

Sufism In South Asia: Past, Present And Future

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Abstract: *General understanding of Islam as a religion does not consist of many diversities and identities as in the other major religions viz. Christianity and Hinduism. In both of the later, it is believed to be having diversities and denominations, such as in Christianity. Hinduism also has many. In this article, we highlight the fact that Islam has also multiple identities which are region wise, content wise and in ritual and practices wise. To mention briefly, you have one sect following, aggressive K and non-human and extremist methodology, which is terrorism, on the other hand, there is a sect called Sufism, whose principles are non-violence, commitment to art, music, gender sensitivities and sympathy and empathy for the welfare of the poor and deprived.*

Keywords: Sufism south Asia, Saints art and culture, Communal harmony

INTRODUCTION

The word Sufi came from safa meaning pure. Sufi is a mystical dimension of Islam. Generally, Islam is known in mainstream thinking as a religion of sword and aggression. Sufism contradicts this image of Islam and says that Islam is based on the universal love and humanitarianism.

Islam in South Asia spread through the Sufi saints and preachers that our paper deals with this aspect of Islam which is not so much explored in academics, and in the context of the global terrorism. Exploring this aspect of the Islam is quite relevant and useful.

The term Sufi, Walli-Allah (protégé of God), dervish and fakir are applied to Muslim spiritualists, who attempt to achieve a development of their intuitive faculties through the ascetic exercises, contemplation, renunciation and self-denial.

There is no doubt Sufism or tasawwuf conjures up image of such institutions and customs as saint cults, fascination with occult, thaumaturgy and orgiastic practices, a mysterious world of visions and miracles, erotic poems, and lascivious dancing.

However, a significant section of Sufis managed to inculcate an understanding among different groups within the Muslim community. It is a psycho-historical phenomenon, which has potential force to meet social and political challenges produced by the protracted political upheavals, associated with autocratic oppression and economic depression (Athar Abbas Rizvi P. No.1)¹

Love, service, and compassion help us reopen our hearts and come closer to God. One of the greatest services we can perform is to help heal the injured hearts of others. Our hands are made to lift up those who have fallen, to wipe tears of those who are suffering the trails of the world. Shaik Muzafer also said, "A kind word or glance soften your heart, and every hurtful word or act closes or hardens your heart" (Ferdiman & Frager, P. No. 1)²

The contradiction between Sufi poets and state is as old as the state itself. The Indian state persecuted many poets who taught the universal love and brotherhood. There has been always a friction between the state and Sufis that still continues. In the medieval period poets like Hallaz was executed by the state for supporting the universal love. Many of the Sufis have died with hunger while fighting for the people's cause. (Schimmel Annemarie)³.

Sufism in India and south Asia

The full impact of Sufism, in India in twelfth century and early thirteen century can be seen after consolidation of main Sufi orders in central province of Islam. The most outstanding representative of this movement Muinuddin Chist, was born in Sistan and was a part time disciple of Abu Najib Suhrawardi. His dwelling place became

a nucleus for the islamisation of the central and southern part of India (Schimmel Annemarie)⁴

Over a period of 1000 years Sufism has been evolving in south Asia. The presence of it has been a leading feature as the reaches of Islam throughout South Asia increased. As Islam reached the subcontinent in the 8th century, Sufi mystic traditions became more visible during the 10th and 11th centuries of the Delhi sultanate. A conglomeration of four chronologically separate feature dynasties and the early Delhi Sultanate consisted of ten rulers from Turkey and Afghan lands. The influence of Persia flooded south Asia with Islam and Sufi thought, syncretistic values, literature, education, and entertainment, which has created an enduring impact on the presence of Islam also in India today. Sufi preachers, merchants and missionaries also settled in coastal Bengal and Gujarat.⁵

Reform Sufism in south Asia

In the introduction to the hagiography of the reformer Naqshabandi Sufi saint Zindapir, the living saint, Nawaz writes as follows..

Contemporary Muslim students (talib) who study in religious schools, the vast portion their life passes in studying formal (religious) sciences. They remained denied those sciences that allow for purification of soul and cleansing of heart”.

