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## MUSLIM MYSTICS AND INDIAN RELIGIONS

The present topic is situated within the general theme of "Islam's Encounter with World Religions." Thus the phrase, "Indian Religions", is meant to refer to religions which originated in India, such as Hinduism and Sikhism. Whether the latter can accurately be included under the umbrella of "world religions" is highly problematical, whereas Buddhism, which also originated in India, would find no challengers on this score.

### An Overview of Sufism

Muslim mystics are referred to as 'Sufis.' The term is an interesting one. It comes from *tasawwuf*, which means "wearing wool." Christian monks commonly wore woollen clothes. Muslims who wished to embrace a similar style of life imitated this outward observance. The word has another usage. It refers to the orders- *тариqa* or *silsila* - founded by the Sufis, just as the Dominican Order, for example, was founded by St. Dominic. In this usage its meaning is more generic and corresponds to the word 'religious', as we speak about "religious orders." Some of the most famous Sufi orders are the Suhrawardi Order, founded by Abu Najib Suhrawardi (d. 1168); the Qadiri Order, founded by Abdul Qadir Gilani (d. 1166); and the Naqshbandi Order, founded by Baha'uddin Naqshband (d. 1390). In India the most famous order is the Chishti Order, founded in Ajmer by Mu'inuddin Chishti (d. 1236). It is fascinating to see how these Sufi orders originated in the same period as the mendicant orders in Christianity, and were similarly mobile in character, quickly spreading throughout the Muslim world.

These orders were, however, a development of Sufism, just as the mendicant orders were a development of religious life in the Church. They were preceded by a form of religious life resembling monasticism in the sense that disciples gathered around a famous Sufi and thus a particular, stable grouping occurred. Some Sufis had admirers but not disciples, strictly so called.

Two of the earliest and most famous Sufis were from Basra, in present-day Iraq. They were Hasan of Basra (d. 728) and the most famous of all the women associated with the Sufi movement, Rabi'a (d. 801). Kufa was another early centre of Sufis, and it was Abu Hashim of Kufa (d. 776) who seems to have been the first to be called a Sufi.<sup>1</sup> The practice of wearing wool had already been in vogue for some time, however, as Ibn Sirin (d. 728) had criticized some contemporary Muslim ascetics for wearing wool and thus "imitating Jesus," whereas they should have been wearing cotton in imitation of the Prophet.<sup>2</sup>

Over the centuries a body of Sufi literature grew up. Hujwiri (d. 1071) produced a very popular and generally reliable compendium of Sufism entitled *Kashf ul-Mahjub* (The Revelation of What is Veiled). In it he speaks about "The People of the Bench" and would have us believe that these companions of the Prophet were the original Sufis. He quotes this Quranic verse in favour of his statement: "Do not drive away those who call upon their Lord morning and evening, desiring to seek His face" (Q6,62). Quranic commentators, however, think the verse refers to poor people whom the leading Meccans wanted Muhammad to send away before they could talk to him.<sup>3</sup> If you thumb through the *Life of Muhammad* by Ibn Ishaq (d. 768), however, you will look in vain for Hujwiri's group of men with the spiritual attributes he has accorded to them. The two books take you into different worlds, and they are poles apart. Hujwiri's mind-set enabled him to find what he was looking for when, in fact, much of it was a projection of later Sufi developments back to the early formative period of Islam.

One also needs to be careful about the authenticity of what can be called generically "Sufi stories." While some of them are undoubtedly based on fact, their real purpose was didactic. Hence they may or may not be true, or may be a highly embellished and skillfully crafted version of an actual incident. If they produce the desired effect in the hearers they are 'true,' but it would be an illusion to think a history of Sufism could be constructed on the

1. Massignon, Louis, *Essai sur les Origines du Lexique Technique de la Mystique Musulmane*, Paris, Libr. Phil. J. Vrin, 1968, p. 154.

2. *Essai*, p. 153.

