

**PROMOTION OF INTERFAITH PEACE AND DIALOGUE: A STUDY OF THE
PROMINENT CHISHTI SUFIS IN MEDIEVAL INDIA**

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Abstract

Religions and religious representatives continue to play a significant role in sustaining peace by promoting interfaith understanding. Interfaith understanding, peace and harmony is indispensable for maintaining peace and tranquility especially in a multi-religious and culturally diverse societies like India. Sufis (Muslim saints), as representatives of the spiritual facet of Islam, have been considered highly instrumental, especially during the medieval times, in promoting inter-faith peace and dialogue. The significant role of the Sufis in promoting peace and tranquility among different religious, cultural or ethnic strands in a nation like India, has received accreditation not only from the Muslims but from the non-Muslim scholars as well.

Among the prominent Sufi Orders that flourished in India, the Sufis of Chistiyyah are known to have spearheaded this approach of interfaith understanding, peace and dialogue. They believed in the unity of divine revelation that paved way for interaction and dialogue among the learned men of diverse faiths. The contribution of Chishti Sufis to Indian society lies in their sincere and dedicated struggle to find a unity for the heterogeneous elements that make up its totality. Their *Khanqahs* welcomed all irrespective of their religion, caste or color, and considered all people as Children of God on earth. Thus, their philanthropic and tolerant demeanor towards other denominations of the society led to the sustenance of unity amid diversity. Pertinently, the current study makes an attempt to underscore and analyze, with historical and descriptive method, the role of Chishti Sufis in promoting interfaith peace and harmony in medieval India.

Keywords:

Interfaith, Peace, Sufis, Medieval India, Tolerance, Khanqahs

Introduction

Indian society has been pluralistic for centuries. It never witnessed any period, which had only one religion or one language or one culture. It was always multi-cultural and multi religious. Long before the Turkish conquest in 11th century many Muslim mystics had established their centers in Northern India. With the advent of the Muslims in India, peace building and harmony among the various cultural groups was not only a moral and cultural demand but also an urgent social necessity. The Muslim mystics rose to the occasion and released syncretic forces, which eliminated the social, ideological and linguistic barriers among the various culture groups of India and helped in the development of a common cultural outlook. The early Indo-Muslim mystics adopted an attitude of sympathy and understanding towards all cults and creeds¹. Their contribution lies in their sincere and dedicated struggle to find a unity amid the diversity of the heterogeneous elements that make up its totality. They recognised the multi-racial, multi-religious and multilingual pattern of Indian society. They had free social interaction with the Hindus and tried to understand their approach towards the basic problems of religion and morality². *Khanqahs* became the centers for interfaith dialogue between different religious groups, as it was the place where everyone was welcomed irrespective of his caste and religion. It was their firm conviction that spiritual greatness could be attained by Hindus in the same way as it could be achieved by the Muslims. While firmly adhering to the basic principles of their faith they also admired other forms of thought and behavior. For them all people were the children of God on earth and any social discrimination was a negation of the true spirit of Islam. At the same time, on the onset Muslim conquest of India, the Hindu society was then passing through one of the most critical

¹K.A. Nizami, *Some Aspects of Religion and Politics in India During 13th C.E.*, Idarah-i-Adabiyat-I Delli, Delhi, 1974, p. 262

² Ibid, p.318

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phases of its history. Caste system was then at its peak and the idea of physical contamination had further weakened its social fabric. A careful analysis of the sites of *Khanqahs* of the early Indo-Muslim mystics would reveal the fact that most of them were established in the midst of the lower sections of the Indian population. The unassuming ways of mystics, their broad human sympathies and the classless atmosphere of their *Khanqahs* attracted these despised sections of Indian society to its fold³. The *Chishtiyyah* accounts clearly indicate that the *Chishtiyyah* Sufis established their centers in the midst of the Hindu population and interacted with the Hindus. This pattern was adopted from the very beginning as Shaykh Moin u'd-Din Chishti himself is reported to have settled in the town of Ajmer which was a Hindu majority area.

Muslim mysticism reached India when it had attained the last phase of its development i.e., Organization of the Orders⁴. The *Chishtiyyah* Order was introduced in India by Moin u'd-din Sijzi strengthened by Baba Farid u'd-din Ganj-i-Shakar and reached its pinnacle under Shaykh Nizam u'd-din Awliya.

