

Analyzing the Development of the Chishti Silsilah in Delhi: A Case Analysis of the Role Played by Shaikh Nizamuddin Auliya

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Abstract

In the early medieval period, Delhi emerged as the nerve-centre of Islam. With the establishment of the Delhi Sultanate, the city came to be regarded as a safe haven for not only the rulers and the nobility but also the scholars and men of piety. Gradually, Delhi became a focal point of Sufism. The most prominent silsilah in Delhi was the Chishti silsilah and the most popular Sufi saint was Shaikh Nizamuddin Auliya. This paper aims to analyze the rise and development of the Chishti silsilah and the role played by Shaikh Nizamuddin Auliya in popularizing Sufism in the city.

Introduction

Delhi became the heart of the Sufi movement at the beginning of the 13th century due to Mongol invasions and the consequent upheavals in Central Asia and Iran. Sultan Iltutmish moved his capital to Delhi and the city became the only region in the entire Islamic East where peace and harmony prevailed. There was an exodus of scholars and holy men from the regions run over by the Mongols, and these scholars and men of piety took refuge in the city which they called the *Quwwat al-Islam* (Cupola of Islam). By the end of the 13th century Delhi came to occupy a unique position in the Asian world.

The city of Delhi was unique in the way that it became the 'magnetic field' of Sufism right from the beginning of the establishment of the Sultanate. The city attracted Sufi mystics from all the *silsilahs* and many Sufi saints lived and worked in the city during the 13th century. The Chishti *silsilah* was, however, the most prominent, and its saints were the most revered among all.

The Chishti Silsilah in Delhi: Rise and Development

The genre of Sufism which became most popular in the city was propagated by the Chishti saints. The most prominent saints of the city belonged to this *silsilah*. These saints immensely impacted the society and culture of their times and were revered as semi-divine figures. The pioneer of the Chishti Sufis in Delhi was Khwaja Qutub ad-din Bakhtiyar Kaki (d. 1235 AD), who was the principle disciple of the Khwaja of Ajmer. He brought the teachings of his master, Gharib Nawaz, to Delhi at a time when the city was emerging as the power centre of the new Muslim Sultanate. Multan was already a well-established Muslim centre, while Delhi, a younger city, was experiencing rapid growth under the leadership of Sultan Iltutmish.¹ Abul Fazl in the *Akbar Nama* has explained the way in which the Khwaja became a disciple of Khwaja Muin ad-din Chishti of Ajmer—“Khwaja Qutub ad-din Ushi of Andijan became, in Baghdad, in the month of Rajab 522, in the mosque of Imam Abu i-lais of Samarkand and in the presence of Shaikh Shihab ad-din Suhrawardi, of Shaikh Uhad ad-din of Kirman and of a number of other saints, the disciple of Khwaja Muin ad-din.”²

Khwaja Qutub arrived in Delhi seven years after his master’s arrival in Ajmer and made the city the centre of his activity sometime after 1221 AD. After a brief stay at Multan, he left for Delhi where the Turks were busy laying the foundations of Muslim political and cultural institutions. He was a contemporary of Sultan Iltutmish who had provided a safe haven of refuge to the divines and mystics of the Islamic world.

He was entrusted with the task of establishing the Chishti order in Delhi, and this was an extremely difficult task as many Muslim divines from the Islamic world were also present in the city. The Khwaja was close to the Sultan and though he did not associate himself formally with the ruler or the nobility, he extended his moral support to the Sultan in the construction of public works and centres of cultural activity. The Sultan offered the post of *Shaikh al Islam* to the Khwaja but he declined to accept it owing to the restrictions put on political involvement by the Chishti traditions.

¹Haeri, Muneera, *The Chishtis: A Living Light*, Oxford University Press, Karachi, 2000, p. 46

²Fazl, Abul, *Akbar Nama*, vol. II, translated by H. Beveridge, Asiatic Society of Bengal, Rare Books, Delhi, 1972, p. 239

The Khwaja contributed immensely to the spread of the *silsilah* in Delhi. After his death he was buried in Mehrauli, the place of his residence. His tomb lies in a congested area and is frequented by visitors. The *khalifas* of the Shaikh were Shaikh Farid ad-din Ganj i-Shakar, Shaikh Badr ad-din Ghaznawi, Khwaja Imad ad-din, Khwaja Syed Muhammad Sugri, Shaikh Mahmud, Shaikh Hamid ad-din, Shaikh Saad, Qazi Shaikh Imad, and Shaikh Muiz ad-din. Among the *khalifas* of the Khwaja, the most prominent were Shaikh Farid ad-din Ganj i-Shakar and Shaikh Badr ad-din Ghaznawi. The former made Ajodhan in Punjab his centre of activity, while the latter lived and preached the message of Sufi mysticism in Delhi.