This is the very reason why the majority of the Ulema expend their entire efforts in polemical disputation and conflict and in becoming orators from who other than sedition and corruption, no positive outcome is attained. (OsellaFilippo, Osella, Caroline)⁶

Sufis and Bhakti saints played a vital role starting in medieval India up until the present to bring strife-torn society together. They preached and practiced human brotherhood, equality and service to the humanity. (Hussein, Hamid)

In this context of reform within the Islam and changing aspects of Muslim life, here are some explorations on the Sufi preachers, saints and musicians...

In south Asia, many Sufi poets, thinkers, preachers, singers, painters, musicians and philosophers have influenced the sub-continent. Among them Amir Khusrow and Kabir are iconic figures. Here our paper focuses on their work and bring their relevance to the contemporary society.

From among all of them Kabir's contribution is the largest. Kabir lived in a time of great political upheaval in India. Kabir's life was centred around Kashi, also called Banaras (Varanasi). Legend has it that he was actually the son of a Brahmin widow who abandoned him and that he was found by a Muslim weaver named Niru, who adopted the boy and taught him the weaver's trade.

Kabir, is one of India's most quoted poets and mystics. His birth itself is shrouded in mystery. some say he was the son of a Brahman widow, others that he was of virgin birth, what is known though is that he was brought up in a family of Muslim weavers. He was never formally educated and was almost completely illiterate. According to legend, the only word that he ever learned how to write was "Rama".

Listen to me brother! Bring the vision of the Beloved in your heart'-Kabir

Legend says that he relinquished his body when he was about 120 years old. When he died, his Hindu and Muslim followers started fighting about the last rites. In Maghar, his tomb and samadhi still stand side by side.

Kabir, through his couplets not only reformed the mind-set of common villagers and low caste people but gave them self-confidence to question Brahmins. Kabir believes in self- surrender and bhakti towards God. He suggests inward worship and remembrance of God. For him, true worship is only inward. He composed no systematic treatise; rather his work consists of many short didactic poems, often expressed in terse vigorous poetry in Indian languages.⁷

Amir Khusrow(1253-1325), was an Indian Sufi musician, poet and scholar. He was an iconic figure in the cultural history of the sub-continent. He was a mystic and a spiritual disciple of Nizamuddin Ahuliya of Delhi. He wrote poetry primarily in Persian, but also in Hindvi. Certain vocabulary in verse, called the KhaliqBari - containing Arabic, Persian, and Hindvi terms is often attributed to him. Khusrow is sometimes referred to as the "parrot of India".

Khusrow is regarded as the "father of qawwali" (a devotional music form of the Sufis in the Indian subcontinent), and introduced Ghazal style of song into India, both of which still exist widely in India and Pakistan. Khusrow was an expert in many styles of Persian poetry which were developed in medieval Persia. He used 11 metrical schemes with 35 distinct divisions. He wrote in many verse forms including Ghazal, Masnavi, Qata, Rubai, Do-baiti and Tarkib-band. His contribution to the development of the Ghazal was significant.

Various leaders of Sufi orders chartered the first organized activities to introduce localities to Islam through Sufism. Saint figures and mythical stories provided solace and inspiration to Hindu caste communities often in rural villages of India. The Sufi teachings of divine spirituality, cosmic harmony, love, and humanity resonated with the common people and still does so today (REF). A thematic approach to discuss a myriad of influences helped spread Sufism and a mystical understanding of Islam, making India a contemporary epicentre for Sufi culture today⁸

Present Situation and Sufism in India

Bloodshed has returned to Muslim-majority in Kashmir since Kashmir has been partitioned between India and Pakistan. Muslim leaders and spiritual Sufis in particular must be constantly wary of the penetration of Islam by trends that to increase instability in such difficult situations.

