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**Political Dimensions of Sufism  
An Interpretive Study of Sufi-State Relationship in Medieval India**

**Abstract**

Sufism has been a dynamic phenomenon of the Muslim society in Medieval India which impacted the state as well. It is interesting to note that the ebb and flow of the Muslim state and the Sufi dynamism coincided in an amazing way. If Sultan Ala ud Din Khalji's reign was the zenith of Delhi Sultanate; Nizamud-Din Auliya (a contemporary of the Sultan) set Chishti Silsila on strong traditions unknown in the past. Similarly, in the Mughal period if Akbar the Great was strong enough to present a new religious order for a pluralistic society, Bhagti thoughts were widely prevalent in the country. This parallel development of the state and the mysticism needs a special attention to explore the nature of relationship between the two. Though keeping itself at a distance from the officialdom and detesting state's maneuverings, Sufism seems to have consolidated the Muslim rule in the region, indirectly. Moreover, all Sufi circles were not averse to having ties with the government. The Soharwardi Sufis were prominent in this respect. It implies that Sufism has political dimensions, although on its own terms. These dimensions are to be determined in historical context.

Apart from discussing the political aspects of Sufism, the study will throw light on the nature of Muslim politics of the medieval ages as a two-way phenomenon. As politics is characterized by materialism, the discussion proceeds to the evaluation of Sufism in materialistic terms as well. Sufism is said to have a socialist approach; hence the Marxist frame can be consulted in understanding the phenomenon. This may help to develop a parallel conceptual and theoretical framework addressing the Sufi thoughts throughout the ages.

**Introduction**

Muslims developed different traits of a civilization with equal excellence. Politics (in terms of empire building and administration), theology, pure and natural sciences and mysticism attained maximum height of the theory as well as the practice.<sup>1</sup> Muslims produced such a splendid literature upon these developments which still have to be explored and explained.<sup>2</sup> Among the nations which came across the Muslim conquest, only Hindus met them on equal footings regarding literature and pervasive nature of their religion which deals with all spheres of life.<sup>3</sup> Hinduism had strong experiences of mysticism with traditions of revitalizing these experiences. Muslim Sufis had to make their place in this environment. It was only after the political setup of Muslim rulers that Sufis were prominent in the area. No renowned Sufi is recorded before the Muslim political hold on India. It implies that Sufism is not without political dimensions. Moreover, in India Muslim Sufis encountered special conditions not experienced in other parts

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<sup>1</sup> Muslims laid down basic principles of almost all modern sciences. Europe just gave finishing touches to those works. What rendered modernism credence and popularity is the capitalist outlook of life. Renowned orientalist Fuad Sezgin has explored startling facts regarding the Arabic-Islamic sciences of traditional Muslim past.

<sup>2</sup> Hundred's thousands of books were destroyed by Tartars Hordes of the East and Christian Hordes of the West. Added to this loss was the establishing of English and other European languages as lingua franca of even the Muslim World which restricted Arabic and Persian only to scholars who sometime misinterpreted the text due to their poor knowledge of these languages. For example, Franz Rosenthal, a celebrated orientalist, made blunders in the translation of Ibn Khaldun's book. *The Muqaddimah: An Introduction of History*, Trans: Franz Rosenthal, (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1958)

<sup>3</sup> A detailed study in this regard is conducted by Bhaskar Anand Soletore, *Ancient Indian Political Thoughts and Institutions*, (Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1963)

of the conquered world. In the following discussion we will study Sufism in the materialistic terms. As the soul is nothing without the body so is spirituality. Drawing conclusion from a general background we shall have a statement of the problem which will help us to study the phenomenon in the case of India.

