



ANALYZING THE DEVELOPMENT OF LESSER-KNOWN SILSILAHS IN DELHI DURING THE MEDIEVAL PERIOD: A CASE STUDY OF THE QADIRI AND FIRDAUSI SILSILAHS

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ABSTRACT

The city of Delhi was witness to the rise and efflorescence of Sufism during the medieval period. Some Sufi silsilahs, like the Chishti silsilah gained immense popularity in the city during the 13th-14th centuries, and though it witnessed a gradual decline in the subsequent centuries, it remained popular among the faithful. Another popular silsilah was the Suhrawardi silsilah which also flourished in the medieval period. Apart from the popular silsilahs, there were some lesser-known silsilahs which also played a significant role in restructuring the socio-religious fabric of the city. Two of these were the Qadiri and the Firdausi silsilahs. This paper intends to look at the development of these silsilahs in the city of Delhi and the contribution made by them affecting significant changes in the religious realm.

KEYWORDS : Sufism, Dargah, Silsilah, Firdausi, Qadiri, Delhi

Introduction

At the beginning of the 13th century due to the Mongol invasions and the consequent political upheavals in Central Asia and Iran, Delhi became the heart of the Sufi movement. 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. Most of the great Muslim cities had either been destroyed by the Mongols or were leading a precarious existence with a decaying population. The capitals of the Mongols on the other hand were enormous encampments with no cultural or civic life. Therefore, Delhi was the only city which combined the merits of civic, military, cultural, and political life during the period of the Sultanate. Amir Khusrau is supposed to have once declared that 'Delhi owing to the combination of learning and action is like Bukhara.' The citizens of Delhi admired their city and they never called it merely by its name but in prose and verse they referred to it as *Hazrat-i-Delhi* (Revered Delhi).

The development of Sufism in the 12th century from metaphysics and individual asceticism, to organized orders with transmittable systems of authority, had a profound impact on the establishment and use of political authority in the Delhi Sultanate. As early as the 12th century, Muslim courts in South Asia were developing in tandem with the emerging social power of the Sufi shaikhs. The early evidence of the influence of the Sufi shaikh on the religious, cultural and political geography of South Asia dates from the Ghurid period. By the 13th century a massive trans-regional network of organized Sufi groups had spread across the sub-continent.

As the Sultanate structure began to evolve in the area of northern India, Sufi saints began to act as agents of change in the social, political and cultural life of the cities in general and their followers in particular. In fact, some historical sources like the *Tarikh-i-Mubarak Shahi* of Yahya bin Ahmad Sirhindi mention that the Sufis played an important role even in the coronation of Sultans. To cite an example from the text, it may be mentioned here that during the coronation of Sultan Mahmud Nasir ad-din Shah, one of the later monarchs of the Tughlaq dynasty, 'amirs, maliks, imams, sayyids, and Sufis played an important role and the coronation of the king happened with the consent of all these important functionaries of the state.'

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.

Saints of the Suhrawardi and Naqshbandi order also found a place in the spiritual environs of Delhi, and made a significant contribution to the development of the city as a centre of Sufi activity. Sufis of the Firdausi and Qadiri silsilahs made substantial contribution to the spiritual life of the people of Delhi, though their contribution is often overshadowed by the mighty Chishtis who emerged as the most prominent silsilah in the city. Even today, the most famous dargahs in the capital are the Chishti dargahs that are frequented by people from all denominations.

There were some Sufi centres in the city that were associated with saints who did not belong to the dominant silsilahs, they were the qalandars or those who stood outside the realm of 'codified' Sufism. Their contribution to the spiritual and religious life of the city cannot be ignored. Some of the qalandar saints hold a special place in the hearts of the people and are revered even today. Significant contribution was also made by some women saints, and though they are considered to be on the margins of the dominant Sufi tradition in the city, their contribution cannot be ignored.

The Qadiri Silsilah in Delhi

The history of the Qadiri order in Delhi can be traced to the reign of Sultan Sikandar Lodi when attempts were being made by select Sufis from the order to establish themselves in the capital. The Qadiri Sufis were firm believers in the concept of *Wahadat al-Wujud* and the most famous exponent of this philosophy among the Qadiris was Shaikh Amanullah Panipati. One of his most distinguished disciples was Shaikh Saif ad-din who was the father of Shaikh Abd al-Haqq Muhaddith Dehlvi, author of the famous Sufi biographical anthology, the *Akhbar al-Akhyar*.

Shaikh Abd al-Haqq was initiated into the Qadiri order by Shaikh Musa who lived under the state patronage of Akbar in Fatehpur Sikri. Shaikh Abd al-Haqq travelled widely and visited the provinces of Malwa and Gujarat en route to Mecca. He finally returned to India in 1592 AD and became a firm friend of Khwaja Baqi Billah who was then attempting to establish a Naqshbandi centre in Delhi. Later on, Emperor Jahangir got angry with the Shaikh and exiled him and his son to move to Kabul. The Shaikh died in 1642 AD and was buried near the Hauz-i-Shamsi in Mehrauli in present day south Delhi. Since he is buried in Delhi, it may be assumed that the Shaikh came back from Kabul and settled in Delhi during the later years of his life.

Shaikh Abd al-Haqq was a scholar par excellence and wrote many treatises. His most famous work is the *Akhbar al-Akhyar* in which he provided a detailed description of the Sufis of the sub-continent. Badauni praises him by calling him 'a compendium of perfect qualities and a source of excellence.' Praising his intellectual calibre,

the chronicler states that 'he gives instruction in all branches of knowledge, both in those in which the reasoning faculty is called into play and in those which depend on memory.'

