

## Sufis and Communal Harmony 'A Case Study of Indian Sufis'

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The dictionary of Islam defines *Sufiyah*, as a man of the people who professes the mystic principles of *Tasawwuf*. Such men in popular parlance were known as the *Sufis*. The origin of the word Sufi can be traced to various roots, for example to the Arabic *Suf* which means wool, this was on account of the woolen dress worn by the Eastern ascetics or from Arabic *Safu*, meaning purity, with reference to the effort to attain metaphysical purity or according to the *Ghiyasul lughat* it is derived from the *Sufah*, the name of a tribe of Arabs who in the time of ignorance separated themselves from the world and engaged themselves exclusively in the service of the Makkah Temple.<sup>1</sup> It would not have been very easy to engraft mysticism over the Quranic lessons. However it is generally admitted by the Sufis that one of the great founders of their system, as found in Islam, was the son-in-law of the Prophet and the fourth Caliph, Ali-ibn-Abu-Talib. All the Sufi silsilahs with the exception of Naqshbandiya start with Ali because he never discriminated between the Arabs and Non-Arabs and behaved truly impartially towards them. He was also very sympathetic towards the downtrodden in the society and he lived an exemplary simple life. It was for this reason Hzt.Ali became the attracting point for the Sufis who traced their source of inspiration in him. Ali shifted the capital of Islamic state from Arab dominated town of Madina to Kufa. Kufa was a military cantonment and also the most planned urban center and was thus confluence of people belonging to different religious and social groups. More than fifty percent of population was of non-Arab origin who were mostly slaves or liberated slaves. Most Sufis accept that their ideology had always existed in the world, even prior, to the rise of Islam. Indeed mysticism as a way of religious emotionalism and simple spirituality can be traced in other religions as well, like the bhakti stream of Hinduism or the writings of the old academics of Greece such as

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<sup>1</sup> Thomas Patrick Hughes, *Dictionary of Islam*, Pub. Rupa & co., New Delhi, 1993, pp.608-609.

Plato.<sup>2</sup> Rise of Sufism in Arabia was prompted by its own socio-cultural nuances. However among reasons of political hue, one issue was that Islam believed in democracy and democratic functioning of the state which continued upto Ali, the fourth Caliph, but in 661 AD, Muawiyah converted Caliphate into *mulukiyat* (absolute monarchy). After the assassination of Ali, Muawiyah laid the foundation of Umayyad rule. Yazid, the son and successor of Muawiyah openly violated the tenets of Islam. In 681, Imam Husain (A.S) protested against this and he along with his family members and companions was killed. In 682 Madina and Mecca were attacked and plundered and the result was rape and massacre of innocent people. <sup>3</sup> Abdullah bin Zubair was executed. <sup>4</sup> Kufa and Basra were the main targets of the barbarity and tyranny since 661. It is likely that Sufi movement originated in these very towns as a fallout of challenging political-socio and cultural circumstances. It is obvious that diverse inter and intra religious systems have their own powerful mechanisms for confirming a particular belief. Often the confirmation comes from the past experiences of the community or communities in question. In such cases the present starts manipulating the past; this could happen through a systematic way of selection, reduction or enhancement of evidences and facts. There might be overlap or underlay of incidents that may come in handy in justifying a current demand or situation. Development of consciousness and identity are not casual things and their evolution cannot be studied with simplistic ease. Exactly why and how religious philosophers feel and think in a certain way, at a certain point in time may remain unclear, but what sometimes is comparatively clear and probably more important is the positive impact of their thought process. The cognitive science of religion is a new approach to the scientific study of religion. Cognitive science is the set of disciplines that investigate the mind-brain process involved in human thought and behavior. Scholars in the cognitive science of religion explain features of religious thought and behavior that recur across cultures and eras in terms of mental processes involved in their production and transmission. Religion along with other forms of culture like music, art, literature is understood by cognitive scientists as a natural by-product of the way our mind-brain

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<sup>2</sup> ibid

<sup>3</sup> . Jurji Zaydan-*History of Islamic Civilization* P. 139. *Tarikh-i-Ibn Khalladun* pp.139-140.

