

INDIAN SUFIS AS PIONEERS OF PEACE, HARMONY AND BROTHERHOOD: ROLE OF SOME MEDIEVAL CHISTI SUFIS

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Abstract

Sufism reached India through the endeavours of Sufis when the Indian society was passing through the darkest period of its history as the casteism was at its peak, inequality rampant, the religious scriptures only available to those who belonged to high castes and all the basic amenities of life were denied to people born of low castes. In such circumstances the Sufis established their Khanqahs among the lower castes and introduced and preached the basic teachings of Islam of peace, harmony, love and brotherhood. This attracted the ignored section of society towards these Khanqahs where they saw a classless atmosphere, where everyone was welcomed irrespective of caste, color and religion.

Sufi adepts of India, particularly those belonging to Chishti/Sattariyah looked upon social service as the supreme object of all their spiritual exercises. They considered a life of poverty and self-sufficient contemplation to be incompatible with the highest mystic ideals. They believed in a pacific and non-violent approach and demonstrated the working of these principles in their own lives. Consequently they were successful in disseminating the teachings of peace, harmony and brotherhood to the then society. The present paper as such is an attempt to highlight the role of medieval Chishti Sufis in promoting the communal peace, harmony and brotherhood. The present paper will essentially be a desk research with descriptive and historical method.

Keywords: Medieval Sufis, Peace, Harmony, Brotherhood, Chishti, Pacifism, Non-violence.

Introduction

Tasawwuf Sufism reached India, when Indian society was passing through the darkest phase of its history, when the casteism in Indian society was at its peak. It is reported that all the atrocities of civic life were directed to low caste people who constituted the majority of Indian population. The Muslim saints of this period established their *Madrasha* in these areas which were inhabited by those low caste people. Their unassuming ways, broad human sympathies and the classless atmosphere of their *Madrashas* attracted this section of Indian society to its fold. They demonstrated the Islamic idea of Tasbeed as a working principle in social life, the medieval *Madrasha* became the spear-heads of Muslim culture.¹

Among the two prominent Sufi orders (Chishtiyyah and Suhrawardiyyah) in medieval India the Chishtiyyah order gained more prominence with their cosmopolitan approach as K.A. Nizami has rightly pointed out that the "popularity and success of the Chishti saints in India was due to their understanding of the Indian conditions and the religious attitudes and aspirations of the Indian people".² They lived in the midst of the lower strata of society and identified themselves with the problems and perplexities of the people. The prominent saints of this order in medieval India include Khwaja Mu'inn'ud-din Chishti, Baba Farid and Khwaja Nizam ud din Auliya. Now I would like to highlight their role in promoting peace harmony and Brotherhood in medieval India.

Khwaja Mu'inn'ud-din Chishti life was born in 536 A.H./1141 A.D. in Sijistan,³ his life has been discussed in detail by many biographers⁴ therefore without repeating the same, coming

¹ K.A. Nizami, *Some Aspects of Religion and Politics in India During 13th C.E* (Oxford University Press, 2003), p. 261.

² *Ibid.*, p. 178.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 182.

⁴ For his details see: Akbarul Afiya, *Faraidul Faid*, Siyaru Auliya, Siyaru 7 Afiya.

directly to his arrival in India. After reaching India he selected Ajmer as his place of stay which was not merely a seat of Chaghan power but a religious centre as well. Nizami catagorizes his determination and great self confidence to work in such place with high political and religious significance. According to K. A. Nizami the future of Muslim mystic movement in India was depended on his success or failure.³ But unfortunately no details are available about the ways he worked in Ajmer.

He is portrayed as a teacher who consoled everyone who came to him in distress. His larger *Maash* was open to all sections of society without any discrimination. He intended to create social environment within which equality could be practiced and dedicated his entire life to service of humanity. He had an exceptional personality, and his impact on society was long-lasting. In addition to his service to humanity he is remembered for his devotion to Allah. He instilled in his disciples the spirit of human service, assisting the oppressed and meeting the needs of the poor. He dedicated his life to social service. As a result, he refused to associate himself with the rulers, kings, and administration. He realized that if they did, they would be unable to fulfill their social obligations as they desired. As he encountered different societies, cultures, and ideologies, he gradually became successful in his mission. He was noted for his sacrifices but even more for the ungrudging manner in which he took upon himself the burdens of all who needed help, and needy Muslims and Hindus continuously surrounded him.