The sons and disciples of the Shaikh were strict adherents to the traditions of the Qadiri order and were mystics as well as scholars. His most outstanding disciple and successor was his son Shaikh Nur al-Haqq who was an erudite scholar. Many of the disciples of Shaikh Abd al-Haqq and his son Shaikh Nur al-Haqq helped in spreading the teachings of their Qadiri master in Jaunpur, Banaras and Bihar. The Shaikh's legacy in Banaras was carried forward by Shaikh Taiyib. One of the most prominent *khalifas* of Shaikh Taiyib was Shaikh Muhammad Rashid who enthusiastically propagated the teachings of Ibn al-Arabi. His disciple and second son, Shaikh Abd al-Rashid enlisted many disciples among whom some became distinguished for their work in Delhi.

In the 16th century, the Qadiri *silsilah* was popularized in the city by Shaikh Syed Hasan Rasul Numa (d. 1691 AD). The Shaikh originally belonged to Narnaul but made Delhi his area of work. By the middle of the 17th century he acquired fame in the realm of Sufi piety in the city. Khafi Khan has mentioned his name in the *Muntakhab al-Lubab* along with the other leading Sufis during Aurangzeb's time. The Shaikh is said to have enabled his disciples to get visions of the Prophet and, therefore, the epithet 'Rasul Numa' was added to his name. He was buried in the compound of his *khanqah* which is in the Panchkuiyan Road area of Connaught Place in central Delhi.

The Firdausi Silsilah

The Firdausi *silsilah* was a branch of the Suhrawardi *silsilah*. The founder of the Firdausi *silsilah*, Khwaja Badr ad-din Samarqandi, settled in Delhi after Khwaja Qutub ad-din Bakhtiyar Kaki had made Delhi his place of residence. He lies buried in the present-day Firoz Shah Kotla area, near the Jama Masjid inside the palace compound of Firoz Tughlaq's Firozabad close to the medieval city of Shahjahanabad. The Khwaja was succeeded by two *khalifas*—Shaikh Rukn ad-din and Shaikh Najib ad-din. Shaikh Rukn ad-din came to settle in the Kilukhari area of Delhi soon after Sultan Muiz ad-din Kaiqubad (1287-90 AD) established his capital there. The *Manaqib al-Asafiya*, the biographical dictionary of the Sufis in India, states that if Shaikh Rukn ad-din Firdausi had not succeeded his master, Shaikh Badr ad-din Samarqandi, the name of the branch would not have been changed from Suhrawardi to Firdausi. The spiritual successors of Shaikh Rukn ad-din Firdausi renamed the branch as Firdausi to carry forward the spiritual legacy of their master.

Shaikh Rukn ad-din was succeeded by Shaikh Imad ad-din who was his younger brother and *khalifa*. His tomb is situated on Mathura Road, opposite the Oberoi Hotel and is in the vicinity of the *dargah* of Shaikh Nizam ad-din Auliya. Yet another prominent Sufi of the Firdausi *silsilah* in the city was Shaikh Najib ad-din Firdausi who was the disciple of Shaikh Rukn ad-din and the son of Shaikh Imad ad-din.

The early Firdausi saints practiced sobriety and considered the display by Sufis saints of miraculous powers as an irreligious practice which was contrary to Islam. They accused their miracle mongering to be a tool for gaining popularity. They set traditions of austerity and asked their followers to stay away from the miracle mongers. According to Iqtidar Hussain Siddiqui, it was because of their strict adherence to austerity that they could not gain popularity in Delhi and their followers, limited in number, came from the elite classes.

The most distinguished *khalifa* of Shaikh Najib ad-din was Shaikh Sharf ad-din Yahya Maneri who popularized the *silsilah* in Bihar. The Firdausis, however, could not make a mark in the city of Delhi. Simon Digby has argued that this was due to their enduring tradition of hostility to the Chishtis. This view can, however, be contested. Digby bases his argument on a reading of the *Siyar al-Auliya* which mentions that the sons and devotees of Rukn ad-din Firdausi had no respect for the devotees of Nizam ad-din Auliya.

Amir Khwurd further narrates an incident in which the sons of Shaikh Rukn ad-din Firdausi express their hatred towards the great Chishti saint of Delhi as a consequence of which they die. Barring the philosophical differences between all *silsilahs*, the Sufi *shaikhs* had maintained cordial relations with their contemporaries. Besides, like in the case of the Suhrawardi-Chishti divide perceived by the historians, there is no merit in judging the relationship between the Chishtis and the Firdausis as being hostile.

Moreover, evidence suggests that the relations between the Chishtis and Firdausis were cordial enough and the Chishti *shaikhs* were in close contact with their Firdausi counterparts. An example from this is cited in the *Ain-i-Akbari*. Abul Fazl in his account of the discipleship of Shaikh Sharf ad-din Yahya Maneri has elaborated that Maneri was directed by Shaikh Nizam ad-din Auliya to see Shaikh Najib ad-din Firdausi, and after discipleship became the vicegerent of Shaikh Najib ad-din. N. Hanif in his biographical sketch of the Sufis has claimed that Shaikh Nizam ad-din Auliya refused to accept Maneri as his disciple, instead directed him to Firdausi. Whether the Shaikh refused to accept him as his disciple or not is a contested theory, but the fact that he guided him not to a Chishti Shaikh but a Firdausi Shaikh suggests that the level of animosity between the Chishtis and the Firdausis, perceived by Simon Digby and other scholars, did not exist in actual terms.

Conclusion

The Qadiri and Firdausi *silsilahs* have been seen as 'lesser-known' *silsilahs* in comparison to the dominant *silsilahs* like Chishti and Suhrawardi. However, these *silsilahs* also played a significant role in deepening the roots of Sufism in the city. Scholars have tried to look at a possible conflict between the Firdausis and the Chishtis because of which the former could not rise to prominence in the capital, however, textual evidence does not corroborate this fact.

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