of Ghazali was greater because of the new educational system set up by the state, It provided for setting up of seminaries of higher

learning (called Madrasas) where scholars were familiarised with Ashari ideas. They were taught how to run the government in accordance with orthodox Sunni ideas. These scholars were known as ulema. Ulema played an important role in the politics of medieval India.²

The Sufis

Contrary to the ulema were the Sufis. The Sufis were mystics. They were pious men who were shocked at the degeneration in political and religious life. They opposed the vulgar display of wealth in public life and the readiness of the ulema to serve “ungodly” rulers. Many began to lead a retired ascetic life, having nothing to do with the state. The Sufi philosophy also differed from the ulema. The Sufis laid emphasis upon free thought and liberal ideas. They were against formal worship, rigidity and fanaticism in religion. The Sufis turned to meditation in order to achieve religious satisfaction. Like the Bhakti saints, the Sufis too interpreted religion as ‘love of god’ and service of humanity. In course of time, the Sufis were divided into different Silsilahs (orders) with each Silsilah having its own Pir (guide) called Khwaja or Sheikh. The pir and his disciples lived in a Khanqah (Hospice). A Pir nominated a successor or Wali from his disciples to carry on his work. The Sufis organized Samas (a recital of holy songs) to arouse mystical ecstasy. Basra in Iraq became the centre of Sufi activities. It must be noted that the Sufi saints were not setting up a new religion, but were preparing a more liberal movement within the framework of Islam. They owed their allegiance to the Quran as much as the ulema did.³

An interesting feature of introduction of Sufism in India, as Nizami pointed out, was that it was introduced at the very beginning of the establishment of Muslim rule and the latter's rise and spread all over India. In other words, it developed in a period when free thought and scientific research and development had been suppressed in west and central Asia in the early tenth century as was pointed out by Professor Mohammad Habib in the introduction to Nizami's book.⁴

The Sufi stream came to India when Sufi thought was delinked from natural mysticism or was not playing an active role in bringing about any social transformation as the Qarmatians or Shah Inayat tried to do. It was institutionalized into different Silsilahs and each confined itself to a vilayat (i.e. domain). The major silsilahs in India were the Chisti, Suharwardi, Naqshbandi and Qadri. Abul Fazl in *Ain-i-Akbari* gave a list of all that existed during his time, with some details leading Sufis.⁵

The role of Sufis must be understood in proper social context in order to better understand and appreciate their valuable contribution. Analysing the social role of the Sufis K. Damodaran says : Sufism was spiritual reflection of the growing social conflicts. The Sufis disliked the vices and luxurious living of the upper classes, which violated the Quranic precepts of simplicity and the brotherhood of man. They saw that Islam was becoming more and more subordinate to the state, and that the Ulema, the Qazis and the Mullahs representing religious orthodoxy were exploiting the Quranic doctrines to uphold and justify a social system based on oppression. But, at the same time, they found themselves in a helpless position, unable to mobilize the people and fight for justice and the purity of Islam.⁶

Sufism In India

The advent of Sufism in India is said to be in the eleventh and twelfth centuries. One of the early Sufis of eminence, who settled in India, was Al-Hujwari who died in 1089, popularly known as Data Ganj Baksh (Distributor of Unlimited Treasure). In the beginning, the main centres of the Sufis were Multan and Punjab. By the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the Sufis had spread to Kashmir, Bihar, Bengal and the Deccan. It may be mentioned that Sufism had already taken on a definite form before coming to India. Its fundamental and moral principles, teachings and orders, system of fasting, prayers and practice of living in Khanqahs had already been fixed. The Sufis came to India via Afghanistan on their own free will. Their emphasis upon a pure life, devotional love and service to humanity made them popular and earned them a place of honour in Indian society. Abul Fazl while writing in the *Ain-i-Akbari* speaks of Fourteen Silsilahs of the Sufis. However, in this lesson we shall outline only some of the important ones. These Silsilahs were divided into two types: Ba-shara and Be-shara. Ba-shara were those orders that followed the Islamic Law (Sharia) and its directives such as Namaz and Roza. Chief amongst these were the Chishti, Suhrawardi, Qadiri and Naqshbandi silsilahs. The Be-shara Silsilahs were not bound by the Sharia. The Qalandars belonged to this group.⁷