<sup>4</sup> . ibid. Vol. II. 184-194.

functions. Cognitive scientists of religion are primarily interested in explaining religion, which they distinguish from theology. Religion for them is a set of actual religious concepts people have in their heads and behaviors they perform. Theology is the set of creeds that clergy instruct people to believe in. Islamic Sufism is an interesting mix of this ‘religion’ and ‘theology’. The early sufis of Arabia were probably designing, consciously or unconsciously, an emotional revolt against exploitation of religious systems for perpetuating imperialism, separatism and corruption. Their mission was to establish peace and harmony in society.

Sufi scholars like Shaikh Ali Hajweri (b.1072 AD) the author of *Kashful Mahjub*, Shaikh Muhiuddin Ibn-i-Arabi (b.1248AD) author of *Futuh-at-i-Makkiya* and *Fususul Hikam*, Shaikh Shahabuddin Suhrawardi (b.1234 AD) and Maulana Jalaluddin Rumi (b.1273 AD) created a treasure of philosophy of religious emotionalism. The Sufis divided the universe into their *vilayats* (spiritual territories) and India was one of those. They played a significant and positive role in the Indian society.

The famous doctrine of Mohiuddin Ibn-i-Arabi’s *Wahdatul Wujud* (Unity of Being) was quite a revolutionary doctrine as far as harmony between the followers of different religions was concerned. This doctrine implied that entire mankind is one and it reflects the glory of God. It meant that essential the Being is the one and we all are manifestation of this Being. When put to practical and emotional use, the doctrine of *Wahdatul Wujud* inculcates a sense of unity among all human beings. It also induces respect for nature and other objects in the universe as everything in the universe is a reflection of Divine glory. Ibn-i-Arabi’s verses have always fascinated the students of his thought “Within my heart, all forms may find a place, the cloister of the monk, the idol’s frame, a pasture of gazelles, the Sacred Home of God, to which all Muslims turn face: The Table of the Jewish Law, the world of God revealed unto His Prophet. Love is the faith I hold, and wheresoever His camels turn, the one true faith is there.” Thus the doctrine of *Wahdatul wujud* was instrumental in promoting communal harmony by eliminating all formal differences of faiths, this attitude was of great importance in the context of the Indian subcontinent because of the heterogeneous religious milieu of the place.

Shaikh Ahmed Sirhindi refuted the doctrine of *Wahdatul wujud* and instead propounded *Wahdatush Shuhud* (Unity of witnessing). What was implied was that though we witness such unity but in fact it does not exist. Existence does not emanate from God since He is divinely distant and transcendent. However, it was the all-embracing and all-inclusive

*Wahdatul wujud* which was the accepted popular notion in India and *Wahdatush Shuhud* could never compete successfully with it. Although Shah Waliullah tried to work out a synthesis of the two divergent philosophies but even the synthesis did not find many takers. It remained confined to a small section of scholars. Akbar's policy of *Sulh-i-kul* (Peace with all) was also based on *Wahdatul wujud*. Abul Fazl and Faizi's religious outlook was also based on *Wahdatul wujud*, this implies that the popularity of this notion had cut across class structures; the commoners as well as the most brilliant scholars of the age were touched by it.

Maulana Jalaluddin Rumi sums up the substance of the story in his own characteristic way.

“The religion of love is apart from all religions. The lovers of God have no religion but God alone.”

Hafiz Shirazi echoes it in his own superb way:

“The good of this world and that can be summed up in a few words: that is kindness towards friends and hospitality towards enemies.”

The noted Persian and Urdu poet Mirza Ghalib (b.1797) highlighting the doctrine of unity of Being and one creed is “to renounce all formalities (of faith) the (different) communities, when obliterated, became ingredients of (my) faith.”

Mir Anis (1805-1874) a famous *Marsiya* poet sums up the essence of *Wahdatul wujud* in his ‘Rubai’ on which shia's mujtahids of Lucknow who were *usulis* asked Mir Anis to give an explanation of his religion because Maulana Dildar Ali (b. 1752) a shia's *alim* had declared sufis as *kafirs* in his work *Shihab-i-Saqib* because Sufis believed in *Wahdatul wujud*. Mir Anis was also a descendent of a famous Sufi Saiyid Muhammed Gaisu Daraz of Deccan. That is why, Anis says –

*Har Rang Main Jalwa Hai teri Qudrat Ka  
Jis Phool Ko Soughta Hou Bu Teri Hai*

Each colour bears the splendor of your Essence Whichever flower I smell, the fragrance is yours.