The current article attempts at studying the role of these Chishti masters as peace builders in the multi-cultural society of medieval India. The *Chishtiyyah* Order is known for its emphasis on love, tolerance and philanthropy. One of the main tenets of the *Chishtiyyah* Order in India has been to maintain close relations with other religions especially the dominant Hinduism. Their worldview was based on three basic postulates, which determined their attitude towards God, Man and Society:

1. All people are children of God on earth.
2. Adopt the ways of God.
3. Unity of Divine revelation.

This basic approach opened the doors of deeper ideological contact and communication with people of different faiths, and put an end to 'all notions of exclusiveness which had hitherto prevailed among mankind assigning divine blessings and favours to one's own community'⁵. Once Dara Shukoh asked Shah Muhibb-ullah of Allahabad, a distinguished saint of the *Chishtiyyah* Order, if religion permitted making a distinction between a Hindu and a Muslim. The saint's emphatic reply was 'no'. To strengthen his point further he said the Prophet (ﷺ) was sent as a 'Blessing for all Mankind' and therefore no distinction could be made between one individual and another on the basis of religion. The role and contribution of Chishtis to the promotion of Interfaith Peace and Dialogue in medieval India could be well studied by examining the lives of its prominent Sufis as follows:

Prominent Chishti Sufis in medieval India and their relations with the people of other faiths:

- Khawja Moin-ud-din Chishti
- Baba Farid u'd-din Ganj-i-Shakar
- Nizam u'd-din Awliya

Khawja Moin u'd-din Chishti

Shaykh Moin-u'd-din Chishti was born in or about 1141 A.D. in Sijistan. He was the son of Sayyid Ghiyas-ud-din. From his childhood he had a strong inclination towards mystic way of life and was by nature a mystic. The germination of mystic attitude is attributed in him as the blessing of a *dervish*, Ibrahim Qanduzi. Later he travelled extensively and came into contact with eminent saints and scholars of his time, who exercised a great influence on his life and thought. He became the *Khalifah* of Khawja Usman Harooni.⁶ He nearly visited all great centers of Muslim culture in those days and then turned towards Ajmer, India, after a brief stay at Lahore, where he prayed and meditated at the tomb of Shaykh Ali Hujwari. Ajmer was not merely the seat of Chauhan power; it was a religious centre also where thousands of pilgrims assembled from far and near.⁷ He spent many years in Ajmer and worked for the subaltern and common people. The highest form of devotion for him was to redress the misery of those in distress, to fulfill the needs of the helpless and to feed the hungry. He had tolerant attitude and respect for other religions. His doors were open to all. In his *Khanqah* there was interaction between people of every strata. There was exchange of ideas in matters of prayer, spiritual and social life. His

³ Ibid, p. 261

⁴ K.A. Nizami, *Studies in Medieval Indian History and Culture*, Kitab Mahal PVT.LTD, P,81

⁵ Janjua, s, the contribution of Indian sufis to peace and amity, P, 3

⁶ Shaykh Abul Haq Muhadith Dehalvi, *Akbhar- ul-akhyar*, Adab-i-Duniya, 1994, p, 55

⁷ K.A. Nizami, *Some Aspects of Religion and Politics in India during 13th C.E.*, Idarah-i-Adabiyat-i-Delli, Delhi, 1974, p, 184

tolerant attitude, farsighted vision and his brotherly concern for everyone made him a great personality. Some of his sayings as recorded by Mir Khurd supply the epitome of his religious and social ideology and reveal him as a man of wide sympathies, catholic views and deep humanism. His entire thought was based on the following three principles:⁸

1. Explaining his views about universe he said; when we transcended the externals and looked around, we found the lover, the beloved and the love (itself) to be one, i.e. in the spheres of oneness 'all is one'.

This approach brought him very close to the religious thought of Upanishads and created an atmosphere favorable for the exchange of ideas at a higher level.

2. Regarding the highest form of devotion to God, he said; to redress the misery of those in distress; to fulfill the needs of the helpless and to feed the hungry.

3. Regarding the qualities, which endear a man to God, he said; develop generosity like a river, affection like sun and hospitality like earth. As these phenomena of nature make no distinction between any Creature of God, likewise man should not discriminate between one human being and another.

These three principles reveal Shaykh Mo'in-ud-din Chishti's attitude towards the basic problems of religion and morality. Through these basic principles he was successful in promoting peace in the myriad society of medieval India. These principles were carried forward by his successors faithfully and ardently for maintaining the peace and harmony with the people of other faiths. He died in 1236 A.D. and was buried at Ajmer.