Ghaznawi's work in Delhi typified the contradictions between the moral and material values of the age. Going against the principles of his *silsilah*, he dabbled in politics and could not resist the allurements which the city offered. His love for the material world could not take away his spiritual prowess with which he was endowed, and he commanded great respect in the mystic circles of Delhi.³ He was an erudite scholar, a poet and a preacher of great eminence. He was buried near the tomb of his master.⁴

The master whose disciples were to turn the fortunes of the Chishtis in the city was Shaikh Farid ad-din Ganj i-Shakar (popularly known as Baba Farid). He had seven principle disciples—Shaikh Jamal ad-din Hansvi, Shaikh Najib ad-din Mutawwakil, Shaikh Badr ad-din Ishaq, Shaikh Ali Sabir, Shaikh Arif, Maulana Fakhr ad-din Safahani, and Shaikh Nizam ad-din Auliya. Among all these *khalifas* of the Baba Farid, Shaikh Nizam ad-din Auliya was the most prominent Sufi saint in the city of Delhi. However, there were others who made significant contributions in the development of the *silsilah* in the city.

The younger brother of Baba Farid, Shaikh Najib ad-din Mutawwakil (1175-1265 AD), was a prominent Sufi of his time. He lived in abject poverty and made frequent visits to Ajodhan to meet his spiritual guide. He was buried outside the city of Delhi near the Manda gateway (present day Adchini area). According to Shaikh Abd al-Haqq, Najib ad-din's grave lay on the path to the tomb of Khwaja

³Nizami, K.A., *Religion and Politics in India During the Thirteenth Century*, Oxford University Press, New Delhi, 2002, p. 205

⁴Dehlvi, Abd al-Haqq Muhaddith, *Akhbar al-Akhyar*, Maktaba Jamia Ltd., Delhi, pp. 50-51

Qutub ad-din. Sultan Muhammad bin Tughlaq erected a structure over the grave of Shaikh Najib ad-din Mutawwakil.⁵

Shaikh Nizamuddin Auliya: Popularizing Chishti Sufism in Delhi

The most prominent saint of the 14th century Shaikh Nizam ad-din Auliya (1244-1325 AD) who lived and worked arduously to make Delhi the nerve centre of Chishti Sufism had great regard for Shaikh Najib ad-din Mutawwakil. Shaikh Nizam ad-din Auliya came to Delhi, accompanied by his mother and sisters, to complete his education. When he first arrived, he stayed near the residence of Shaikh Najib ad-din Mutawwakil. Abul Fazl in the *Ain i-Akbari* mentions a saying of Shaikh Nizam ad-din Auliya who heaped praises on Shaikh Najib ad-din Mutawwakil—“When I left Badaun for Delhi desiring to pay respects to Ganj i-Shakar, I met Najib ad-din and was much benefitted by his society.”⁶ In a passage from the *Fawaid al-Fuad*, the Shaikh is seen praising the virtues of Shaikh Najib ad-din Mutawwakil:

“I have not found his equal in this city. He does not know which day or which month it is, nor does he know what is the price of grain or meat! Nothing of such matters crosses his mind, so observed is he in his devotions to God—may God be exceedingly merciful to him.”⁷

The mystical methodology of Shaikh Nizam ad-din Auliya was preserved in the *Fawaid al-Fuad*, a text which aimed to boost his popularity in the 14th century and at the same time instruct Muslims on how they could live a life based on spiritual virtues. In the text, he asserted that he received substantial mystical training from his master. Through his anecdotes Nizam ad-din conveyed to his audience that his relationship with his master was a model on which the *pir-murid* relationship was to be based.