The Chishti Silsilah

The Chishti order was founded in a village called Khwaja Chishti (near Herat). In India, the Chishti Silsilah was founded by Khwaja Muinuddin Chishti (born c. 1142) who came to India around 1192. He made Ajmer the main centre for his teaching. He believed that serving mankind was the best form of devotion and therefore he worked amongst the downtrodden. He died in Ajmer in 1236. During Mughal times, Ajmer became a leading pilgrim centre because the emperors regularly visited the Sheikh's tomb. The extent of his popularity can be seen by the fact that even today, millions of Muslims and Hindus visit his Dargah for fulfilment of their wishes. Among his disciples were Sheikh Hamiduddin of Nagaur and Qutubuddin Bakhtiyar Kaki. The former lived the life of a poor peasant, cultivated land and refused Iltutmish's offer of a grant of villages. The Khanqah of Qutubuddin Bakhtiyar Kaki was also visited by people from all walks of life. Sultan Iltutmish dedicated the Qutub Minar to this Saint. Sheikh Fariduddin of Ajodhan (Pattan in Pakistan) popularized the Chishti Silsilah in modern Haryana and Punjab. He opened his door of love and generosity to all. Baba Farid, as he was called, was respected by both Hindus and Muslims. His verses, written in Punjabi, are quoted in the *Adi Granth*.

Baba Farid's most famous disciple Shaikh Nizamuddin Auliya (1238-1325) was responsible for making Delhi an important centre of the Chishti Silsilah. He came to Delhi in 1259 and during his sixty years in Delhi, he saw the reign of seven sultans. He preferred to shun the company of rulers and nobles and kept aloof from the state. For him renunciation meant distribution of food and clothes to the poor. Amongst his followers was the noted writer Amir Khusrau.⁸

The Suhrawardi Silsilah

This Silsilah was founded by Sheikh Shihabuddin Suhrawardi. It was established in India by Sheikh Bahauddin Zakariya (1182-1262). He set up a leading Khanqah in Multan, which was visited by rulers, high government officials and rich merchants. Sheikh Bahauddin Zakariya openly took Ilutmisht's side in his struggle against Qabacha and received from him the title Shaikh-ul-Islam (Leader of Islam). It must be noted that unlike the Chishti saints, the Suhrawardis maintained close contacts with the state. They accepted gifts, jagirs and even government posts in the ecclesiastical department. The Suhrawardi Silsilah was firmly established in Punjab and Sind. Besides these two silsilahs there were others such as the Firdawsi Silsilah, Shattari Silsilah, Qadiri Silsilah, Naqshbandi Silsilah.⁹

The Naqshbandi Silsilah

The Naqshbandiya tariqah is named after Hadrat Shah Baha al-Din Naqshband Radi Allahu anhu [d.791H / 1389CE] and is a tariqah that is widely active throughout the world today. It is described as the 'Mother of all Tariqah's' by Shaykh Ahmad al-Faruqi al-Sirhindi [d.1034H / 1624CE] (Radi Allahu anhu). There are hundreds of Spiritual Order's which are all on the correct path but the Naqshbandiya, together with the Qadiriya, Chistiya and Suhrawardiya, are considered as the four main Silsilah's of the Ahl as-Sunnah wa'l Jama'at.

The designation of the Naqshbandi Golden Chain has changed from century to century. From the time of Hadrat Abu Bakr as-Siddiq radi Allahu ta'ala anhu to the time of Hadrat Bayazid al-Bistami radi Allahu ta'ala anhu, it was called as-Siddiqiyya. From the time of Bayazid al-Bistami radi Allahu ta'ala anhu to the time of Sayyadina Abdul Khaliq al-Ghujdawani radi Allahu anhu it was called at-Tayfuriyya. From the time of Sayyadina 'Abdul Khaliq al-Ghujdawani radi Allahu ta'ala anhu to the time of Hadrat Shah Naqshband radi Allahu ta'ala anhu, it was called the Khwajaganiyya. From the time of Hadrat Shah Naqshband radi Allahu ta'ala anhu through the time of Sayyadina Ubaidullah al-Ahrar radi Allahu ta'ala anhu and Sayyidina Ahmad Faruqi radi Allahu ta'ala anhu, it was called Naqshbandiyya. Naqshbandiyya means to "tie the Naqsh very well." The Naqsh is the perfect engraving of Allah's Name in the heart of the Murid [disciple]. From the time of Sayyadina Ahmad al-Faruqi radi Allahu anhu to the time of Shaykh Khalid al-Baghdadi radi Allahu anhu it was called Naqshbandi-Mujaddidiyya. From the time of Sayyidina Khalid al-Baghdadi radi Allahu anhu until the time of Sayyadina Shaykh Ismail Shirwani radi Allahu anhu, it was called the Naqshbandiyya-Khalidiyya.¹⁰