So sufis never hesitated to assimilate the spiritual insights from other faiths. They were more akin to the Quranic verse “for everyone there is direction to which one turns, so

view with each other in good deeds.” Once Shaikh Nizamuddin Aulia went for a morning walk in Ghiyaspura along the river Yamuna where he saw some Hindu women worshipping the rising Sun. He, on seeing these women in the act of worship, told his poet disciple Khusrau.

‘For every people there is religion and direction to which they turn to pray.’ These words were literal translation of the Quranic verse deeply reflecting Nizamuddin Auliya’s approach towards other religions. Nizamuddin Auliya used to recite very often.

(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).

Sufis adopted an attitude of sympathy and understanding towards all creeds. They said :

“O you who sneer at the idolatry of the Hindu,  
learn also from him how worship is done.”

Sufis believed in universal brotherhood and never made any individual distinction between the people of different creeds, races, communities and sects. The concept of God, people and existence of the universe is very clear and lucid in the Quran, enlightened and influenced the sufis and they put it into use through preaching and practice. As Jami has explained:

“Jami you have become the slave of love, so you just forbade pride in genealogy because in the path of love, you are the son of such and such is meaning less.”

The fundamentals of Sufi ideology rest on the relationship of Love that exists between God and man. They helped in developing a more humanitarian approach in religious life with stress on service to mankind and a belief that love of God was not possible without the love of mankind.

Sufis, unlike the *ulema*, did not keep themselves aloof from Indian masses. They knew Arabic and Persian but they adopted local idiom and preached the message of love and universal brotherhood in local languages. They also adopted local customs and traditions and thus drew Indian masses near Islam. Thus, they played much greater role in spreading universal values of Islam than the doctrinaire *ulema*. As Ibn Hujveri had rightly commented:

“You will not find God in the books on jurisprudence; see the mirror of your heart, because no book is better than this.”

Islam as practiced by the sufis was somehow more influential than the Islam of the ambitious Turkish conquerors. Sufis believed in equality and fraternity of mankind. They abjured narrowness of mind and opposed communal, sectarian and caste barriers, which cause conflict and destroy social harmony.

The outstanding sufis who played a revolutionary role in the social, cultural and religious life of India were Khwaja Moinuddin Chishti of Rajasthan, Shaikh Fariduddin Ganj-i-Shakar of Punjab, Shaikh Bahaduddin Zakariya of Punjab, Shaikh Nizamuddin Aulia of Delhi, Mir Saiyid Ali Hamedani of Kashmir, Saiyid Muhammed Gaisu Daraz of Deccan, Shaikh Latif, Shaikh Jalal Thaneshri and others. These sufis had divided the whole north India and some parts of south upto Deccan into their *vilayats* (spiritual territories). Sufis worked in Kashmir, Sindh, Punjab, Bihar, Bengal, Gujarat, Maharashtra, Awadh and Deccan. They through their unparalleled moral standards and sweet spiritual voice propagated Islam in India and opened a new epoch in Islamic history for a better understanding of other religions, cultures. Human values and good inter-religious relations were stressed upon.

Shaikh Fariduddin Ganj-i-Shakar established his *khanqah* at Ajodhan, a town of Punjab. He was the first Indian Sufi who had cordial relations with the Hindu thinkers. He wrote excellent poetry in Arabic, Persian, Punjabi and local Hindavi dialect. His *Shloks* and *Shabads* have been incorporated in the *Guru Granth Saheb* by the fifth Guru, Arjun Singh. Baba Farid adopted Punjabi and vice versa Sikhs adopted Persian. Baba Farid's poetry was a means of creating congenial moral atmosphere in Punjab. His *Shloks* and *Shabads* won the hearts of Punjabi people. His Punjabi and Hindavi poetry became immortal and even today his verses are being sung in Punjab.

Amir Khusrau (1253-1325) born of an Indian mother and the Turkish father, personified the diffusion of two cultures, imbibing the best of both. Extremely proud of being an Indian, intensely devoted to Hindavi; he occupies a prominent position among the spiritual benefactors of mankind by his love towards the common people of India. Khusrau endeared to transform the common speech of the people into a literary language 'Hindavi' which he regarded as not being second to either Arabic or Persian. Khusrau also brought about a synthesis of Indian and Iranian music.

