
Sufi Norms of Piety in the Early Chishtī *Malfūzāt*

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It is not uncommon in the present scenario to come across people who claim to be Sufis. This is primarily on account of the fact that there is little knowledge of the attributes that distinguishes a Sufi/darwesh from ordinary people. The essay studies the virtues that define a Sufi. It unravels how a spiritual aspirant traverses the mystic journey to pass through the various stages (*maqām*) and experiences the various states (*ahwāl*) to ultimately be one with God. It also delves into the exemplary norms of conduct that sets her/im apart from ordinary mortals. Apart from this, it studies how the life of a Sufi from partaking food, to wearing the Sufi robe and cap signifies ascetic struggle. The essay illustrates how a darwesh adheres to prescribed norms of socialization to remain constantly connected to God. The study is based on an analysis of the pedagogy of the Early Chishtī Saints as penned by their disciples in texts called *malfūzāt*.

Keywords: Sufi. Prescriptive norms. Struggle. Divine knowledge (*marī‘fat*). Union with God (*wasl*).

Sufism/*tasawwuf* today is popular across the globe as a living tradition primarily through its cultural manifestations like music and the ritual of shrine visiting (*ziyārat*). Religious studies have focused on spiritual themes to comprehend the mystical dimensions of Islam *Sufism/tasawwuf*. Yet most people are hardly aware of the processes involved in becoming a Sufi and the pietistic attributes that distinguishes a Sufi from ordinary mortals. This is probably on account of their being unaware of the prescriptive norms and ethical virtues laid down by Sufi Saints. Consequently some individuals have begun attaching the epithet- Sufi- to their names without having an import of what it implies. But one does not

come across the *Sajjāda Nashīns* (those who sit on the prayer carpets) of shrines (*dargahs*) using that epithet Sufi.

A Sufi is supposed to perfect the standards and moral goals set forth for them to progress on the spiritual path. Scholars like Carl Ernst by an extensive and intensive analysis of Sufi literary works have indicated that those who tread the spiritual path and achieve considerable success in perfecting themselves never called themselves Sufis.¹ In modern scholarship such lacunas in comprehension of Sufis and their practices is due to a secular interpretation of these religious works.² The manner in which the Sufi Shaikhs guided their community on Islamic beliefs and its mystical dimensions was scarcely considered. Nor is there any focus on how they unraveled the ways of becoming a Sufi.

The texts penned in the circle of the Sufis largely deal with religious and spiritual themes and these need to be studied for constructing the history of faith and spirituality. Further, when these works came to be valued for their religious content they were utilized to construct Sufi beliefs and practices as “isms”. Ernst argues against the usage of the term Sufism for the Sufi beliefs and practices. He states that philosophies, beliefs and movements, when studied as “isms”, reduce them to descriptive definitions based on their essential virtues. This is in sharp contrast to the ways in which the word is used in Sufi literature.³ It classifies a Sufi as one who has mastered the various stages and states to transform herself/himself from an ordinary Muslim to an extraordinary seeker of God and to attained union with Him (*wasl*).

Carl Ernst propounds that the Arabic word for Sufism is *tasawwuf*, which connotes the process of becoming a Sufi. Consequently, Sufi beliefs, their diverse practices and the processes by which they transform their world-centered existence to a divine one, should be treated as a method to become a Sufi. Consequently, for Ernst the term *tasawwuf* is more

¹Carl W. Ernst, *The Shambhala Guide to Sufism*, (Boston, Massachusetts: Shambhala South Asia Editions, 2000). pp. 1-31.

²Carl Ernst, ‘The Textual Formation of Oral Teachings in the Early Chishtī Order’, in *The Eternal Garden: Mysticism, History and Politics at a South Asian Ṣūfī Centre* (Albany: State University Press of New York, 1992), pp. 62-71.