3. Sale, George, *The Koran*, London, Orlando Hodgson, p. 96.

basis of such stories. Nowadays an ever-increasing number of works by Sufis themselves, or by their immediate disciples, is being made available in English. A work such as Annemarie Schimmel's *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*<sup>4</sup> provides an abundance of material for the beginner. Sufis like al-Hallaj (d. 922); al-Ghazali (d. 1111) and Ibn Arabi (d. 1240), it should be noted, played significant roles in the development of Sufism.

### Sufism in India

It has to be remembered that people like Mu'inuddin Chishti, who came to India in 1206, came from a Sufi tradition that had been growing for over five centuries. Much development and refinement had taken place. For example, the centrality of the love of God was introduced by Rabi'a, who died as early as 801. The question of influences, Christian and otherwise, need not detain us. Most serious scholars nowadays, e.g. Massignon, Nwyia and Schimmel, point to the Quran as the chief source of spiritual nourishment, but this was supplemented by contact with Christians and others. The word 'Sufi' itself indicates this. Hence we would expect, a priori, that this process would continue in India, which has a rich spiritual tradition of its own. What actually happened when Sufis met religious personages of India's indigenous religions?

In his work, *Sufi Movement in Eastern India*,<sup>5</sup> Tamizi wrote:

When the Sufis entered India by its northern gate, the Aryans found in them something common in respect of social habit and mystical thought. India itself was humming at that hour with the Bhakti movement. The Siddhas and the Bhaktas were trying hard to bring relief to the people in the midst of their growing miseries and hardship.

Sufi monotheism appealed to Indian intellectuals, who believed in the doctrine: 'ekam eva adityam brahma' (Only Brahman without a second is true) as preached through the sacred books of the Hindus, thus a new vista of collaboration

4. Schimmel, Annemarie, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, The University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, 1975.

5. Tamizi, Mohd. Yahya, *Sufi Movement in Eastern India*, Idarah-i Adabiyat-i Delli, Delhi, 1992.

between the Sufis and the Bhaktas were opened up in this country which helped both to develop their ideology on broad lines. (pp. 165-6)

If one ignores the errors of grammar, spelling and punctuation and tries to analyze what has been said, bafflement, not enlightenment, is the result. Such unsubstantiated assertions do little to provide an understanding of what happened when Sufis appeared in India. Careful study is needed to get a clearer picture of what actually took place.

The first point to be noted is the completely uncharacteristic nature of Al-Biruni's (d. 1048) very careful study of Hinduism based on observation and reading. He even learned Sanskrit in order to be able to read the Hindu scriptures.

I have found it very hard to work my way into the subject, although I have a great liking for it, in which respect I stand quite alone in my time, and although I do not spare either trouble or money in collecting Sanskrit books from places where I supposed they were likely to be found, and in procuring for myself, even from very remote places, Hindu scholars who understand them and are able to teach me.<sup>6</sup>

Al-Biruni was a most versatile and brilliant scholar in several fields, but he was not a Sufi. Put succinctly, Sufis did not study Hinduism. This does not mean that they did not learn about Hinduism. In varying degrees, they did, but they did not formally set about the study of Hinduism, as Al-Biruni did. For example, we do not find them learning Sanskrit. Al-Biruni wanted to acquire as thorough a knowledge as possible of Hindus, their religion and everything about them. He found it "very hard" to "work his way into the subject," yet his efforts were remarkably successful. His book is a real credit to him.

Sufis, on the other hand, were men devoted to God, not to the study of comparative religion. Those who lived in India, however, could not ignore the fact that Hindus had their own ideas about

6. Al-Biruni, *India*, transl. by E.C. Sachau, edited by Qeyamuddin Ahmad, National Book Trust, India, 1983, p. 11.

religion. Hinduism formed an important aspect of their milieu, but it served as a backdrop to, not the focus of, their lives. The following excerpt, written by an eminent Indian Sufi, Sharafuddin Maneri (d. 1381), is instructive.