Shaykh Farid-ud-din Masud Ganj-i-Shakar;

Born in 1175 A.D. Shaykh Farid-u'd-din Masud Ganj-i-Shakar was the most outstanding figure of the *Chishtiyyah* Order during the thirteenth century. The credit of stabilizing the *Chishtiyyah* Order in India goes to Baba Farid. He was the ardent disciple of Qutub-ud-din Bakhtiyar Kaki⁹. His first teacher was his mother Qarsum Bibi¹⁰. It was she who kindled that spark of divine love in him, which dominated his entire being. As long as Baba Farid lived he was the focus of public eyes. People visited him from far and near and sparkled in the sunshine of his spiritual favours. The gates of his *Khanqah* were kept open day and night and all kinds of people were welcomed into his *Khanqah* and treated equally. Equality of all was his prime concern. *Khanqahs* were the only places where people of different shades of opinion, professing different religions and speaking different languages met. Therefore a common *lingua franca* evolved, in fact, the *Khanqah* of Baba Farid was the birthplace of Urdu language. His *Khānqāh* became a centre for cultural intercourse between different social groups. Shaykh Farid-ud-din Masud Ganj-i-Shakar 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.¹¹ Hindu Jogis used to visit his *Khanqah* very frequently and the inmates sometimes discussed interesting problems with them. His close contact with the people made the Order as a spiritual culture of the masses. He furnished the society with an infinite moral force, which remained as a means to remove the social, moral, ideological and linguistic barriers between people of various cultural groups. He was a model of moral and spiritual perfection for his disciples and they carefully noted every word and act of his and followed him according to their capacities.¹² He was held in high esteem by all sections of society like Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs. Shaikh Farid-ud-din Ganj-i-Shakar's greatness was the greatness of a loving heart. Day and night he attended to the problems of the misery-stricken people, assuaged their wounds, pulled up their hearts and infused new life and confidence in their broken nerves. His sympathy gave them the courage they needed to face the ordeals of life.¹³ He had taken upon himself the herculean task of lifting up humanity from the pitfalls and quagmires of sin and superstition. He didn't like sophisticated discussions. His clear, frank and lucid exposition rarely left any room for debate. He went to the heart of every problem and so when he ended his elucidation his opponent found himself convinced.¹⁴ The Shaikh had all those qualities of head and heart which

⁸ Ibid, p, 184

⁹ Shaykh Abul Haq Muhadith Dehalvi, *Akbhar- ul-Akhyar*, Adab-i-Duniya, 1994, p, 59

¹⁰ K.A. Nizami, *the Life and Times of Shaikh Farid-u'd-din Ganj I Shakar*, idarah-i-Adabiyat-I Delli, Delhi, 1998, P. 15

¹¹ Ibid, p, 105

¹² Nizami, K. A. *The Life and Times of Shaykh Farid ud-din Ganj-i-Shakar*, idarah-i-Adabiyat-I Delli, Delhi, 1998, P. 111

¹³ Ibid, P. 112

¹⁴ Ibid, P. 113

were needed to build up an organization, a deep understanding of human nature combined with clarity of thought and intuitive intelligence.¹⁵ He was an embodiment of peace and love. He was always ready to forgive and forget. He used to please his enemies as well. He became a lovable figure with this pleasant, forgiving and sympathetic nature.¹⁶ He spent his entire life in building bridges of dialogue, understanding, love, equality, solidarity and affection. As a Sufi his responsibility was to keep people united together as only under such conditions, the society could progress spiritually and otherwise. This demanded humility, modesty, patience, fortitude and a cleansing of the heart from all conceit. Shaykh Farid breathed his last in 1265 A.D.