³*Ibid.*, pp. 63-4

befitting than Sufism to understand the stages and states that a Sufi undergoes to attain the state of spiritual perfection.⁴

Sufis are grouped into brotherhoods called *tarīqas/silsilahs* (paths). Each *tarīqa* unfolds the process of becoming a Sufi/darwesh in its own way but the ultimate aim is to achieve union with God.⁵ A Sufi aspirant acquires proximity to God by intense devotion, asceticism and exemplary ethical behaviour. The Chishtī *silsilah/tarīqa* that has made significant impact on the religious and spiritual lives of the people of South Asia. They remain the most popular out of the several *silsilahs* that were established in the region in the twelfth and the thirteenth centuries.⁶

This essay examines the virtues and norms of conduct that the early Chishtī Shaikhs of Delhi- Nizām al-Dīn (d.1325), Nasīr al-Dīn Mahmūd (d.1356) and Gesū Darāz (d.1422) laid down for Sufis to imbibe and perfect. These attributes are meant to set them apart from ordinary believers. The study will demonstrate how every aspect of a Sufi's daily life symbolizes abstemiousness. From the cloak (*khirqā*) and cap (*kulāh*) s/he wears to how he eats and the manner of his socialization with people indicates a life of denial. Her/His conduct is marked by an adherence to superior ethical vision mastered by constant struggle (*jahd*). Simultaneously s/he should strive relentlessly to attain divine proximity by constant engrossment in divine worship and contemplation. The essay will also indicate how all the thoughts and actions of a Sufi should be marked by an awareness of God and the ways in which accountability to God for a Sufi is far more severe compared to an ordinary Muslim.

The paper attempts to examine these aspects of a Sufi's life from the discourses of the three early Chishtī Shaikhs mentioned above. The objective is to get an insight into the virtues, ethical goals and the ascetic struggles that distinguishes a Sufi from an ordinary Muslim. The

⁴ Ibid., pp. 18-31.

⁵ Ibid., pp. 120-46.

⁶ Bruce B. Lawrence, *Notes from a Distant Flute: The Extant Literature of Pre-Mughal Indian Sufism* (Tehran: Imperial Iranian Academy of philosophy 1978), pp. 20-6 and Richard M. Eaton, *The Political and Religious Authority of the Shrine of Baba Farīd, in India's Islamic Traditions, 711-1750* (Delhi: Oxford University Press), 2003, pp. 263-84.

essay delves on these themes from the conversations (*malḥūzāt*) of the Shaikhs penned by disciples. Amīr Hasn Sijzī compiled the deliberations of Nizām al-Dīn between the years 1307-22. Hamīd Qalandar penned the didactic conversations of Nasīr al-Dīn *Khair al-Majālis* between the years (1354-56). Sayyid Muhammad Akbar Hussaini gathered the discourse (*malḥūz*) of Gesū Darāz in *Jawami' al-kalim*.⁷ The Shaikhs have spoken of the stages (*maqāmāt*) and states (*ahwāl*) that a spiritual aspirant should tread and experience to become a Sufi.

The first and foremost requirement the process of becoming a Sufi is adherence to Islamic faith.⁸ It entails setting on a mystic journey (*sulūk*), marked by numerous ascending stages (*maqāmāt*) to attain the ultimate goal that is union (*wasl*) with God. Only some Sufi aspirants manage to reach the stage of perfection, as there are numerous impediments (*waqfa*) on the path.⁹ A mystic traveller (*sālik*) reaches the destination (union with God) after cultivating the attributes embodied in the 99 names of God. It is possible solely by intense devotion and asceticism. In addition, it is imperative for one aspiring to be a Sufi to cultivate exemplary conduct of socialization. Finally, when he perfects himself, God makes him die to himself and live in Him.¹⁰

A beginner on the path of *tasawwuf* strives to cultivate the prescriptive norms and values that are recommended for the path. He struggles to imbibe all the virtues embodied in ninety names of God. The name of God *al-Rahim* implies the compassionate one. Likewise, the divine name *al-Ghafūr* means one who pardons.¹¹ Most spiritual aspirants manage to

⁷ Amīr Hasan Sijzī, *Fawā'id al-Fu'ād*, edited by Khwaja Hasan Thani Nizami Dihlawi (Delhi: Urdu Academy), 1990, 69;

Hamīd Qalandar, *Khair al-Majālis*, edited by Khaliq A. Nizami (Aligarh: Department of History, Aligarh University Press), 1959 and Muḥammad Akbar Husainī, *Jawami' al-Kalim*, translated into Urdu by Sayyid Rahimuddin Husain Bandah Nawazi (Hyderabad: Aijaz Perlang Press, 1956), pp. 188.

