

# The Significant Role of Sufism in Central Asia

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## Abstract

Central Asia is considered to be a centre of Sufism. Sufism has played a significant role in fighting against Tsars of Russia and Soviet colonization. Here, Sufis and their different orders are the main religious sources. It is the common belief that in Sufism mundane activities such as politics, involvement in state business and fighting are abhorred and avoided but the history of Sufism in Central Asia tells the other story. Different Sufi orders came forward to safeguard Islam and interests of the Muslims. They not only fought for the Muslim cause but also took active part in the indigenous politics.

There came two stages in the history of Central Asia when Sufism became politically active: once, when the followers of Sufis stood against colonial powers to liberate their country and, no doubt, it was quite a positive role on their part, secondly, when they participated in national politics and it was not on party level but on individual level. Atif Abdul Hamid (2006) quotes the co-operation between

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IRP Tajikistan and Qazi Tor Jan Zada (Mufti Azam) as its prime example. This co-operation lasted till 1997. (1)

The world of Islam was challenged many times by non-Muslims. According to Gregory T. Massel, Sufi orders had been the only effective Muslim response to the 'infidels' of Qara-Khitay and Mongols particularly in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. Again, the only serious and organized resistance against Russian conquerors in eighteenth and nineteenth centuries and Soviet regime in the 1920s was led by the same Sufi orders. (2)

These Sufi orders (tariqa) were called 'Parallel', 'non-Official' or 'Sectarian Islam' by Soviet sources. Alexander Bennigson and Wimbush S. Enders (1985) write in 'Muslims of the Soviet Empire' that Parallel Islam proved to be more powerful, dynamic and deeply rooted than the Official Islam. According to them, Sufi brotherhoods were 'closed' but 'well-structured and hierarchic organizations bound by an absolute dedication to a religious ideal'. They opposed the foreign rulers to safeguard Islam. The survival of Islam in USSR owes to the constant struggle of these Sufi orders. Parallel and non-Official Islam would not be controlled by Soviet higher authorities or the so-called Muslim spiritual directorates. As Official Islam could not gain ground in the Muslims of Central Asia and it rather gave way to Parallel Islam at some places so the later proved more effective with its adepts running their clandestine religious schools and mosques. These mosques and schools were many times more numerous than the official working mosques. (3)

In the 'Islamic Threat to Soviet State', Bennigson (1984) says that the activities of the Tariqa were generally centred on the 'holy places' like tombs of Muslim saints. The people of Central Asia took these holy places as substitutes for the pilgrimage to Makkah. Prayers by believers and Zikr by the adepts at these places had replaced the closed mosques. These places also acted as a forum which the Sufis used for

teaching and for an active counter-propaganda against official atheism. Sufi brotherhood was not a small group of people. Their number rather increased with the passage of time. Though they were targeted badly since the World War II, an up rise was noticed in the branches of Sufism. The adepts of Sufi orders included not only the peasants and poor craftsmen of Central Asian cities but also a growing proportion of industrial workers and intellectuals. (4)

In 1975, a Soviet sociologist, V.G. Pivovarov established that more than half the believers in North Caucasus belonged to a Sufi brotherhood. This means that in north Caucasus alone the number of Sufi adepts could be around quarter of a million, an incredible figure for an underground society. (5)

The Sufi brotherhood as not being passive force detached from the world, were quite dynamic. The adepts were not only interested in advancing spiritually towards God but also in building God's rule on earth. This latter interest was alarming for Soviet forces and perhaps for this reason Soviet forces described them as a 'fanatical anti-Soviet, anti-social reactionary force' (6) but they couldn't help admitting that the emotional and aesthetic aspects of *Sufi* ritual appeared much more attractive than the dull and vulgar official ceremonies.

According to Bennigson and Enders (1985), Sufi brotherhoods played a major role in the history of the area by protecting the Muslims against the assault of the infidels and influencing some infidels by their preaching. As a result, Islam became deeply rooted among the northern sedentary Turks, Tatars, Bashkirs, Kazakh and Kirghiz nomads. It is, therefore, rightly said that from 12<sup>th</sup> century, the history of Central Asia is influenced by the activities of Sufi brotherhood.(7)

Farzana Shiekh (1992) found four Sufi brotherhoods active in the territories of Central Asia: Naqshbandia (the

most wide spread), Qadiriya, Yasawiya and Kubrawiya. The strongholds of Sufism are the Farghana valley, Daghestan, and northern Azerbaijan. (8)

### **Naqshbandiya**

Sufi orders exist in all the Muslim areas of the Soviet Union, but their main bastion remains the northern Caucasus (especially Dagestan and the Chechen-Ingush Republic) where the Naqshbandiya for the last two centuries has been the standard bearer of the resistance to the Tsarists and their Soviet successors. According to Syed Qasim Mehmood, Naqshbandiya resembles Awais Qadri's Tariqa. (9)

Muhammad Ibn-e-Bah-ud-Din Naqshbad (1317-89), the founder of the Naqshbandiya Tariqa, was and is still considered the most revered mystic and saint in Central Asia and Afghanistan. Even today his tomb outside Bukhara is the most visited place in Central Asia. Though transformed into an anti-religious museum, it is still used as a place of pilgrimage by believers. (10)