### **Literature Review**

Mysticism is one of the richest branches of knowledge regarding the literature. Muslim Sufis themselves wrote on the nature and experiences of Sufism right from the inception of this tradition. However, they did not comment about politics. But it does not mean that they ruled out Muslim polity. In the Modern age, Western scholars also contributed a lot to the literature on Sufism. Preoccupied by the modern currents Muslims and non-Muslim scholar share virtually identical approach towards the political stance of Sufism, that is, they are antithetical to the politics. A recently published dissertation by the Oxford University Press discusses the relationship between the Delhi Sultanate and Chishti Sufis according to the usual approach.<sup>4</sup> The author describes the relationship as a tussle in which Chishti Sufis carved out their 'space' independent of the state influence. However, the statement is without the support of concrete arguments.<sup>5</sup> On the other hand being a rather traditional approach Khaliq Ahmed Nizami imparted a credible approach in his history of Chishti Sheikhs. Assigning three periods to the Sufi stance, Nizami maintains that Sufis had great concern with ongoing business of Islamicate.<sup>6</sup> In the first period Sufis detested the overwhelming character of politics owing to the administration of vast areas through rapid conquests. In the second period they stemmed the flood of the Greek philosophical thoughts due to its translation into Arabic. In the third period they resisted the limitless jurisprudence of the Muslim law (*shariah*).<sup>7</sup> Hence, the Sufi's objective was to create a balanced society in all respects. Thus, the study of Sufism should not be restricted to the realm of spirituality only, as in the case of Christianity where spirituality exists in seclusion.

### **Mysticism and Materialism**

As a theory materialism emerged to understand the human behavior as an all-pervasive argument. In turn it received influence from the scientific approach to the physical world, that is, the physical phenomena are determined by the natural forces. Likewise, the human behavior should have its reason in natural phenomenon and that is mode of production. All the modern social approaches, directly or indirectly, respond to this very concept. Mysticism seeks a similar rule for life but in metaphysical spheres, especially among the Muslims it is strongly held that pious souls control the world through metaphysical medium.<sup>8</sup> Thus this world and hereafter are actually theirs. Hence, it is the change of world view which renders mysticism non-practical and otherworldly. In a nutshell, mysticism is a metaphysical treatment of the physical phenomena in Islam. Therefore, basic needs of life are not discarded by Sufis and tradition of *langar* (free kitchen) has been an essential element of Sufi shrines.

### **Sufism Springs amid Political Conflict: Background**

The first rift among the Muslims was of political nature when the vice regency of the Prophet PBUH came to the fore. The situation remained under control to a greater degree of the companions of the Prophet generally styled as *Rshidun* but afterwards the system was transformed into some sort of

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<sup>4</sup> Tanvir Anjum, *Chishti Sufis in the Sultanate of Delhi 1190-1400*, (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2011)

<sup>5</sup> It is held that Chishti's stance was independent of the state as they used to decline any favor from the court in any form. It is acknowledged on many places that Sufis remained mindful in order to avoid any overt clash with the state. In a state of no clash, it is hard to think about the supposed control. There would be SPACE for anyone who does not pose any challenge to the authorities. SPACE could only be claimed in the teeth of some conflict. The author has clearly cited that Shaykh Nizam al-Din had to write to the Soharwardi preceptor of Sultan Ghiyath al-Din in order to escape the latter's edict of beheading the Shaykh (Anjum, 203). This raises another question why Chishti Sufis recognized Soharwardi silsilah who had no reservations in accepting grants from the rulers. The author does not touch this point anywhere. Lastly Shaykh Nasir al-Din had to obey the orders of Sultan Muhammad Tughlaq and after him Chishti Shaykhs shed the principle of not accepting grants from the Sultan.

<sup>6</sup> Anjum, 30. "The term is coined by Marshall G. S. Hodgson to refer to the vast territories in Africa, Asia and Europe influenced by Muslim rulers."

<sup>7</sup> Khaliq Ahmed Nizami, *Tarikh Mashaikh Chisht* [History of Chishti Sheikhs], (Delhi: Nadwat-ul-Mussanifin, nd), 73-95

<sup>8</sup> Accounts of Sufis are often replete with *karamat* i.e., wonders of these saints which are considered to be the result of supernatural powers bestowed upon them due to their piety.