He preached Islam not only through precepts and sermons, but also by giving living examples of humanity serving with a single purpose and unity of mind. According to him worship is listening to the plight of the oppressed, assisting the needy, and filling the stomachs of the hungry. Mirnu'd Din worked tirelessly to understand that constant concern for those in need of comfort and assistance is regarded as more valuable in society. Nizami maintains that as "some of his sayings as recorded by Mir Isbard, supply the quintessence of his religious and social ideology and

³ *Ibid.*, p. 134.

reveal him as a man of wide sympathies, catholic views and deep humanism."⁴ Defining the highest form of devotion to God he said it is nothing but to redress the misery of those in distress, to fulfill the needs of the helpless and to feed the hungry and regarding the qualities which endear a man to God, he referred to the following attributes, develop river like generosity, sea like affection and earth like hospitality. As these phenomena of nature make no distinction between any creatures of God, likewise man should not discriminate between one human being and another. He emphasized religious harmony, tolerance, the importance of education, minority rights protection, and a pluralistic society. He firmly believed in the concept of being stronger together and solidarity created an environment of peaceful coexistence among various Indian subcontinent communities.

Mas'ud 'd-Din Chudri stands out as a role model for others in every way. He was a man who cared about others. He was more concerned with others than he was with himself. He was a true ambassador of religious syncretism in India. He promoted humanitarian values as well as universal love and peace.

Shaykh Farid u'd-din Gang-i-Shakar

He was one of the most outstanding figures of Chudri order in thirteenth century. He was born in 571 A.H./1175 A.D. Nizami mentions that Muhammad ghausi has traced his deacon to caliph Umar.⁵ His first teacher was his mother Bibi Qasim at Nizami states it was she who kindled that spark of Divine Love in him which later dominated his entire being and molded his thought and action.⁶ After completing his early education he went to Multan for further education where he met with Shaykh Qasim u'd-din Bakhshyar khalil and joined his mystical discipline. Nizami mentions this Muhammad ghausi remarks that all the shaykhs of India are unanimous in declaring that no saint has

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 184.

⁵ K. A. Nizami, *The Life and Times of Shaykh Farid-ud-Din Gang-i-Shakar*, (Delhi: Idarah-i-Ashrafyat-i-Delhi, 1955), p. 12.

⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 13.

entitled *gaw-i-shataz* in his devotions and penitencies¹⁰ after completing his mystic training at the feet of Shakh-yar khalī he settled at Harid and then shifted to Ajothan where he set up his *khānqah* where the spiritually starved people fars to him from every part of country.

Defining the significance of these *khānqahs* Nizami in his book *The Life and Times of Shaikh Farid u'd-din gaw-i-shataz* avers that "as their *khānqahs* were the only places where people of different shades of opinion, professing different religions and speaking different languages met, these *khānqahs* became veritable centers of cultural synthesis where ideas were freely exchanged and a common medium for this exchange was evolved".¹¹ Nizami maintains that he is the first indo-Muslim saint about whose contacts with the hindu religious thinkers and religious discussions with them we have clear and definite information.¹² It is reported that Shaikh Nizam u'd-din Auliya had met with hindujigs in his *khānqah* twice and discussed different things with them. He further elaborates in his book that "the *khānqah* was one of the earliest centers of the Urdu language".¹³

In addition to this he spends his whole life in lifting up the humanity from the pitfalls and quagmires of sin and superstition.¹⁴ His *khānqah* was open for everyone from early morning till late night and he used to attend everyone's problems with sympathy and love and his sympathy gave them courage they needed to face the trials of life.

Shaikh Nizam u'd-din Auliya

Shaikh Nizam u'd-din Auliya was one of the most outstanding *khalijah* of Baba Farid and he had found in him his true successor. He was born in Badaur, Umar Pradesh in 1238 A.D. He was a very sharp and bright student. Also very sincere and devoted to his

¹⁰ Nizami, *SALP*, op. cit., p. 191.

¹¹ Nizami, *Shirah Farid*, op. cit., p. 105.

¹² *Ibid.*, p. 105.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 106.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 113.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 112.

studied and this makes him very popular among teachers. Later, in Delhi, he distinguished himself among the highest academic circles. He was the best debater of his times and got the title of "master of debate". Many great educationalists of his times predicted an illuminating and glorying future for him, but when time comes he proved everyone wrong and chooses a path of hardship and sacrifices in spite of luxurious life for the upliftment of human life. He devoted his whole life and education in the service of mankind and joined the spiritual discipline of Baba Farid. Under Baba Farid he got more human values and learned service of humanity. Baba Farid appointed him as his chief of successor after him. Baba Farid also advised him to lead an ascetic life and gave him blessings in these beautiful words: "O Nizam u'-din, you will be a tree under whose shadow the people will find rest".