⁸ Amīr Hasan Sijzī, *Fawā'id al-Fu'ād*, pp. 249-50; Hamīd Qalandar, *Khair al-Majālis*, pp. 25-6 and Muḥammad Akbar Husainī, *Jawāmi' al-Kalim*, p. 45.

⁹ Hamīd Qalandar, *Khair al-Majālis*, p. 47.

¹⁰ Carl W. Ernst, *The Shambhala Guide to Śūfism*, pp. 22-3.

¹¹ Hamīd Qalandar, *Khair al-Majālis*, p. 77.

achieve and master only a few of these attributes. Accordingly, they are known by the virtue that they have mastered rather than the term Sufi. As a Sufi is one who has imbibed the entire gamut of virtues associated with God and is one with Him. Carl Ernst has signified that darweshes do not call themselves Sufis as it reeks of egotism and boastfulness of having achieved perfection. Instead those who master the stage of complete obedience are known as 'Ābid a derivative of the Arabic word 'abd meaning obedience. A Sufi aspirant becomes an ascetic (*zāhid*) when he detaches himself from the world completely. The word *zāhid* is a derivative of the Arabic word *zuhd* connoting an ascetic.¹²

Similarly, one who acquires proximity to the divine is called a friend of God (*Auliya'*) and the Chishtī Shaikh, Nizam al-Din is widely known by that epithet. Nevertheless, a Sufi neither claims nor exhibits that he has accomplished that stature during his lifetime. In fact, he is prohibited from revealing his spiritual state to acquire fame. He gets that recognition from his peers generally after his demise.

It is noteworthy that a Sufi initiate has to be a Muslim to adopt the path of *tasaawuf*. In reality Chishtiyas have followers and disciples from diverse faiths. They deal with this contradiction by a custom that Shaikh Nizām al-Din had begun. The Shaikh resolved this problem by bestowing a Sufi cap of blessing (*kulāh-i tabbaruk*) on one who was drawn to darweshi for worldly gains. He conferred the Sufi cap of discipleship (*kulāh-i bai'at*) on a person who was genuinely inclined towards God.¹³ He taught the ways of *tarīqa* only to one who sought God. These pragmatic accommodations of the Chishtiyas were one of the major reasons for not only their survival but also popularity in South Asia.

Markers of a Sufi

Intuitive knowledge of the divine

It is vital to comprehend the distinguishing characteristics of a Sufi. Gesū Darāz indicates that a Sufi is absolutely free from the fetters of *nafs* (base desires) and his heart is filled with nothing but divine love. S/he achieves it by traversing the spiritual journey (*sulūk*)

¹²Carl W. Ernst, *The Shambhala Guide to Sūfism*, pp. 22-8.

¹³Mohammas Akbar Hussaini, *Jawami'al-Kalim*, p.420.

marked by various stages (*maqāmāt*) and experiences states (*ahwāl*). Finally s/he attains divine knowledge (*ma'rifat*) and becomes one with God and His creatures. Consequently a darwesh desires for others what s/he desires for himself cultivating empathy both for humans and animals.¹⁴

This knowledge is gotten not with rationality and arguments but with the intuitive self (*bātin*/esoteric self). It involves the heart (*qalb*) and not the mind. Since a Sufi has to grasp this knowledge with his *bātin*, even the unlettered can aspire to be one.¹⁵ Gender, bondage and other social disparities are also no impediments on the path of *tasawwuf*.¹⁶

***Tārki-duniya* (Renouncing the world)**

A Sufi should be a *tārik-i duniya* (one who has forsaken the world). Nizām al-Dīn Auliya' laid down that shunning the world did not imply its physical abandonment but living in it with absolute detachment. He should live in the world to serve people while being immersed in the divine. S/he should strive (*jahd*) to become get detached from the world by treating it as a mere provision to achieve the world hereafter.¹⁷