The Qadiri Silsilah

Qadiriyyah (also transliterated Kadri, Elkadry, Kadray, Qadiri or Qadri), is one of the oldest Sufi tariqas. It derives its name from Abdul-Qadir Gilani (radi Allah anhu) (also transliterated as "Jil lani" or "Jailani" and "Jilali" in the Maghreb) AH 470 (1077-1166), a native of the Iranian province of Gilan. In 1134 he was made principal of a Sunni Hanbalite school in Baghdad. His contribution and renown in the sciences of Sufism and Sharia was so immense that he became known as the spiritual pole of his time, al-Gauth al Azam (the "Supreme Helper" or the "Mightiest Succor"). His writings were similar to those of al-Ghazali in that they dealt with both the fundamentals of Islam and the mystical experience of Sufism. The Order is the most widespread of the Sufi Orders in the Islamic world and can be found in Afghanistan, India, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Turkey, the Balkans, China, as well as much of the East and West Africa, like Morocco.¹¹

Significance of Sufism

The Sufi movement made a valuable contribution to Indian society. Like the Bhakti saints who were engaged in breaking down the barriers within Hinduism, the Sufis too infused a new liberal outlook within Islam. The interaction between early Bhakti and Sufi ideas laid the foundation for more liberal movements of the fifteenth century. You will read that Saint Kabir and Guru Nanak had preached a non-sectarian religion based on universal love.

The Sufis believed in the concept of Wahdat-ul-Wajud (Unity of Being) which was promoted by Ibn-i-Arabi (1165-1240). He opined that all beings are essentially one. Different religions were identical. This doctrine gained popularity in India. There was also much exchange of ideas between the Sufis and Indian Yogis. In fact the Hatha-Yoga treatise Amrita Kunda was translated into Arabic and Persian.

A notable contribution of the Sufis was their service to the poorer and downtrodden sections of society. While the Sultan and Ulema often remained aloof from the day to day problems of the people, the Sufi Saints maintained close contact with the common people. Nizamuddin Auliya was famous for distributing gifts amongst the needy irrespective of religion or caste. It is said that he did not rest till he had heard every visitor at the Khanqah. According to the Sufis, the highest form of devotion to God was the service of mankind. They treated Hindus and Muslims alike. Amir Khusrau said "Though the Hindu is not like me in religion, he believes in the same things that I do".

The Sufi movement encouraged equality and brotherhood. In fact, The Islamic emphasis upon equality was respected far more by the Sufis than by the ulema. The doctrines of the Sufis were attacked by the orthodoxy. The Sufis also denounced the ulema. They believed that the ulema had succumbed to world by temptations and were moving away from the original democratic and egalitarian principles of the Quran. This battle between the orthodox and liberal elements continued throughout the sixteenth, seventeenth and eighteenth centuries.

The most notable writer of this period was Amir Khusrau (1252-1325) the follower of Nizamuddin Auliya. Khusrau took pride in being an Indian and looked at the history and culture of Hindustan as a part of his own tradition. He wrote verses in Hindi (Hindawi) and employed the Persian metre in Hindi. He created a new style called Sabaq-i-Hindi. By the fifteenth century Hindi had begun to assume a definite shape and Bhakti saints such as Kabir used it extensively.¹²

Mughals And Sufis

In the middle of the eleventh century, Sufis reached the part of the north west India under Ghaznavid control. The following centuries saw the arrival of many men of God belonging to different brotherhoods or following different 'Ways', There were the Chistis lovers of music and poetry, whose center, Ajmer became very important for the Mughals. There were also the sober Suhra wardiyya, who were initially concentrated in Sind, the Punjab and Bengal. Ali-yi Hamdani led the kusrawiyya into Kashmir. There was an active branch of this group, the Firdausiya, in Bihar and Bengal. Babur visited Hamdana's grave in Khuttalan during his military campaigns. For a time the Shattariyya played an important role in central India, while the central Asian Naqshbandiya, who were averse to music and dancing, were increasingly important to the Mughals in the sub-continent. In addition these were numerous smaller groups, venerators of particular holymen, hybrids with elements from Hindu Bhakti groups and so on. When Babur and his associates came to India there was a dazzling array of different mystical paths. The theosophy of the Andalusian Ibn Arabi (died 1240) was spreading in India at more or less the same time. Before this theosophy came to be generally accepted there were lengthy disputes between the different masters. Their belief in the 'oneness of being', often designated as either pantheism or monism, coloured the poetry of all the languages of the subcontinent, and inspired mystically inclined scholars to compose numerous commentaries and original works. The most famous of the teachers in India was Muhibbullah of Allahabad who followed Ibn Arabi, and who was venerated by Prince Dara Shikoh. Babur's family had a long standing connection with the Naqshbandis, going back to Bahauddin Naqshband, who died in Bukhara in 1389. His most important successor, Khwaja Ahrar (died 1490), was one of the most powerful men in Central Asia at the time, and Babur's father was a follower of his. Members of his family came with him to India and some of them married into the Mughal family.¹³