In the socio-religious life of Deccan Burhanuddin Gharib, Saiyid Zainuddin Daood, Shaikh Ainuddin Bijapuri, Saiyid Muhammed Gaisu Daraz and Shaikh Sirajuddin Junaidi played a significant role. One of the most celebrated figures in the early history of sufism in Deccan was Saiyid Muhammed Gaisu Daraz, who played a very conspicuous role in the Deccan. Hindus also frequently visited him and stayed in his *khanqah* without any inhibition.<sup>5</sup> He also read Sanskrit books to know the mythology of Hindus.<sup>6</sup> Saiyid Muhammed Gaisu Daraz's father Saiyid Yusuf composed '*Manan Suhagan Nama*' in *Dakkani*. Gaisu Daraz also wrote *Mairajul Ashiqin* in *Dakkani*, which is a symbol of composite culture and social integration. The liberal attitude of sufis, created pleasant atmosphere and their *khanqahs* became the centers of cultural synthesis and communal harmony. That is why a new language known as Dakkani originated in the *khanqahs* of the sufis of the *Deccan*.

Shaikh Muhammed Baba of Shirgonda of Ahmednagar district gave his message in Marathi. With Marathi, the sufis established a dialogue with and within the entire Marathi knowing community of Maharashtra. Shivaji's grand father Maluji's wife was barren and he went to a Sufi, Shah Sharif and sought his blessings for children and subsequently two sons were born to her which he named after the sufi as Shahji and Shivaji.<sup>7</sup> The 19<sup>th</sup> century reformer M.G. Ranade holds opinion, "Some Mohammedan fakirs have been ranked with the Hindu saints in general veneration and there are some saints who are venerated by both communities alike. These features of tolerance and moderation have been developed in the course of centuries and they constitute some of the most stable elements and national character."<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> Syed Shah Khusrau Husaini – *Saiyid Muhammed Gaisu Daraz* – Delhi, 1983. P. 7

<sup>6</sup> M. Sulaiman Siddiqi – Origin and development of Chishti order in the Deccan. *Islamic Culture* Vol. I. L1. No. 3, July 1977. P. 218.

<sup>7</sup> P.V. Rauade: *Binocular Glossary of Vedanta and Tasawwuf of Shaikh Muhammed*. P. 74.

<sup>8</sup> B. Namade – *Tukaram*, New Delhi, 1980. P. 8

Sufism had a deep impact on Sindhi life and literature, with its humanist outlook and harmonious approach especially through the liberal poetry of our sufi poets like Qazi Qadan, Abdul Karim, Shah Inayat, Shah Latif, Sarmast, Sami, Bedil, Bekas, Dalpat and others of mid 16<sup>th</sup> to mid 19<sup>th</sup> century. All these poets had condemned communal hatred and religious bigotry and preached communal harmony and social integration. Shah Latif (1690-1750) and Sachal (1739-1829) were very influential and are household names for both Sindhi Muslims and Hindus till today. Sachal was a multilingual poet of Sindhi, Persian and Urdu, has used Persian prosody also along with indigenous forms. He boldly spoke in favor of a classless and peaceful society, which would form a base for communal harmony. He warned the people against the rising British power as well. He had said – ‘Hindus and Muslims unite in bond of love. Before it is too late and the Sun sets in the west’. And indeed Sachal’s fears proved true because we did suffer many losses due to the ‘policy of divide and rule’ which the British administrators followed in the Indian subcontinent.

Through *Padmavat*, Jaisi tried to open the eyes of all those who advocated separation between followers of different religions. He said that ‘*Viyog*’ of Ratna Sen for Padmavati was the same as that of Alauddin for her. The text evokes emotions and feelings for the different characters irrespective of their caste, color or religion. Jaisi asserts that all humans emote in the same way, the basic human responses to situations do not have much to do with formal religions. During the course of humanitarian interaction, bonds of religion, caste, sect and nationality break down automatically and there emerges a perfect being whose heart is tender, liberal, permissive and powerful. Jaisi wrote thousands of verses in Avadhi but in Persian script. His description of events smoothly goes on without any modification at the cultural and social level. Jaisi followed the tradition of Khusrau’s masnavis in *Chaudayan*.