Marshall G.S. Hodgson has opined that many Sufis devoted their time to help others in solving their moral problems, and many others devoted themselves to

⁵Rizvi, S.A.A., *A History of Sufism in India*, vol. I, Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers Pvt. Ltd (Fourth reprint), 2012, p. 152

⁶Fazl, Abul, *Ain i-Akbari*, translated by Col. H.S. Jarrett, vol. III, Oriental Books Reprint Corporation, New Delhi, 1978, p. 408

⁷Sijzi, Amir Hasan, *Fawaid al-Fuad*, translated in English by Bruce B. Lawrence, Paulist Press, New Jersey, 1992, p. 226

public preaching. According to him, Shaikh Nizam ad-din Auliya acted as a ‘father-confessor’ to Muslims of all classes, and even to some non-Muslims.⁸ He stressed forgiveness of enemies, insisted on moderation in relation to worldly goods, and stressed on the importance of responsible behaviour. According to Mohammad Habib, ‘The Shaikh’s life was, in fact, the embodiment of what psychological research shall one day prove to be the deepest principle of our human nature: that salvation or happiness in its highest form lies not in a war with the attractions of worldly life or in indifference towards them, but in the healthy development of the cosmic emotion, in a sympathetic identification of the individual with his environment.’⁹ According to K.A. Nizami, this identification of the individual with his environment by the Shaikh converted the mystic movement into a mass movement.

The Shaikh moved to a village called Ghiyaspur in the vicinity of Kilukhari. At the time the Shaikh made it his abode, the place was unknown to most of the citizens of Delhi. It was only after the death of Sultan Balban and the ascendancy of his son Muiz ad-din Kaiqubad that the area became relevant. Kaiqubad made Kilukhari his capital and as a consequence Ghiyaspur became important. More people came and settled in the area, and it became a busier place. Later, during the rule of Sultan Ala ad-din Khalji, Ghiyaspur became a prosperous suburb of Delhi.¹⁰

A passage from the *Fawaid al-Fuad* describes the precincts of Ghiyaspur and its conversion, in later years, into a bustling township.

“I went to Ghiyaspur and in those days that place was not so inhabited. It was a neglected spot, with few people living there. I went and took up residence there. But then some time later Kaiqubad moved to Kilukhari and people began to crowd into Ghiyaspur. Kings, princes and many others, a great throng of people, flocked to Ghiyaspur.”¹¹

The Shaikh attracted a large number of disciples who learnt Islamic ideals of morality and religious observances from him. A passageway was constructed

⁸Hodgson, Marshall G.S., *The Venture of Islam*, vol. II, Vanguard Books Pvt. Ltd., Lahore, 2004, p. 206

⁹Nizami, K.A. (ed.), 1974, Op cit, p. 311

¹⁰Rizvi, S.A.A., 2012, Op cit, p. 160

¹¹Sijzi, Amir Hasan, 1992, Op cit, p. 244

between Delhi and Ghiyaspur and the rich and poor alike visited the *khanqah* of the Shaikh. Barani in his *Tarikh i-Firoz Shahi* mentions that an atmosphere of serenity and spirituality surrounded the area.¹² Barani has furnished a detailed account of the popularity and influence of the Shaikh. Khwaja Muin ad-din Chishti introduced Sufism to India, but it was Shaikh Nizam ad-din Auliya who took upon himself the task of spreading the Sufi message far and wide.

In a passage from the *Siyar al-Auliya*, the views of Barani who is quoted by the author of the text, it is evident that Shaikh Nizam ad-din Auliya was the most celebrated Sufi of the time—“Shaikh Nizam ad-din had opened wide the doors of his discipleship and admitted nobles and plebeians, rich and poor, learned and illiterate, citizens and villagers, soldiers and warriors, freemen and slaves, and these people refrained from many improper things because they considered themselves disciples of the Shaikh. If any of the disciples committed a sin, he confessed it before the Shaikh and vowed allegiance anew.”¹³ Sultan Ala ad-din Khalji’s market regulations and his suppression of immoral activities were greatly influenced by the Shaikh’s Sufi movement in Ghiyaspur. Many members of the Sultan’s family and the Sultan himself had great faith in the powers of the Shaikh.

An analysis of the malfuz *Fawaid al-Fuad* reveals that the Shaikh had a firm belief, like his Chishti predecessors and like his successors, in the basic tenets of Islam. It is interesting to note that the Shaikh and most of the other Chishti *shaikhs* never renounced their faith. Evidence from literary sources suggest that they continued to follow and abide by the basic tenets of their religion, while adding a spiritual component to it. Shaikh Nizam ad-din Auliya explains in detail the difference between mandatory and supererogatory prayers and emphasises the need to perform both in a passage in the *Fawaid al-Fuad*.¹⁴