Babur's son Humayun was a great venerator of holy men, visited the shrine of the leader of the chistis, Abdul Quddus Gangohi (died 1538), and during his wandering in exile in Iran, he visited all the accessible mausoleums, including the shrine of 'Abdullah-i Ansari (died in 1089) in Gazurgah, near Herat. The sufi with the greatest influence on the emperor was Shah Phul or Bhlul, who claimed to be descended from the great Persian mystical poet Fariddin 'Attar, and who was renowned for his exorcism. Shah Phul was killed by Humayun's brother Hindal, who feared his great influence over Humayun. Shah Phul's brother Muhammad Ghaush Gwailari (died 1562) had an even greater influence on many Muslims, and the Shattari order which he represented remained active for many years, for example in Burhanpur. The great theologian Wajihuddin Gujarati spoke in his defence.¹⁴

Akbar too believed deeply in the dervishes, the representative of mystical Islam. In 1564 he performed the first pilgrimage on foot to Muinuddin Chisti's mausoleum in Ajmer and repeated this act frequently, thus in 1569 to offer thanks for the conquest of Chitor, the Rajput stronghold. It is said that even in this conquest he was supported by a Suhrwardi saint, Miran Muhammad Shah (d. 1604 in Lahore). The conquest was celebrated by Badauni with the verse: "And a happy day was it for the vultures and crows - Glory to Him who multiplied! food for his creatures".¹⁵ Till 1579 the emperor visited the Shrine in Ajmer almost every year, "and daily according to his custom held in that sacred shrine by night intercourse with holy, learned, and sincere men, and seances for dancing and Sufism took place, and the musicians and singers, each one of whom was a paragon without rival, striking their nails into the veins of the heart used to rend the soul with their mournful cries, and dirhams and dinars were showered down like raindrops".¹⁶

Akbar's first surviving son Salim was born from a Rajput princess on 31 August 1569, as a result of the prayers and blessings of Salim Chisti (d.1571)¹⁷, one of Farid Ganj - Shakar's descendants, the chronogram of whose death is Shaikh-I-hukama, Shaikh of Sages' or Shaikh Hukkam 'Shaikh of rulers' Out of gratitude, Akbar erected a sanctuary for the saint, around which the city of Fatehpur Sikri was built, a city of red sandstone which seems to reflect the high soaring mystical feelings of the emperor.

The enormous gateway is visible for miles and leads the visitor to Salim Chisti's delicate white marble tombs and finally to the Ibadat Khana, the 'house of worship', where the emperor held his meetings with the representatives of different religions - Muslims, Hindus, Christians, and Zoroastrians. Strange people too came to Agra and Fatehpur Sikri in those years; the influx of Shia poets and preachers from Iran and Iraq continued and even increased. Among them was Mulla Muhammad of Yazd who 'got the name of Yazidi and tried hard to make the emperor a Shia'.¹⁸ It was Ibadat Khana, as Abul Fazal records, that 'bigoted ulama and the routine lawyers were shamed'.¹⁹

The most prominent of Akbar's critics was Ahmad Sirhindi (Mujaddid-i-alf-i-Thani), who also frequently appears, during Jahangir's time. He was a Naqshbandi, and like many members of this 'strait-laced' order, he began his theological career by uniting on anti-Shia tract. Akbar's tolerance and his syncreticism were completely at odds with Ahmad's narrow conception of the true Islam.²⁰ Sirhindi evolved his own theories to counter those of the increasingly influential Ibn Arabi. Whereas this Great Master's followers proclaimed that Hama Ust, Everything is He Ahmad Sirhindi's were to say of him that Hama-Az -Ust, Everything is from Him', instead of Wahdat-al-Wajud, the 'unity of Being', he substituted Wahdat-ash-Shuhud, 'unicity of contemplation'.

The role of the Naqshbandi in India increased in importance. Muhammad Nasir Andalib's son, Mir Durd became the first great mystical poet in Urdu. There were others Naqshbandiya who were also active at that time in Delhi, the most prominent being Shah Waliullah, the son of a lawyer who had been involved in compiling the Fatawa-i-Alamgiri.²¹ The Mughal government did not communicate all that much with the great intellectuals, but they did expect their advice. However, the influence of the Naqshbandi reformer continued in India even after the collapse of the Mughal empire, and a branch of this Naqshbandis still survives in Delhi.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion I will bind up my paper saying that Sufism plays a very important role in medieval India to know the world beyond our imagination which we cannot perceive. A true Sufi is one who holds the purity of soul; and keeps above arrogance, greed and other undue inhuman ambitions.

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