Bennigson and Enders (1985) adequately outlined the underlying reasons for the sweeping success of this Sufi brotherhood, of which following is the most relevant to the argument made here:

“The Naqshbandiya has a unique ability to adapt to changing social and political conditions. An adept is not ascetic; he remains in the world. Thus as an individual, the Naqshbandi adept is required to adjust his social behaviour to meet the requirements of everyday life; he must be socially flexible.”(11)

This order symbolizes doctrinal liberalism, in that it excludes fanaticism or radicalism. It is for this reason that Naqshbandiya has been successful in superimposing itself on other brotherhoods, absorbing them without insisting on their elimination. Haghayghi (1995) seems to agree with

Bennigson and Enders (1985) when he says, Naqshbandiya is the most popular Sufi sect with liberal orientation. Bennigson and Enders give the credit of Muslim political survival to the Naqshbandiya saying that it was largely because of this sect that Sufism had been institutionalized and became an integral part of the political, social and cultural life of Central Asia since the fourteenth century. (12)

Ahmed Rashid (2002) also recognizes this distinct feature of Naqshbandiya that they unlike other brotherhoods believe in active missionary work and political activism. Many leaders of the revolts against Tsar and the communists were Naqshbandis. (13) He also mentions the leader of 1898 revolt in Andijan. 'In twentieth century Naqshbandi political activism played a major role in influencing Islamic movements in Afghanistan, Chechnya, and ... the Farghana valley', says Rashid (ibid).

In 'Sufi Movements, Search for identity and Islamic resurgence', Thierry Zarcone finds Central Asia a home of several important brotherhoods where Sufism remained particularly active in the former nomadic areas. Here 'native society preserved its clan structure, such as in Turkmenistan, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzia and southern part of Uzbekistan'. (14) Sufi orders had been quite active in the Tatar intellectual and cultural revival of 19<sup>th</sup> century in the Volga region. After war, they were almost disappeared. Now following the breakdown of USSR, the Sufi network is gradually re-emerging particularly in Bukhara and Namangan. (15)

The Sufi orders especially Naqshbandis assumed the leading role in the intellectual renaissance of the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Many Naqshbandis were in fore-front of the modernist liberal Jadid reform movement. Many leaders of Basmachi movement in Central Asia were all Naqshbandi Murshids or Murids. (16)

Naqshbandiya is the most popular of all the Sufi orders as it follows the religious matters strictly but doesn't go for

the excesses of other orders. This order is well organized and perfect whose aim is to support and dominate the religion.(17)

### **Qadriya**

The Qadriya order emerged in the seventh decade of 19<sup>th</sup> century when Naqshbandi resistance came to an end leaving Muslims disappointed and discouraged. Russian forces crossed all the limits to crush the Muslims after they occupied the area. That is why all the affected people joined Qadriya order to seek spiritual enlightenment. As the continuous wars of almost half a century, affected the souls of the people badly, so this order proved a fresh air and became famous. But shortly, government turned against Qadriya. The Russian wanted to crush every form of Muslims which could create an impressive role in some type of organization, no matter how weak and harmless the form was. For this reason when Qadriya started “Quali” and “Urs”, the Russian forces, at one occasion, opened fire at the procession and hundreds of people were killed at the spot. (18)

The Qadriya was founded in Baghdad, and is probably by prestige and influence, the second most important of the Sufi orders. As early as the 12<sup>th</sup> century, this brotherhood was introduced by Arab merchants from Baghdad to the Kingdom of Bulghar on the Volga and to the cities of Turkistan, especially those of the Farghana valley.

Bennigson in ‘Mystics and Commissars’ explains how Qadriya was named ‘Kunta Haji Tariqat’ for the reason that this order was brought to the north Caucasus in the 1850s by a Kumyk ‘Kunta Haji Kishiev’. Thus, its association with old Qadriya was ignored intentionally. Most of the warriors of Imam Shamil joined Kunta Haji as they were disappointed by the ruthless Tsar administration and realized the power in their own organization, so they changed their mode i.e. from

‘non-resistance to evil’ to the direct action against Russian administration.

Bennigson (1984) gives the structure of ‘Kunta Haji’ brotherhood which was divided into three principal orders:

1. ‘The Tariqa of Bammam Giray operating in Chechen country. The most moderate one of the three.’
2. The Tariqa of Batal Haji operating in the Ingush country. It is the most anti-Russian of all Sufi orders operating in the USSR. The leadership of Tariqa is hereditary in the Belhoroev family. The Tariqa remains very conventional in religious matters, refusing innovations and observing dogmatic taboos towards other Muslims.’
3. ‘The Chim Mirza Tariqa, the most ‘modernist’ of the ‘Qadiri branches’.(19)

After the war, a fourth brotherhood Tariqa of Vis Haji emerged from Chim Mirza Tariqa. Qadriya order which was restricted to northern Caucasus, Chechen Ingush Republic, northern Ossetia and northern Dagestan spread to Kazakhstan and Kyrgyzstan in 1943. Less ‘intellectual’ than the Naqshbandis, the Qadris have a long tradition of underground revolutionary activity in the Soviet Union.(20)