Struggle (*jahd*) as the vital ingredient of *darweshi*

A Sufi acquires these exceptional virtues by constant struggle (*jahd*) but his striving has to be continuous even after mastering them. This must be reflected in every aspect of his life from the manner in which he partakes food, dresses and socializes with people. A Sufi should eat frugally as he cannot be engrossed in the remembrance of God with a full stomach. Then every every morsel that he partakes should in the name of God and solely for God.¹⁸

¹⁴Muhammad Akbar Husaini, *Jawami' al-Kalim*, p.11.

¹⁵Amir Hasan Sijzi, *Fawā'id al-Fu'ād*, pp. 5-6.

¹⁶Ibid., pp.5-6, 191-3.

¹⁷Amir Hasan Sijzi, *Fawā'id al-Fu'ād*, pp.12 and Hamid Qalandar, *Khair al-Majālis*, pp.254-5.

¹⁸Ibid., pp. 122, 194.

Nasir al-Din Mahmūd indicates that a Sufi eats just enough to get strength to pray and for him partaking food itself is prayer.¹⁹

A crucial aspect of *jahd* is fasting apart from the fasts of Ramazān. The Chishtīyyas recommend four months of fasting for a Sufi to restrain his *nafs*. It should be observed by spacing it throughout the year. Abstention is a vital mode of struggle and ascetic practice for a Sufi.²⁰

Asceticism as a way of life

The Sufi robe

Nasir al-Din Mahmūd laid down that abstemiousness should characterize the manner in which a *darwesh* dresses. He should wear a garment of shortened sleeves and length and shave his head. The short sleeves symbolize that he has amputated his hands in order to abstain from seeking from anyone. However, if he severs his hands then he cannot fulfill the basic rituals of worship that is ablutions (*wadju*) and bath nor can he shake hands with his brethren. Consequently, he should reduce the length of his sleeves as a constant reminder that he is bereft of hands to desist from asking when in need. Similarly, the shortness of his outfit signifies that he has cut off his feet to desist from venturing to unworthy places. Of course he cannot cut off his feet, as this would disable him from visiting a mosque for congregational prayers on Fridays. Consequently, he should reduce the length of his garment as a reminder that he should venture out just for obligatory prayers. Additionally, it is meant to be a constant exhortation that he should be constantly engrossed in devotion and contemplation of the divine in solitude.²¹

¹⁹Hamid Qalandar, *Khair al-Majalis*, pp.154-5.

²⁰Amir Hasan Sijzi, *Fawa'id al-Fu'ad*, pp.32-3

²¹Hamid Qalandar, *Khair al-Majalis*, pp 65-6..

Tonsuring of head

Shaikh Nasīr al-Dīn instructed that treading the mystic path means giving up one's life for God. The tonsured head is a persistent reminder of the fact that *adarwesh* has beheaded himself on the path of God.²² Moreover, *adarwesh* shaves his head because the space beneath every hair is the abode of Satan.²³

Norms of socialization

A Sufi should minimize his socialization with others. He should converse with people with his exoteric self (*zahirī*) but his *bātin* or *qalb* should be engrossed in the divine. The early Chishtīs also give primacy to providing religious and spiritual guidance to people along with prayers, meditation (*fiqr*) and remembrance of God (*zikr*) in solitude. Consequently, they prescribe detailed norms of socialization for Sufis. They recommend that a *darwesh* should exercise extreme restraint and self-control while socializing.

Their hospices should be open for people from all walks of life and they should be accessible for them around the clock.²⁴ They are supposed to gracefully bear the torments and abuses of their visitors. Nizām al-Dīn counseled that a *darwesh* should be kind and forgiving towards his enemy as well.²⁵

Nizam al-Dīn describes that a Sufi should welcome a visitor by saluting (*salām*) then offer food (*tā'am*) and finally preach (*kalām*) to him/her.²⁶ In case s/he has no food, then just offer water so that the visitor would realize his state of poverty (*faqr*) and leave without complaining.²⁷ Struggle for a *darwesh* also implies a willing acceptance of poverty. He

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid., p.60.