Shaikh Qutban of Jaunpur, wrote a book *Mirgawati*’ (1503) an epic of love and romance. Shaikh Qutban has properly utilized Hindu mythology, astrology and many a religious symbols to weave a wonderful tale which culminated to preach oneness and the unity of God.

In retrospect we can see that just as the basic ideas and attitudes of sufism were translated from Arabic to Persian, so were they expressed in Hindavi, Rajasthani, Punjabi, Maharashti, Sindhi and Dakkani.



The sufis promoted communal harmony with their devoted activities and attracted the caste – ridden and oppressed lower sections to their organizational fold. Titus rightly said, “It was through Sufism that Islam really found a point of contact with Hinduism and effective entrance to Hindu heart.”<sup>9</sup> R.K. Megh holds opinion, “We can thus conclude that whenever there is a crisis of cultural identity, or the romantic spirit is resurrected, the sufi heritage would speak with a thousand tongues to us all.”<sup>10</sup>

We see that immediately following the death of Muhammed Ghori, the Ghorid empire broke up. His favourite slave, Yalduz, succeeded him at Ghazni, while another slave, Qubacha seized control of Multan and Uchh. Qutubuddin Aibak became the Sultan of Delhi in 1206 and India was divided. But the dream of united India was seen by a Sufi Shaikh Bahauddin Zakaria of Suhrawardi order. After the death of Aibak, Iltutmish became the Sultan of Delhi in 1210, Shaikh Bahauddin Zakariya who had his *Khanqah* in Multan invited Iltutmish to attack Multan. Iltutmish followed the direction given by the sufi and Qubacha was defeated and the whole of Punjab came under the direct rule of Delhi.<sup>11</sup> So we see that Sufis played an important role in uniting India and Punjab during 13<sup>th</sup> century.

Some poets joined the romantic band of liberal poets of love and beauty. Such a manifestation of the eternal feminine is radical departure from the feudal cultural system. They believed that love is not realized without beauty and one must sacrifice oneself, in the fire of love. Yet they were clearly against lust; they transformed their ‘*Ishq-i-Majazi*’ into ‘*Ishq-i-Haqiqi*’ and elevated the woman of pleasure and dance into a spiritual symbol.. Among such romantic rebels of the 18<sup>th</sup> and 19<sup>th</sup> centuries prominent ones were Bodha (18<sup>th</sup> century) Thakur (18<sup>th</sup> century) and Ghananand (19<sup>th</sup> century). Almost all of them were under the deep influence of the sufis. *Ishq Nama* by Bodha and *Ishq Lata* by Ghananand are the glowing examples. It appears that the sufi influence had

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<sup>9</sup>. Titus: *Islam in India and Pakistan*. P. 36.

<sup>10</sup>. R.K. Megh: *The influence of sufism in the growth of Hindi poetry*. P. 208.

<sup>11</sup>. M.M. Khizr: *Sufism and Social Integration*. P.119

P.D. Jassal: *The life and message of Guru Ravidas*. P. 169.

become a strong archetype in our cultural pattern. *Rubaiyat-i-Umar\_Khaiyam* are popularly tinted with sufi thought and they have been variously translated by Hindi poets of different schools and period. Bhagwati Charan Verma and Jaya Shankar Prasad have intimately drawn from sufi idioms.

They refrained from hollow argumentation and lived a life of poverty, piety, trust, patience, resignation and love. They practiced and preached these values and thereby created a peaceful and progressive society. They shared the life of the downtrodden.

The sufis has never been sectarian because they never identified with any particular sect. All the sufi poets had condemned communal hatred and religious bigotry and preached communal harmony and social integration. Sufis stood for cultural co-existence– Sufi idea of cultural co-existence became the norm of mutual relations during medieval period in India. This is the great legacy which sufis have left for the succeeding generations in India. Respect for cultural diversity is perhaps the greatest contribution of sufis to Indian civilization.

Today when we are facing a great challenge from the communal and divisive forces bent upon promoting conflict in the name of creed, sect, caste, it is necessary to revive the spirit of sufis and the Bhakti saints. Real spiritualists can always play a vital role in the spiritual evolution of a pluralistic society which will promote peace, harmony and humanitarianism. We need them again.