### **Yasawiya**

The Yasawiya, an old Sufi order, was founded in southern Kazakhstan in the 12<sup>th</sup> century. Ahmed Yasawi was the founder of Yasawiya. (21) It was the best known among the Central Asian brotherhoods. Faud Koprulu termed it as a ‘permeable to pre-Islamic beliefs’. Turkish speaking nomads from the people of Steppe were its supporters. (22)

Ravil Bukaraev says that Ahmed Yasawi was the first renowned Sufi of Turkic origin, creating the Sufi movement of Yasawiya, the Tariqa of wanderers. Though this Tariqa did

not attain much fame in its own right, the much more famous Tariqa of Naqshbandiya is believed to have sprung from the teachings of Ahmed Yasawi. (23)

As Yasawiya was a Tariqa of wandering dervishes, it had neither any branch nor any permanent settlement except near Sheikh's tomb. The spread of Islam among the people of Turkistan and the nomads of Kyrgyzstan and Kazakhstan owes to these wandering dervishes. (24)

These dervishes kept them restricted to practice the loud zikr and they were not interested in mundane affairs. But in late 1920s, the repression after the defeat of Basmachis resulted in the emergence of two new radical branches of Yasawiya: 'the Laachi' and 'the Hairy Ishans'. Both branches were political in nature and survive today. The followers of the Laachi were farmers of villages while the Hairy Ishans belonged to the cities. The followers of these branches were high in number but for the underground nature of their brotherhood, they couldn't be located easily. (25)

Like other brotherhoods Yasawiya had been under the severe criticism of Soviet sources. They accused the Tariqa of terrorism and political agitation. Many adepts were tried in Kyrgyzstan for opposing Soviet laws, running clandestine Qur'an schools and places of prayer. Main charge against them, common to all brotherhoods, was to sabotage the Soviet regime and preparing the foundations of an Islamic theocratic state.

### **Kubrawiya**

After communist revolution, Sufism was left the only shelter for the Muslims of Central Asia. It was quite a natural choice on their part as any person when faces shackles outside, he tries to hide in his inner world. The same happened with the Muslims of Central Asia. They sought refuge in these orders of Sufism. (26)

In the World War II when Soviet ruler's grip became weak, such orders emerged. Kubrawiya was one of them.



Kubrawiya, another mystical brotherhood was founded in the 12th century in Khwarzam. It was named after Shiekh Najamuddin Kabral. (27)

This Tariqa practices loud zikr. The Kubrawiya played an important part in the Islamisation of the nomadic tribes of the Golden Horde. Today it is the least influential of Central Asian brotherhoods. (28)

Finally there are numerous 'wandering' mystics in Central Asia. Some who are loosely connected to a brotherhood such as the Qalandria whose spiritual centre is in Samarkand. Others have no affiliation with any brotherhood. Bennigson (1984) calls the later as 'part Muslim clerics (ruhani), part Turco-Mongol Shaman (witch-doctor)'. During 1970s, Sufi Islam was targeted by seculars in Central Asia and northern Caucasus which shows not only the deep influence of Sufism on the Muslims of the area but also the Russian fear of the power of Islam. For them, it was the combined effort of Official and Parallel Islam that helped the religion survive in Central Asia. (29) Bennigson measures the success of these efforts with the fact that '80 percent of the population is 'believers', whilst 20 percent are declared atheist, whereas the percentage is exactly the reverse among the Christians, so called'. The role of practicing Muslims and these brotherhoods is not limited to preserve the religious beliefs and their cult observance. In Islam, religious, national and political spheres are interwoven, so these brotherhoods have become the centre of 'traditional opposition' to the Russian presence. (30)

Sodat Olimova, a research scholar at the 'Sharq', centre for analytical studies in Dushanbe, says that these Tariqas play an important role in the politicization of Islam. They opposed the secular administration. (31)

This should be kept in mind that the USA does not like the concept of Islamic revolution and labels it as extremism. The USA favours the Sufism and its related activities against

the Islamic revolutionary movements. The most significant example is the research works presented by Nixon Centre in a seminar in March 2004. In these researches, the opportunities of getting benefits from Sufism by Washington were discussed. The following resolutions were passed:

1. To help in the progress of Central Asia so that they are bound to the customs and traditions of this specific region and no space should be left for the introduction of outer ideologies.
2. As it is not possible for the USA to help in training of Imam in Islamic countries but it can help in secular education in this region and the experience of Turkish secularism should be repeated being closely connected to USA and NATO, the teaching of Atta Turk should be consulted.(32)

Consequently the markets were invaded with the books about Sufism and the books of Sufis were used to combat Islamic revolutionary teachings. In mosques, Sufis were appointed as Imams and preachers. They were given heavy financial support and were supplied with weapons which give forth to riots between the groups having Sufi ideology and other people resulting in many deaths. So, if the Islamic powers want to perform an active role in future, they will have to create a harmony between Islamic movements and Sufi orders.

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