Shaykh Nizam-ud-din Awliya

Born in 1244 A.D. Shaykh Nizam-ud-din Awliya was an illustrious *Khalīfah* of Baba Farid u'd-din Ganj-i Shakar and carried on his mission with true spirit of love and brotherhood. Shaykh Nizam-ud-din Awliya was one of the most charismatic personalities of South Asia. According to Jamali in his inner life he was 'Bayazid of the time' and in adherence to externals of religion he was second 'Abu Hanifa'.¹⁷ Welfare of the society was a prime concern for Nizam-ud-din Awliya. He made every effort to bring people together under the banner of humanity. The progress of society is based on sound social system and structure. The Sufis in general worked towards the progress of society. Nizam-u'd din Awliya had this aspect very close to his heart. He strongly believed that if one is learned to live for the Lord alone, love, peace and amity would prevail in this world. With his large-hearted compassion, warmth and empathy, he welcomed every kind or section of people to the *Khanqah*. Shaykh Nizam-u'd din Awliya's relations with the non-Muslims were determined by two basic postulates of his social outlook: All human beings are children of God on earth and one should adopt the ways of God in his dealings with human beings. The bounties of God do not discriminate between one individual and another. Thus, one should not treat human beings differently. To show that God did not like discrimination between human beings he narrated a story of Prophet Abraham (AS) who, he said, never took his meals without some guests joining him. Sometimes he went out for miles in search of a guest. One day a polytheist was with him. He had some hesitation in asking him to partake food with him. Divine admonition came to Prophet Abraham: "O Abraham! We can give life to this man but you cannot give food to him". One morning Shaykh was strolling on the roof of his *Jamat Khanah* (hospice) as he looked down he found Hindus worshipping idols on the bank of river Jamuna. He remarked "every people have a religion and a house of worship". Tolerance and goodwill inspired this remark, which reflects the true spirit of medieval Indian cultural coexistence of different religions and patterns of life. Shaykh Nizam-ud-din Awliya twice met Hindu Jogis in the *Jamat Khana* of Baba Farid. He discussed with them the two elements in human nature-the spiritual and the animal. On another occasion, a Hindu Jogi explained to Shaykh Nizam-ud-din his views about the birth and character of children, relationship between husband and wife and other similar matters.¹⁸ With this background of early contact with Hindu Jogis in mind, it becomes easier to analyse the nature and extent of Shaykh Nizam-ud-din Awliya's contact with the Hindus religious men during his stay in Delhi. Shaykh Nizam-ud-din Awliya was a firm believer in pacifism, peace and harmony. He advised his disciples to be good even to their enemies and very often recited the following verses of Shaykh Abu Sa'id Abul Khair:

He who is not my friend, may God be his friend,

And he who bears ill-will against me may his joys 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.*¹⁹

Concept of devotion to God served as the bedrock of spiritual and moral teachings of Shaikh Nizam-ud-din Awliya layed in his concept of devotion to God. He said, "Devotion to God is of two kinds, *lazmi* (intransitive) and *muta'addi* (transitive). The *lazmi* devotion includes prayers, fasting, Hajj, Dhikr etc. the *muta'addi* devotion on the other bringing comfort to others. And according to Shaikh

¹⁵ Ibid, P. 113

¹⁶ Ibid, P. 80

¹⁷ Nizami, K. A. The Life and Times of Shaykh Nizam u'd din Awliya, idarah-i-Adabiyat-I Delli, Delhi, 1995, P. 168

¹⁸ K.A. Nizami, *The life and times of Shaikh Nizam-u'd-din Auliya*, Idarah-i-adabiyat-i-Delli, Delhi, 1995, p, 127

¹⁹ Ibid, P. 96

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Nizam ud din Awliya the reward of *muta* 'addi devotion is endless and limitless.²⁰ Deep humanism and relentless pursuit of moral ideals characterized the thought and activity of Shaikh Nizam-ud-din Awliya throughout his life.²¹

Shaykh Nizam-u'd din Awliya's cosmopolitan spirit; love and amity in social relationship, tolerance in religious approach and concern for welfare of all men irrespective of any consideration of caste or creed were the ideals which were dear to his heart and his relation with the non-Muslims were based on these basic human principles. And it were these principles those were responsible for the promotion of peace and harmony. He left this world on 3 April 1325 A.D.²²

Conclusion

To conclude, it is well established that the Chishti Saints adopted an attitude of sympathy and understanding towards the people of other faiths. They abolished the social, ethnic and linguistic barriers between the various cultural groups of medieval India and helped in the development of common cultural ethos. A non-violent approach, sympathy with the weak and the downtrodden 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 others customs or practices. They exhorted their co-religionists: "O you who sneer at the idolatry of Hindu, learn also from him how worship is done". This broad and cosmopolitan outlook helped in breaking that spirit of mistrust and isolation which honeycombed relations between the various religious and cultural denominations of India and paved way for reconciliation at all levels, social and ideological. They disliked 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 earliest sentences of Hindi were spoken in the *Khanqahs*. They lived in the midst of the lower strata of society and identified themselves with the problems and perplexities of the people. The Sufi saints were anxious to create in society the harmony of a perfect orchestra. Their principle was to return hatred with love, and violence with affection. "Placate your enemies" was the advice which Shaykh Farid 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. Shaykh Nizam-ud-din Awliya approvingly quoted Shaykh Abu Said Abu Khair 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 gnosis than bringing happiness to human heart. One would like to conclude with the following two quotes of Amir Khusrau who is the most powerful exponent of this attitude of medieval Muslim mystics. He very neatly epitomizes the attitude of the early Indo-Muslim saints.

"Though Hindu is not faithful like me
He often believes in the same thing as I do".
O you! who sneer at the idolatry of the Hindu,
Learn also from him how worship is done.

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²⁰ Ibid, P. 92

²¹ Ibid, P. 130

²² Ibid, P. 89

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