monarchy.<sup>9</sup> It is widely held that the traditions of mysticism among the Muslims are pertained to the early political developments when pious souls refused to recognize the state maneuverings. Hazrat Ali (RA'),<sup>10</sup> the fourth Caliph, occupies the central position in the synthesis of Sufism in Islam. However, Hazrat Ali (RA') was equally interested in the then on-going political developments. Clear evidence is there to show that Hazrat Ali (RA') had been a candidate for the caliphate right from the induction of the first Caliph Hazrat Abu Bakr (RA').<sup>11</sup> For around three decades, he gathered fruits of meditation as he was not assigned any important administrative position of the state. After holding the power as a caliph, he took strict measures against them who were the champions of status quo.<sup>12</sup> However, he could not address the objections of his adversaries and he was martyred for his strict stance regarding his policies. After a peaceful span of Amir Mu'aviya, Hazrat Ali's son Hazrat Hussein (RA') strove to topple Yazid's rule which is often termed as unlawful mainly due to inheritance.<sup>13</sup> Hazrat Hussein's martyrdom made his descendants and adherents indifferent to political power and became renowned for spirituality. However, they were severely critical of the rulers' activities.

It can be inferred that Sufism came out of the political deadlock among early Muslims. After failure to snatch the power, spiritual figures asserted themselves in the society. It worked and the Muslim rulers of any age had to recognize these spiritual figures due to the pressure of the society. Moreover, Muslim rulers had themselves developed an interest in Sufi experiences. They always showed reverence for the Sufis.

However, a small section of Hazrat Hussein's descendants continued trying to overthrow the government by raising arms taking the Hazrat Hussein's effort as precedence.<sup>14</sup> This precedence together with the concept of *Mahdi* in Islam made some Sufis think of the political hold. Political domination was not a futile service in the eyes of the Sufis, conditioned the circumstances are favorable for a coup lest it would lead to bloodshed only.

Between these two approaches there were Sufis who fully supported the Muslim rulers with varying degrees. Muslim India witnessed all shades of Sufism described above. They played a vital role in shaping the politics of the region. Following is an analysis of the indirect participation of Sufis in the politics.

#### **Chishti and Soharwardi Approaches**

Chishtis started their journey in the Sub-Continent from the city of Ajmir, the then capital of Prithvi Raj Chauhan who fought against Ghauri. After the Sultanate had settled itself at Delhi Chishtis stayed there on permanent bases. However, they detested relationship with the rulers. This can be termed as some sort of exclusiveness for fulfilling their mission of guarding society against a politicized version of

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<sup>9</sup> It is another widely spread fallacy that Caliphate was a democracy. Though, the Caliphate shares some features with the modern-day democracy but those are in realm of good governance and there is nothing common in the basic principles. Under the concept of Caliphate or Sultanate no non-Muslim could be the head of the state in any case. Especially in the Sub-Continent majority of Hindus could not make any place in Muslim minds that their head could be other than a Muslim. When Ranjit Singh established his rule in Punjab, Muslims waged Jihad against him.

<sup>10</sup> *Raziallah-u-'anhu* (God is pleased with him)

<sup>11</sup> For six months after Hazrat Abu Bakr (RA') had secured the position, Hazrat Ali (RA') did not concede to the latter's legitimacy.

<sup>12</sup> Most of the companions of the Prophet PBUH considered the reign of first three Caliphs as precedence for orthodox rule which afterward became a permanent feature of Sunni jurisprudence. However, Hazrat Ali (RA') dismissed all governors of the caliphate of Hazrat Uthman (RA') due to the former's disagreement with the nature of rule. For a detailed discussion of this argument see M. A. Shaban, *Islamic History A. D. 600-750 (A.H. 132): A New Interpretation*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1971)

<sup>13</sup> It is another simple argument developed by the apologetic approach of Modern Muslim scholars in order to rule out the principle of monarchy in Islam. It should be noted that precedent of inheritance was set up when Hazrat Hasan bin Ali became caliph after the martyrdom of his father Hazrat Ali. Moreover, inheritance is not among basic principles of monarchy. Also Sufism put no objection to inheritance in their circles.