²⁵ AmīrHasanSijzī, *Fawā'id al-Fu'ād*, p.313.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 130.

²⁷ HamīdQalandar, *Khair al-Majālis*, pp. 75-6.

should be happy with his life of denial (*faqr*) and not demonstrate it.²⁸ A darwesh is instructed to conceal his miracles unlike a Prophet who was supposed to exhibit it.²⁹ Accountability is equally important for a Sufi. God punishes an ordinary Muslim only when he acts on his thoughts. A Sufi is punished for his harmless musings as well.³⁰

Likewise if he misses an obligatory *namāz*, it means death for him/ her.³¹ If an ordinary believer is distracted while praying then it is recommended that s/he should make amends for it by doing his/her ablutions again but for a Sufi it is imperative to have a bath. An ordinary person is often distracted by thoughts of the world, which is akin to a corpse, hence just refreshing ablutions is sufficient. For a Sufi, however, bath is recommended as s/he is often disturbed in prayers not by worldly concerns but by the longing for paradise.³²

Devotion of a Sufi

A Sufi attains divine proximity not just by offering the obligatory prayers but he has to be particular about the varied *nafl* (supererogatory) prayers like *chasht*, *ishrāq*, *istikhāra*, *tahajjud* and *awwābīn*.³³ *Nawāfil* (plural of *nafl*) *namāz* is optional for a lay Muslim but it is mandatory for a Sufi, who is also instructed to pray in congregation. Nasīr al-Dīn indicates that the practice was so pleasing to God that at times some ordinary believers are blessed with *darweshi* for just being diligent in congregational devotion.³⁴

The early Chishtī Shaikhs recommend these virtues and ethical norms for a spiritual aspirant to attain divine proximity. While instructing their adherents about these norms, they always indicate that they are derived from sources of *Sharī'a*, the *Qur'ān*, sayings of Prophet Muhammad (*Ahadīs*) and his practices (*Sunna*) and in no way do they digress from Islamic

²⁸ Ibid., p. 163

²⁹ Amīr Ḥasan Sijzī, *Fawā'id al-Fu'ād*, p. 202.

³⁰ Hamīd Qalandar, *Khair al-Majālis*, pp. 84.

³¹ Amīr Ḥasan Sijzī, *Fawā'id al-Fu'ād*, p. 380

³² Hamīd Qalandar, *Khair al-Majālis*, p. 61.

³³ Amīr Ḥasan Sijzī, *Fawā'id al-Fu'ād*, p. 58

³⁴ Hamīd Qalandar, *Khair al-Majālis*, p. 33.

tenets. They counter opposition to their teaching by substantiating them with sayings and deeds of Sufis from the past. This tendency of the early Chishtiyyas to root their didactic in the *Sharī'a* and tradition probably is meant to ensure a better acceptance of their ideas and beliefs.

Conclusion

The above survey suggests that a Sufi is socially invested, as it is this world that provides her/him with the stage to perfect herself/himself for ultimate union with God. People give her/him recognition as a Sufi and under no circumstances should a Sufi claim that pious standing for herself/himself. Since a Sufi is instructed to live in the world with a constant awareness and devotion to the Almighty, strict norms of piety and asceticism keep her/him firmly detached from the world. These norms also prevent a Sufi from lapsing in ascetic struggle, as it is no mean feat to shun the world while living in the world. For this reason, few attain the exalted status of a Sufi. Despite the strict norms and virtues that distinguish a Sufi, there are numerous instances of pretenders and false claimants of this pious position. This phenomenon is not a malice associated with *darweshi* practitioners today but has existed since the very inception of *tasawwuf*. The spiritual adepts who tread the path of *tasawwuf* do not call themselves Sufis. Yet people flock to them because they recognize them to be the embodiment of piety and enriched with insights into divine mysteries to guide them and intercede with God on their behalf.