After the death of his master Baba Farid, he settled in Delhi and built his Khanqah there which became a place thronged with all kinds of people, rich and poor alike. In his Khanqah the kith-kun remain totally hot all day long, and thousands of people without any distinction whatever, began to partake of his splendid generosity, while he himself used to fast daily and lived in strict austerity. All he ate was a small piece of bread prepared from barley. His Khanqah's doors were open day and night for everyone irrespective of religion, caste and creed. Either the visitor was Hindu, Muslim, rich or poor everyone gets an equal love and care.

He had a spiritual realization of the fact that no spiritual exercise had greater value than bringing comfort to the distressed heart and helping the needy and the poor in the eyes of God. Nizami has rightly pointed out in his monograph that "all his efforts were therefore directed towards the alleviation of human misery".¹⁵

Service of Mankind: he has classified the devotion to God into two categories *lezzat* (intensive) and *minat-e'daf'i* (transitive). The former devotion includes prayer, fasting, hajj etc while the

¹⁵ K. A. Nizami, *The Life and Times of Shariat Nizami ad-din Auliya* (Delhi: Idarah-i-Ahadiyat-i-Delhi, 1991), p.91.

maṣā'addi devotion includes spending money on others, helping those in distress etc. according to him the reward of *maṣā'addi* devotion is greater than *ḥaṣḥi* devotion.

Live for the lord alone: he believed that there would all peace and amity in this world and the very basis of human relationship would change if a man learnt to live for lord alone.¹⁶

Renunciation of the material world: he believed that one could not live a life of divine significance unless he firmly rejected all material attractions¹⁷ he has explained the meaning the *ṣarḥ-i-dīyar* "rejection of world does not mean that one should strip himself of his clothes or get on a low-cloth and sit idle, instead rejection of the world means that one may put on clothes and take food. What comes to him undesired, he should accept it, but not hoard it. He should not place his heart in anything. Only this is the rejection of world".¹⁸

Pacifism and non-violence: he was a firm believer in pacifism and non-violence and often used to recite the following verses of Shaikh Abu Saïd Abul Kbayr

(the who is not my friend may god be his friend, and as who bears ill will against me may his joys (in life) increase

He who puts thorns in my way on account of enmity, may every flower that blossoms in the garden of his life be without thorns)

K.A. Nizami highly pointed out that round these ideals of forbearance, patience and sympathy was built the entire structure of the spiritual discipline of Shāfi'i Nizāmī u'd-dīn Auliya.¹⁹

Conclusion

To conclude, it is well established that the Chishti Sufis adopted an attitude of sympathy and understanding towards the people of other faiths. They abolished the racial, ethnic and linguistic barriers between the various cultural groups of medieval India and

¹⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 93.

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 94.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, pp. 94-95.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 97.

helped in the development of common cultural ethos. A ego-violent approach, sympathy with the weak and the down-trodden and consciousness of a divine mission to bring happiness to the hearts of men, characterized the efforts of the Chishti Sufi saints of India. They did not indulge in criticism of other customs or practices. This broad and cosmopolitan outlook helped in breaking that spirit of mistrust and isolation which honey-combed relations between the various religious and cultural denominations of India and paved way for reconciliation at all levels, social and ideological. They distilled linguistic chauvinism and regarded all languages as different vehicles for the communication of feelings. They helped in the development of regional languages — Bengali, Punjabi, Marathi, and so on. They were instrumental in the rise of a common *lingua franca*. The excellent sentences of Hindi were spoken in the Khatwabs. They lived in the midst of the lower strata of society and identified themselves with the problems and perplexities of the people. They were anxious to create in society the harmony of a perfect orchestra. Their principle was to refrain instead with love, and violence with affection. "Treatise your enemies" was the advice which Shaikh Iqbal would give to his disciples. Do not give me a knife, he once told a visitor give me a needle. The knife is an instrument for cutting and the needle for sewing together. Shaikh Nizam-ad-din Auliya approvingly quoted Shaikh Abu Said Abul Khayr who used to say that though there were as many ways leading to God as particles of sand but none was more effective and efficacious in attaining goals than bringing happiness to human being.

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