<sup>14</sup> Zaidi chain of Alids is renowned for armed struggle against the rulers. After Hazrat Hussein one of his grandsons Zaid bin Ali revolted against Umayyad in Kufa. After that a large number of descendants follow the footsteps taking it a tradition of pious Imam. For details see, W. Madelung, "Imama", *The Encyclopedia of Islam*. III, (Lieden: E. J. Brill, 1983), pp. 1162-9

civilization as Nizami pointed out the approach.<sup>15</sup> On the other hand Soharwardis had their origin in co-operation with the Abbasid Caliphate.<sup>16</sup> Therefore, Soharwardis of Multan showed no hesitation in having ties with the ruling elites. They even did not reject the idea of worldly wealth. Chishti Sufis, despite having an opposite stance, had cordial relations with the Soharwardies and they even went to seek help from the latter to avoid the state persecution.<sup>17</sup> The only point which could resolve this contradiction is the fact that Chistis or any Sufi circle of their opinion was critical of the rulers' abusive behavior while they were not critical of the ways by which rulers can be dissuaded from their typical attitude. Hence, what remained different between the two *silsilahs* were the means and not the ends itself. Moreover, it also implies that Sufism had no objection regarding the nature of traditional political system i.e., the Sultanate and the Caliphate, hence, the phenomenon of Sufism is not compatible with the modern state system while retaining its essential features. In the modern time it has undergone a change and has been become a rubber stamp for the modern arts in order to dislodge religious sanctions regarding these arts.<sup>18</sup>

#### **Political Perspective of Social Relations with the Hindus**

Sufis are often taken as the missionaries of Islam who with love and conviction turned people Muslims, an achievement which the state machinery could not make possible. They even did not ask anybody to embrace Islam as they believe in proselytizing by the impact of character. However, it does not mean that they had no urge to make people convert to Islam. Nizamuddin Auliya once remarked about this process of conversion in somewhat complaining tone that the Hindus are steadfast on their religion and only the light of character can change them.<sup>19</sup> Perhaps for this reason Muslims could not convert majority of Indian population towards Islam and they remained always in minority. Spread of *silsilah* centers across the Sub-Continent shows their interest in preaching Islam among the Hindus. However, this apparent indifference towards proselytizing Hindus created the perception that like other versions of mysticism Muslim Sufis believe in the righteousness of all religions. Though some circles of Muslim saints conceded to this notion; the renowned *silsilahs* were orthodox in nature. Bhagti movement took advantage of these currents among Muslims and started to reorganize itself towards the end of the Sultanate period.<sup>20</sup> They based their argument upon Monism which occupied a say in Muslim Sufism as well. The Sufi circle of the Muslims which shared thoughts with Bhagats was the Qadari.<sup>21</sup> However, the Delhi Sultanate was in no mood to recognize this co version of Sufism. For this reason, Bhagti cannot press itself against the orthodox stand point of religion and polity.

#### **State Patronage of Sufism under the Mughuls**

With the establishment of Mughul Empire in the Sub-Continent the state developed amiable relations with non-Muslim subjects by acknowledging their religion virtually equal to Islam. This attitude

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<sup>15</sup> Nizami, 77

<sup>16</sup> Shahabud Din Abu Hafs Umr ibn Abdullallah as-Soharwardi(1145-1234), writer of famous Sufi text *Awaraf-ul-Ma'arif*, was very close to Abbasid Caliph An-Nasir (d. 1225) and was appointed by the latter Chief of Sufis (*Sadrus-Sufiah*). As-Soharwardi dedicated his above-mentioned book to the Caliph. See, Van Den Bergh, "As-Soharwardi", *Urdu Daira Mu'arif-i-Islamiah* [Urdu Islamic Encyclopedia], vol. 11, Lahore: University of the Punjab, 1975, 469

<sup>17</sup> Anjum, 203, Shaykh Nizam al-Din had to write to the Soharwardi preceptor of Sultan Ghiyath al-Din in order to escape the latter's edict of beheading the Shaykh.

<sup>18</sup> Modernism allows a version of religion which has nothing to do with politics, economics and society. Sufism though developed some traits of arts for its expression but it does not conform to the modern concept of arts which exclusively focuses this world and does not recognize soul as an entity but as an emotion only. Sufism manages the betterment of soul with right course of body and it does not permit captivation of soul by the body.