In Kashmir, there have been many great religious movements in medieval times. The Kashmir Shaivism movement of which yogini Lalleshwari was most glowing figure and Sufi movement with Shaik Nurridin Noorani, whose mozar is at Charar-e-Sharif, was most extraordinary story of the era...a positive fashion. (Dr. Karan Singh).⁹

In south India, Muslims have established educational institutions and charitable foundations that endorse secularism and an Indian patriotic spirit. They continue to promote interfaith harmony and inter communal cooperation. The Sunni Markaz, founded in the southwest Indian state of Kerala by the Sufi Sheikh Aboobacker Ahmed, works for the rehabilitation of disaffected jihadi youth from the war-torn Kashmir valleys, encouraging them

to feel patriotic as Indians. Educational institutions following the ideology of Sufi Islam are integral to preservation of positive interreligious relations and options for dialogue.¹⁰

In general, the discussion of Sufi Islam in India has assumed a new approach. Sufis follow the pluralist precedents in Sunni Islam. India is defined in great part by the legacy of Sufi saints throughout the country.

The current regime of India has been criticized as Hindu-cantered and antithetical to the Indian "secular space" in which the Sufis are located. A World Sufi Conference was held in New Delhi, India's capital, from 17th-21st of March 2016. It was organized by the All India Ulema and Mashaikh Board (AIUMB) and financed by the state. Some Muslims have criticized this event as unjustifiably linking up with the ruling party.

In rebuttal to such a criticism, a social media post asked, "How many of you are ready to stop receiving government aid for Muslim education?" In addition, a common platform is necessary to defeat the global threat of terror groups like the so-called "Islamic State" (ISIS). We must stand together, above factional and sectarian differences. Representatives of the Sunni majority among Muslims must call on all humanity to condemn atrocities committed in the name of Islam.

Traditional Islam and Sufism, specifically Sufism, have throughout their history, maintained the principle of living with the amazing diversity of India and other countries. This concept of mutual respect has persisted in the development of Sufism. Sufi saints in India were viewed as protectors, even of the oppressed Hindus. Networks established by early Sufi saints in India demonstrated their fidelity to the Islamic concept of peace between differing systems of belief.

More than anything, the networks of Sufi saints during 12th and 13th centuries A.D. figure Moinuddin Chishti, who contributed substantially to the growth of Islam in India. His teachings are as follows;

Universal Peace and Harmony (Sulh-i-Kul): He advocated for peace and tolerance among people of all religions and social backgrounds, a message that resonated with many and helped foster communal harmony in India. He believed in accepting the path of truth and unity, regardless of religious affiliation.

Love and Service to Humanity: A core tenet of his teachings was love and compassion for all, especially the poor and helpless. He championed the idea that serving humanity was the highest form of worship. His establishment of a refuge and community kitchen for the needy earned him the title "Garib Nawaz".

Devotion to God and Inner Purity: Khwaja Moinuddin emphasized leading a pure life, focused on devotion to the divine and seeking spiritual closeness to God. He encouraged followers to strive for inner purity and to recognize God in all of creation.

In the continuity of traditional Islam, the majority of Indian Sunni scholars argued for coexistence with the other communities, while recognizing that fundamental disagreements could be dealt with through peace and understanding.

This attitude found an Islamic context in the example of Muhammad, peace be upon him, who was asked about socially-beneficial endeavors preceding his prophet-

hood, and who answered that if disbelievers were to ask for him to settle such matters, he would do so.

The tradition of peace in Sufi Islam has been present all across India. Indian Sunni scholars have argued against fanatical interpretations. Extremism, however, has unfortunately recruited thousands of people to militancy and carnage in furtherance of radical Islam. Sheikh Zainuddin Makhdoom, a Sufi theologian living in Kerala in the 16th century CE, called for Muslims to join hands with Hindus to defend the nation against colonialism. This meant surpassing the fiqhi jurisprudential tradition, as there was no perspective in Islamic law for alliance with disbelievers against a common enemy. (Currie P. M.)¹¹

As Muslims throughout India's history lived peacefully with other believers, we should carefully observe the vision of Sufi Islam as one of mercy, inherited from the prophet of Islam and Muhammad himself. It is often said that he forgave every personal attack he suffered from enemies and never became angry for personal reasons. When he conquered Mecca, which was a territory of disbelievers who constantly harassed him, he proclaimed, "Follow in your path, for you are free."