The unbelief of the investigators of truth means those who have seen their parents doing and saying things but are not content with what they have acquired from them. They make an effort and even suffer in their search for proofs, passing their lives in the acquisition of the body of knowledge concerning their infidel doctrine by studying books and, by means of austerities and self-struggle, are totally lost in their search for that knowledge: They make great efforts to purify their souls for the sake of reflecting on reasons and arguments so that they might investigate intricate points and thus deny the Creator: Or, they might find defects in confirming the existence of the Creator. They say: "The Creator is not supreme." They also say, "He is not a knower of particulars." There are many other infidel sayings similar to these which all the groups subscribe to.<sup>7</sup>

Maneri was a very scholarly person himself yet, as the excerpt indicates, his knowledge was acquired by observation and discussion, not by reading. He was very impressed by the seriousness with which the Hindus studied their sacred books in Rajgir, but not with some of their conclusions about God.

The excerpt serves to highlight another important fact about the Sufis. They had contact with Hindus, Buddhists and Jains, rather than with Hinduism, Buddhism or Jainism. This might seem too obvious to even merit mention. Again Al-Biruni serves as an instructive contrast. He explicitly studied Hinduism, with the help of Hindu scholars. The Sufis, on the other hand, were not interested in Hinduism as such, but in the religious convictions of the particular people they encountered. Religious dialogue, rather than the study of comparative religion, expresses more accurately what took place. It must not be thought, however, that 'dialogue' was even a concept

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7. *Sharafuddin Maneri: The Hundred Letters*, transl. by Paul Jackson, S.J., Paulist Press, New York, 1980, p. 283.

they were familiar with. The exigencies of the situation - at least as far as people like Maneri were concerned - evoked appreciation of the religious dedication of particular Hindus and others, together with criticism of what could be termed "doctrinal statements." One swallow does not necessarily herald in summer, nor need one Sufi be representative. We need to look farther afield.

### Searching for Interaction

*A History of Sufism in India*, by S.A.A. Rizvi, looks at the question in the sixth chapter entitled, "The Interaction between Medieval Hindu Mystic Traditions and Sufism." Interestingly enough, Rizvi begins by examining what Al-Biruni has to say on the topic. At bottom Al-Biruni is only comparing Sufi teaching, in passing, with Hindu teaching. He is not speaking about the influence of one on the other. Rizvi goes on to speak about the significance of the use of Hindavi, instead of Persian, in the Sufi sessions devoted to the listening to songs. He rightly points out that Hindavi, in Persian writings, is a generic term referring to the local language, whatever it may be, as distinguished from Persian. He cites Gesu Daraz (d. 1422) as approving of its use, adding that it is "a more convenient language in which to utter the feelings of a heart filled with divine love."<sup>8</sup> An incident recorded in one of Maneri's sessions is enlightening;

The revenue officer, Mahmud Awaz, was present in the assembly. Ten minstrels had come along with him. They began to sing. Later on, they switched to singing in Hindavi. After the recital, the Venerable Master (i.e. Maneri) said: "Hindavi compositions are very forthright and frank in expression. In purely Persian verses, there is a judicious blend of allusion and what can be fittingly expressed, whereas Hindavi employs very frank expressions. There is no limit to what it explicitly reveals. It is very disturbing. It is extremely difficult for young men to bear such things. Without any delay, they would be upset. This is why there are difficulties involved in allowing young men to listen to such things. The members of this group, however,

8. Rizvi, S.A.A., *A History of Sufism in India*, Vol. 1, Munshiram Manoharlal, New Delhi, 1978, pp. 326-7.

experience only one grief and pain. They consider all such things to be somewhat ridiculous".<sup>9</sup>

The reason why Hindavi was "a more convenient language" to express one's emotions was simply because it was the mother tongue of the people. The incident recorded occurred in Binar Sharif, where Magahi was the local language spoken by one and all. Hence it was the language with the most immediate link to life, whereas Persian was used for writing and in formal religious discourses. It didn't pack the punch of the local language.