Moreover, he also emphasises the need to recite the Quran and memorize it in yet another passage from the text.¹⁵ The Shaikh also justifies the Islamic practice of congregational prayer and though Sufism essentially means a one-to-one connect

¹²Barani, Zia ad-din, *Tarikh i-Firoz Shahi*, translated in Hindi from original Persian by S.A.A. Rizvi, *Tughlaq Kaleen Bharat* (part I), Hindi Department, Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh, 1956, pp. 341-45

¹³Khwurd, Amir, *Siyar al-Auliya*, translated by Ishrat Hussain Ansari and Hamid Afaq Qureshi, *Idarah i-Adabiyat i-Dilli*, Delhi, 2013, pp. 346-48

¹⁴Sijzi, Amir Hasan, 1992, *Op cit*, p. 95

¹⁵*Ibid*, p. 156

with the supreme divine, praying in groups, even if there are two people, is emphasized by the saint.¹⁶ Therefore, evidence from the *Fawaid al-Fuad* clearly indicates that the ideas of the Shaikh Nizam ad-din Auliya were not in opposition to the basic tenets of Islam. Evidently, his followers and disciples also practiced that genre of Sufism which was not in opposition to the basic principles of the faith.

It is important to discuss the position of the Shaikh with regard to conversion as religious conversion has been attributed to many famous Sufis in the Deccan and Bengal in the medieval period by scholars who have attempted to analyse the impact of Sufi teachings on non-Muslim disciples and their subsequent conversion to Islam. According to Prof. Mohammad Habib, ‘the wholesale conversions attributed to the Muslim mystics of this period are found in later-day fabrications only and these works must be totally discarded. The Muslim mystics did not bother about conversion; it was not part of their duty. Muslim mysticism in those days was a post-graduate discipline—a discipline exclusively for Mussalmans who had completed their study of the theological and other sciences.’¹⁷ Moreover, Habib points out that the mystics never indulged in any theological controversy, and did not try to run down Hinduism.

Habib contends that “the mystics neither studied Hinduism like Abu Raihan al-Biruni nor quarrelled with it. They merely passed it by. Not a single case of conversion or attempted conversion by a mystic *shaikh* is recorded in the reliable annals.”¹⁸ While discussing the process of urban revolution in northern India, Habib therefore contends that ‘the acceptance of Islam by the city-workers was a decision of local professional groups, and that in making this decision they were naturally more concerned with mundane affairs and their position in the social order than with abstract theological truths, which they had been declared incapable of understanding or even hearing.’¹⁹ This, however, does not provide a valid argument of en mass conversion of the artisanal class, which Habib has tried to project as a matter of choice instead of a matter of force. Scholars are divided on

¹⁶Ibid, p. 203

¹⁷Nizami, K.A. (ed.), 1974, Op cit, p. 76

¹⁸Ibid, p. 77

¹⁹Ibid, p. 77

the matter of conversion in the early medieval period, and are still engaged in a lively debate on theme of conversion.

The theory postulated by Richard M. Eaton stressed on the role of the Sufis as agents of conversion in the Deccan and in Bengal. His main premise was that through the process of accretion and reform, the Sufis were successful in converting many communities to Islam. The “conversion by the sword” theory is also accepted by some historians.

As far as the political position of Shaikh Nizam ad-din Auliya is concerned, it is important to note that the relations between the first Sultan of the Tughlaq dynasty, Ghiyas ad-din, and the Shaikh were strained, and a great role in this conflict was played by the ulema and some competing Sufis of the time. According to Ferishta, Ghiyas ad-din Tughlaq who then reigned at Delhi, though outwardly treated Nizam ad-din with consideration, was in reality displeased with him.

Conclusion

The Shaikh died in 1325 AD and was buried in Ghiyaspur, the place of his residence. Throughout the centuries that followed after the Shaikh’s death, his shrine was visited by kings and nobles, scholars, Sufis, rich and poor alike. Shaikh Nizam ad-din Auliya succeeded in converting *Tasawwuf* into a ‘space-time force for the betterment of the individual and society.’²⁰ Under him, the *khanqah* organization reached its highest peak and every detail concerning its functioning was worked out meticulously.²¹ Therefore, it may be reiterated that Shaikh Nizam ad-din Auliya played a very significant role in making Delhi a popular centre of Chishti Sufism in the medieval period.

²⁰Siddiqui, Sameena Hasan, *Aura and the Institution: A Chishti Dargah*, Gateway Publishing, Delhi, 2008, p. 16

²¹Ibid, p. 16