<sup>19</sup> Nizami, 301

<sup>20</sup> Already existing movement of monism with greater emphasis upon devotion and resistance to mere ritualism, Bhagti made its appearance evident among Muslims in the Mughul period. Along with Muslim saints they floated the idea of universal love. For a comprehensive detail see Ishtiaq Hussain Qureshi, *The Muslim Community of the Indo-Pakistan SubContinent (610-1947): A Brief Historical Analysis*, (Karachi: University of Karachi, 2003), 16-21 and 138-165

<sup>21</sup> Although the founder of Qadri *silsilah*, Sheikh Abdul Qadir Jilani (d. 1166), was a Hanbali, a staunch orthodox school of thought, his *silsilah* showed liberty to mix with other religions. See D. S. Margoliouth, "Qadriyah", *Urdu Daira Mu'arif-i-Islamiah* [Urdu Islamic Encyclopedia], vol. 16/1, Lahore: University of the Punjab, 1978, 10-18

eradicated the apprehensions of Sufi circles about the rulers and Bhagti gained momentum under the state patronage. Especially Sikhs were very happy with early Mughul monarchs. Shiite Islam (vanguard of Sufism in Islam) also made way into the Sub-Continent in considerable number and on important administrative posts in this period. But to the good of orthodox circles there emerged a new *silsilah* to create defiance for the state on the issue of co-religious environment.<sup>22</sup> Naqshbandis under Sheikh Ahmed Sirhindi (1564-1625) popularly known as Mujaddid Alf-i-Sani (revivalist for the 2<sup>nd</sup> millennium) did not allow the rulers to float the idea of mixing of faiths. It was this resistance that Akbar's religion died out before his own death. Mujaddid and his disciples went on working for orthodox cause on political grounds and next two emperors were successfully dissuaded from lending any favor to Bhagats. The victory of Aurangzeb over Dara was actually the victory of Naqshbandi silsilah over Qadri silsilah (Pro-Bhagti) as the former had lent their full support to Aurnagzeb. This was unprecedented in the history that any Sufi circle backed its cause with political pressure and even persecution against the other circle.<sup>23</sup> Thus the orthodox character of Muslim Sultanate was restored under Aurangzeb. It should be noted that puritanical view of the reign is a biased version of historians in the British period. Restoration of orthodoxy did not mean any intolerance regarding the religion.

### **Conclusion**

No ideology or religion could attain universal respect without the political hold of its adherents. However, basic principles of any ideology are not determined by those who are in power. State is only a mean to implement the principles of any religion. Principles are the realm of their preceptors. Though, state can coerce any of the preceptors to issue decrees according to its directions; it would have rebellion in one or the other form in case of coercion. Therefore, rulers have to see how they could legitimize their rule by making their policies compatible with principles. On the other hand, to have the assistance of rulers for the proper dissemination of religious ideas preceptors of any religion -scholars, theologians or saints- adopted different ways to persuade the ruler. It may be direct dealing, social pressure or even a rebellion whichever suitable according to the circumstances. In the Medieval India Muslim Sufis employed their wisdom to spread the religion of Islam in this region. Unlike other parts of Islamic World Muslim Sufis of India had to face a powerful experience of Hindu mysticism which had engulfed the identity of other religions which were developed in India or were brought to this region. Muslim Sufis remained successful in retaining Islamic principles unaffected. In this effort one can witness all shades of Sufism in India under Muslim rule. In a nutshell Sufis deployed different approaches for one purpose i.e., peaceful spread of Islam in India.

With the termination of Muslim traditional rule in India, Sufism underwent a transformation in the Modern setup. Contrary to its original stance Sufism has become a tool of state machinery to legitimize state maneuverings. What we witness in the label of Sufism are remnants of the past only. No Sufi has courage to defy the state's edict. There is need to revive the original spirit of Sufism if we want to have peace in the region.

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<sup>22</sup> Though first with respect to synthesis of silsilahs in Sufims it entered India and made its presence felt towards the end of Muslim rule. Nizami, 130

<sup>23</sup> Sheikh Ahmed Sirhindi used to stay with the royal army in the reign of Jahangir in order to create his followers in the army. This attitude cast a considerable effect upon the policies of Jahangir and Shahjahan regarding the religion. To this effect a large number of the adherents of Naqshbandi are reported to fight as soldiers in the camp of Aurnagzeb along with the grandson of Mujaddid. see S. Moinul Haq, *Islamic Thought and Movements in the Subcontinent (711-1947)*, (Karachi: Pakistan Historical Society, 1979), 341