Rizvi goes on to say that the use of Hindavi "was most probably a significant factor in the arousal of Hindu interest in sufism".<sup>10</sup> He is talking explicitly about "the fact that they all emanated from One", referring to all created objects as coming from God. The common knowledge of the local language enabled Muslims and Hindus to talk to each other. This is obvious. That it aroused Hindu interest in concepts such as the "oneness of all being" (*wahdat ul-wujud*), precisely as expressed in Hindavi, can be questioned. Concepts can be expressed very succinctly in languages such as Persian and Latin. What cannot so easily be conveyed is the rich texture of life as expressed so evocatively in one's mother tongue.

It needs to be remembered that Sufis had the custom of holding meetings at which people could ask questions and all those present would benefit from the answers given by the Sufi. Indeed such a meeting (*majlis*) came to be recorded in what was called a *malfuz*. Many such collections exist. The previous quotation came from one such collection known as *Mukhkh ul - Ma'ani*. The custom was to conduct such meetings in Persian. (All the *malfuz* collections are in Persian). The presence of a Hindu in such assemblies is rarely reported for the simple reason that Hindus were not normally present, for they did not understand Persian. Moreover, the topics discussed and recorded were all within the framework of Islam, full of Quranic and other allusions in Arabic. All of this would have made it even more difficult for a Hindu to

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9. Jackson, Paul, *The Way of a Sufi: Sharafuddin Maneri*, Idarah-i Adabiyat-i Delli, Delhi, 1987, p. 134.

10. Rizvi, op. cit., p. 327.

follow what was being discussed. Such gatherings were basically for disciples of the Sufi Master, as the *malfuz* records themselves clearly indicate.

Thus we are forced to conclude that Sufi masters met Hindus, if at all, individually. There is evidence to suggest that this was a rare phenomenon, at least in the context of a formal, religious setting. For example, the large number of *malfuz* collections concerning Maneri records the visits of only two Hindus, one an old man and the other a yogi. It could be argued that private visits would not feature in the records of the public meetings, but one of these was a private meeting, that with the yogi. Moreover, the whole tenor of the writings – and this is buttressed by that of the whole corpus of the early Chishti literary output – indicates that it was rare indeed for a Hindu to approach a Sufi master in his *khanqah*.

This is not true of itinerant Sufis – often called *dervishes*, *qalandars* or *faqirs*. They necessarily lived among the people and spoke their language. They were not ensconced in a *khanqah*, a Muslim institution which Hindus would not easily have approached. The evidence suggests that Maneri, for example, came into contact with Hindu yogis and others during his brief sojourn in Bihia jungle and, in a more intensive and prolonged fashion, when he was living in a cave in Ragjir in a spot known still today as *Makhdum Kund*. He could not control visitors. He was open to visits by all and sundry. Indeed, this caused him considerable anguish, as the following excerpt vividly describes.

The Revered Master (i. e. Maneri) said: "When I was in my old cell, the local ruler made life very difficult for the people who mostly used to come to me and request me to intercede on their behalf. I did recommend their cases. I used to write letters of recommendation on their behalf.

A large multitude began to come. Human as I am, I experienced considerable difficulty as a result. At that time, Sheikhzada Chishti - may God grant him peace - was also staying there. It so happened at that particular time he visited me. He saw me afflicted. He realized that this had become



very annoying for me. He said: 'Are you put out by all this? Yes, it is a vexatious business, but do take up the burden of the people!'<sup>11</sup>

Rizvi describes at length various Hindu belief systems but comes to actual interaction only when discussing a remarkable Sufi, Abdul-Quddus Gangohi (d. 1538). Rizvi himself edited the *Rushd Nama* of Gangohi in 1971, together with S. Zaidi, "which consists of his own verses and some of his *pirs*, identify (sic) sufi beliefs based on the *Wahdat al-Wujud* with the philosophy and practices of Gorakhnath".<sup>12</sup> Schimmel is more cautious. She speaks of his "*Rushdname*, in which Hindi poetry is inserted and which seems to be influenced by Hindu thought", yet it "still deserves careful study".<sup>13</sup>

Caution seems to be the order of the day. It is a commonplace of religious literature that disciples attach the name of their master to their own compositions. Only a careful examination of the 'Hindi'-understood generically - verses in question can determine whether they are Gangohi's or are interpolations.