Sufi Culture: Syncretism and Mysticism

Islam was not the only religion in India contributing to mystical aspects of Sufism. The Bhakti movement also gained respect due to mysticism popularity spreading through India. The Bhakti movement was a regional revival of Hinduism linking language, geography, and cultural identities through devotional deity worship. This concept of "Bhakti" appeared in the Bhagavad Gita and the first sects emerged from South India between the 7th and 10th centuries. The practices and theological standpoints were very similar to Sufism, often blurring the distinction between Hindus and Muslims. Bhakt, as devotees, linked puja (Hinduism) to songs about saints and theories of life when they would meet often to sing and worship. The Brahman Bhakts developed mystical philosophies similar to those advocated by Sufi saints. As For example, a Bhakt believed that there is a special reality beneath the illusion of life; this reality needs to be recognized to escape the cycle of reincarnation. Moreover, moksha, liberation from the Earth is the ultimate goal in Hinduism. These teachings run nearly parallel to Sufi concepts of duniya (world), akirat (otherworld).¹²

Influence of Sufism on other fields in South Asia

Music has always been present as a rich tradition among all Indian religions. As an influential medium to disperse ideas, music has appealed to people for generations. The audience in India was already familiar with hymns in local languages. Thus, Sufi devotional singing was instantly successful among all the populations. Music transmitted Sufi ideals seamlessly. In Sufism, the term music is called "sama" or literary audition. This is where poetry would be sung to instrumental music; this ritual would often put Sufis into spiritual ecstasy. The common depiction of whirling dervishes dressed in white cloaks comes to picture when paired with "sa'ma." Many Sufi traditions encouraged poetry and music as part of education.

Sufism spread widely with their teachings packaged in popular songs accessing mass demographics. Women were especially affected; often used to sing Sufi songs during the day and in female gatherings. Sufi gatherings today are known as qawwali. One of the biggest contributors to the musical Sufi tradition was Amir Khosraw (d. 1325). Known as a

disciple of Nizamuddin Chishti, Amir was known as the most talented musical poet in the early Muslim period of India. He is considered the founder of Indo-Muslim devotional music traditions. Nicknamed "Parrot of India," Amir Khosraw furthered the Christi affiliation through this rising Sufi pop culture within India.¹³

The massive geographic presence of Islam in India can be explained by the tireless activity of Sufi preachers. Sufism had left a prevailing impact on religious, cultural, and social life in South Asia. The introduction of the mystical form of Islam was done by Sufi saints; Sufi scholars travelling from all over continental Asia were instrumental in the social, economic, and philosophic development of India. Besides preaching in major cities and centers of intellectual thought, Sufis reached out to poor and marginalized rural communities and preached in local dialects such as Urdu, Sindhi, Panjabi versus Persian, Turkish, and Arabic. Sufism emerged as a "moral and comprehensive socio-religious force" that even influenced other religious traditions such as Hinduism.

Their traditions of devotional practices and modest living attracted all people. Their teachings of humanity, love for God and Prophet continue to be surrounded by mystical tales and folk songs today. Sufis were firm in abstaining from religious and communal conflict and strived to be peaceful elements of civil society. Furthermore, it is the attitude of accommodation, adaptation, piety, and charisma that continues to help Sufism remain as a pillar of mystical Islam in India.

TO CONCLUDE

The Sufi Dhargas, saints and poets had tremendous efforts to include the marginal section of communities into the mainstream life; and Sufis have the oppression of the state in every stage in the history to protect the marginal sections as they stood for the universal brotherhood and love. The recent attack on the Dhargas in Pakistan and in India shows that growing intolerance of fundamental groups against the liberal Sufis.

In a world which is getting divided in terms of castes, communities, regions, religions, Sufism is like a bridge among all these groups working for the humane and better world, a world devoid of caste, creed, community, region.

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END NOTES

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