The need for caution is further highlighted if we try, for example, "to find out the extent of impact, if any, of Sufism on the ideology of the Nirguna school of Bhakti". Sharda lines up the positions. "Dr Tara Chand has unequivocally concluded his chapter on Nanak in his book, 'Influence of Islam on Indian Culture' in the following words:

How deep Guru Nanak's debt is to Islam, it is hardly necessary to state, for it is so evident in his words and thoughts. Manifestly he was steeped in Sufi lore and the fact of the matter is that it is much harder to find how much exactly he drew from the Hindu scriptures. His rare references to them leads one to imagine that Nanak was only superficially acquainted with the Vedic Pauranic literature".<sup>14</sup>

11. Arabi, Z.B., *Khwan-i Pur NI'mat*, transl. by P. Jackson, Idarah-i Adabiyat-i Delli, Delhi, 1986, p. 57.

12. Rizvi, op. cit., p. 336.

13. Schimmel, Annemarie, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, The University of North Carolina Press, Chapel Hill, 1976, p. 357 (footnote).

14. Sharda, S.R., *Sufi Thought*, Munshiram Manoharlal, Delhi, 1974, p. 213.

On the following page he says: "Dr. Gokal Chand Narang rejects the view of any influence of Islam on Gurmat Philosophy. In his book, *Transformation of Sikhism* he unequivocally affirms that although precipitated by Islam Sikhism owes nothing to that religion".<sup>15</sup> Sharda's own opinion is clearly in favour of the latter, and he even adds, for good measure, a subsequent heading: "Repugnance of the Hindus towards the Muslims".<sup>16</sup> Whatever be the historical value of this statement, he is on solid ground when he questions the irenic yet facile theory of Tara Chand. McLeod's various painstaking studies show clearly the central role played by the Sants, as influenced by the Nath sect of yogis,<sup>17</sup> on Guru Nanak, the founder of Sikhism. This discovery is interesting on two counts. The first is that it confirms the time-honoured approach of serious scholars of religion. They recognize the deeply rooted hold a whole religious outlook or mind-set has on the individual person as well as on the group. Contact with others can lead to a modification, a fine tuning of these ideas, or even to more radical innovations, but whatever happens, it has to make sense within the overall framework of one's basic religious outlook. A simple syncretic mixing of elements cannot last, as in Akbar's abortive *Din-i Ilahi*, for there is nothing to bind the elements into a coherent whole. Actual assimilation is needed.

The second significant aspect is that the Sants, mostly of low caste origin, were not schooled in Sanskrit. Hence they could not themselves read the Hindu scriptures. This explains the "rare reference to them", as mentioned by Tara Chand. The Sants even evolved their own language, *Sadhukkari*, with *Khari Boli* as its basis. It is thus close to modern Hindi, which has the very same basis. Because of their mobility and language, the Sants were in much greater contact with ordinary people, as well as with their daily concerns and experience. It is not surprising, therefore, that they were able to speak and sing about God in a language and idiom which had a very great impact on ordinary people. Obviously there was much greater scope for religious exchanges between similarly placed Sufis, such as Maneri in his cave in Rajgir, and the Sants and yogis.

15. Sharda, op. cit., p. 214.

16. Sharda, op. cit., p. 220.

17. See especially McLeod, W.H., *Guru Nanak and the Sikh Religion*, O.U.P., Delhi, 1976.

### Regional Interaction

Kashmir provides us with an unusual example of the influence of itinerant yogis – in this case a yogin – on a Sufi. Lalla Yogishwari, a Shaivite yogin, wandered around Kashmir singing her verses in praise of the Supreme Reality, naturally identified by her as Shiva. Her verses had an influence on Nuruddin (d. 1439), the founder of the Rishis, a Sufi group in Kashmir. The verses of both Lalla and Nuruddin were in Kashmiri<sup>18</sup> accessible to all the local people.

"The Sufis of the Panjab, like the Sufis of other parts of India, wrote for centuries together in the Persian language.... It was only in the middle of the fifteenth century that the initiative to write in the language of the people, i.e. Panjabi, was taken by a saint of the Chishti order of the Sufis, This was Shaikh Ibrahim Farid, a descendant of Fariduddin Ganj-i Shakar of Pak Patan. His example was followed by many"....<sup>19</sup> Moreover, "Panjabi Sufis in their compositions employed, except for a few technical terms and words concerning *tasawwuf* borrowed from Arabic and Persian, the vocabulary and terms of local trades and cottage industries".<sup>20</sup> We should also note that "A good number of Panjabi Sufis made attempts to create friendly feelings between the different communities by harmonizing the opposing systems. For this reason their poetry became clear to all sections of the Panjabi people. Besides, from the literary point of view also it deserved and was allotted a very high place. It retains the favour of both Hindus and Muslims and circulates among the masses in the form of songs, proverbs, and hymns even to this day".<sup>21</sup> Indeed, Guru Nanak is the only non-Sufi whose verse is esteemed in a like manner by the Panjabi people.

As is obvious, the significant break-through occurred with the writing of poetry in Panjabi by Ibrahim Farid Sani (d. 1553?). The images and vocabulary, drawn from such commonplace activities as weaving, were familiar to all. Hence although the depth of perception varied, all could grasp the imagery and at least get a

18. Rizvi, op. cit., pp. 349-50.

19. Ramakrishna, Lajwanti, *Panjabi Sufi Poets*, O.U.P., London and Calcutta, 1938, p. XX.

20. Ramakrishna, op. cit., p. XXVI.

21. Ramakrishna, op. cit., pp. XXV & XXVI.

taste of the spiritual reality which was being alluded to. Only further study, by a Panjabi-knowing person, could accept, contradict or modify the statement about the "attempts.... to harmonize the opposing systems". I am inclined to think it would have to be modified. I don't see such poets studying 'systems' in order to 'harmonize' them. Sufis were rooted in their own 'system'. They had no problem assimilating anything which seemed good and fitted into their 'system'. This was particularly true of specific practices, such as the practice of breath-control techniques.

Bengal provides us with another significant example. The Husain Shahi Sultans (1494-1538) were great patrons of the Bengali language. It was subsequently used by the Sufis. Tamizi gives a long list of Sufi literature written in Bengali.<sup>22</sup> An absolutely fascinating account of "Muslim Yoga Literature", by Haq,<sup>23</sup> is replete with Sufi quotations in Bengali. He writes about a current of Sufism,

"which was progressive in spirit.... Due to its progressive spirit, it defied the older form, and moved forward with rapid strides to a goal not at all desired by the puritans. The result was this, that within a short time it fused into other indigenous thoughts and practices to such an extent that it had, in the long run, to lose its own individuality and to merge it sufficiently to the sister thought system and practices. Consequently it became a distinctively curious system of thought and a medley of different practices".<sup>24</sup>

Haq's brief chapter serves to indicate, as is well known to scholars, that Bengali Sufis are special. Probably no other group of Sufis in India became so steeped in the language, culture and indigenous religion - mainly Vaishnavism - as they did. The process began in the sixteenth century with the increasing use of Bengali. It presents a challenging field of study for a Bengali-knowing person.

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22. Tamizi, *op. cit.*, pp. 158-160.

23. Haq, Muhammad Enamul, *A History of Sufism in Bengal*, Asiatic Society of Bangladesh, 1976, Ch. XIV, pp. 397-422.

24. Haq, *op. cit.*, p. 397.

## **Conclusion**

It is neither possible, nor necessary, to look more closely at the Mughal period, the British period, or South India. The salient features have emerged: the irreplaceable importance of the mother tongue as a vehicle of religious expression; the advantages of the free mixing that took place among, for example, the Sants, yogis and itinerant Sufis; the danger that Sufis, once institutionalized in a *khanqah* of their own, find their world circumscribed to that of their own co-religionists, thus making inter-religious contact a rare, rather than a common, phenomenon; and the fact that assimilation, not syncretism, brought about lasting changes.