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Sufism in India and central Asia: A brief analysis

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Abstract

Sufism in India and Central Asia is an attempt to put into perspective the relevance of Sufism, the concept and teaching, and to provide a realistic assessment of its role in the region. The vast regions which stretch from India (especially northern India), to Iran, Afghanistan, Central Asia and Turkey had close interaction throughout history. The people of these regions with different ethnic backgrounds, cultures and languages have been intermingling for many centuries, as seen in the cross-current exchanges of religious ideas and belief.

Sufism has been integral in defining the culture, political behaviour and economic interaction of Central Asians since its arrival in the seventh century. Hence, its resurgence is neither surprising nor unintelligible. Despite bans on unofficial religious activity, Sufism received widespread allegiance at the grassroots level during the Soviet period. Sufism remains an important strand as a calming influence even in the context of violence and terrorism in the name of Islam. Their impact on many parts of the world is so deeply rooted that it forms a significant part of popular religious beliefs and practices. This article deals with the relevance of Sufism its teaching in current perspective.

Keywords: Sufism, Cultures and languages

Introduction

Sufism in India and Central Asia is an attempt to put into perspective the relevance of Sufism, the concept and teaching, and to provide a realistic assessment of its role in the region. The vast regions which stretch from India (especially northern India), to Iran, Afghanistan, Central Asia and Anatolia (Turkey) had close interaction throughout history. The people of these regions with different ethnic backgrounds, cultures and languages have been intermingling for many centuries, as seen in the cross-current exchanges of religious ideas and belief.

The word Sufism, popularly known as mysticism is most likely derived from the Arabic word suf (meaning "wool"), more specific it clarify it mean "the person wearing ascetic woollen garments". Sufism is deeply rooted with Islam and its development began in the late 7th and 8th centuries. The Sufis love their creator, cherish the desire of His closeness and follow His path. According to Islam, there are two types of service. Throughout the night, they remain in prayer, meditation and contemplation of Allah and throughout the day, they serve His creatures especially human beings. Sufis help the people irrespective of caste, creed, religion, faith, belief and sex. They are broadminded persons having the universal vision. They follow the path of Islam, founded on divine love, universal charity and human compassion which also enshrine righteousness, piousness, truthfulness and kindness.

Sufism emphasise greatly the concept of humaneness, was more liberal in forgiving human weaknesses and more broad minded on differences of belief. Sufism had a deep empathy for poetry and mystical music. It espoused the principle of allegiance to the murshid ^[1] (Pir) thus enriching the religious experience of the followers. The Sufi saints sought to spread their message of peaceful coexistence between deferent communities through relating anecdotes and parades, living like ascetics, establishing *Khānqāh* ^[2], where charity was given in the form of food, clothes, money, etc. The great Sufi orders once Islam had entered India become popular among Muslims and Hindus. Sufism eschewed the notion of Kafir or non-believers and called for respecting all forms of religious beliefs.

The teaching of the Sufi saints greatly influenced the Muslim rulers on India in Medieval period, encouraging them to respect celebration of Hindu festivals a part of court culture. A

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great conqueror like Akbar wrote to his son Murad that he should save himself from those who wanted to exploit religious differences for political ends and be at peace with all religion. In the Deoband movement the personality of Imdadullah Muhajir Makki (1817- 1899 A.D.) was very prominent. He was a practising Sufi who took part in the revolt of 1857 against the British Raj and become the head of the new government that was setup. After the revolt failed he took residence in Mecca and promoted moment to spread modern education among Muslims in India. Infact the Sufi moment became known for teaching in local languages which made its ethics more popular. It did not inculcate a severe colonial approach towards religious rituals or the ordainment of severe punishment. It had its own ethics which inculcated love towards all human beings and dint look at romance as a contravention of any Islamic law. Sufis eschewed the use of *fatwas* to enforce religions law through compulsion. They had a more persuasive approach towards the preaching of Islamic ethics and influenced prominent Hindu saints and poets like Kabir (d. 1518 A.D.) and Surdas (d. 1573 A.D.) who came from poor backgrounds and well as kings and even sections of the Sunni clergy. Their popularity rather than the assertion of mandatory authority made them vital bridge builders among Hindus and Muslims promoting peaceful coexistence among them. Giving gift to the Sufi *Khānqāh* becomes a preferred practice among the Muslim royalty and sections of Hindus. These Dargahs brought material and moral salvation for the poor who were attracted to Islam. By highlighting its humaneness the Sufis helped to popularise tolerant image of Islam.

The contemporary relevance of the Sufi orders who continue to be active till today is obvious. The Sufis supported India's freedom moment and inculcated nationalism as a positive value. Most of the Sufis remained in India, since they did not recognised the concept of Kufr. Some of the the Sufi *Khānqāhs* and Dargahs in India like; *Khaja Education Society* of Dargah Hazrath Khaja Bandanawaz, Gulbarga, and many more are now engaged in spreading modern education, healthcare, a rational life style and spiritual values. Sufi *Khānqāhs* and Dargahs need more attention to highlight their social role, and be recognised as a part of national heritage which would strengthen the countries' national unity.

Sufism has been integral part of Islam in defining the culture, political behaviour and economic interaction of Central Asians since its arrival in the seventh century. Hence, its resurgence in the region is neither surprising nor unintelligible. Despite bans on unofficial religious activity, Sufism received widespread allegiance at the grassroots level during the Soviet period. Sufism remains an important strand as a calming influence even in the context of violence and terrorism in the name of Islam. Their impact on many parts of the world is so deeply rooted that it forms a significant part of popular religious beliefs and practices.

Sufism is deeply rooted with the History of Central Asia, and has always played a significant role even in political development in central Asia. According to one scholar, 'Sufism was an influential vehicle for the spread of Islam in Central Asia because of its implicit tolerance, accommodations for the syncretisation of other religious and folk traditions, and its stress on charity, humility, simplicity and piety. Sufi leaders helped demarcate relations between the ruler and populace during the Timurid period [3].'

Sufism should also be encouraged in Central Asia to combat

extremist ideologies and countries like Uzbekistan, Tajikistan and Turkmenistan have been implementing this approach for many years by investing money in centuries - old shrines, publishing ancient Sufi manuscript and promoting Sufism in Islamic education. The reason being the transformative spiritual and political power of Sufism in the contemporary Muslim world especially in central Asia cannot be underestimated or ignored. Sufism has implicit tolerance, accommodations for the syncretisation of other religious and folk traditions and its stress on charity, humility, simplicity and piety makes it an important philosophy to be adhered to in the contemporary scenario. Sufism is connected intimately to the history of Central Asia and it has often played a significant role in politics in the region. Sufi practice shrine visitation is a very strong vehicle for promoting tourism as well as means of cultural exchange between India and Central Asian countries.

There are clear indications that Central Asian republic supporting Sufism to combat Islamist trend by promoting a vision directly link with Sufism, including preservation of National tradition, encourage to visit (zayat) of Sufi shrine. In most of the Central Asian republics government have allowed Sufi practices which was very much part of their tradition like visit of local shrine, reconstruction of Shrine to project as common Turkic culture. Uzbek, Tajik, Kazak, Kirgiz and Turkmen mostly followed Hanafi jurisprudence, considered by some to be the most liberal of the four schools of Sunni Islam. Further to this Naqshbandi Sufism which, in their opinion, best reflects the so-called traditions and Islamic history of Central Asia [4].

Sufism has a deep influence in Kashmir, the influence came from Central Asian region. This region has the geographical relations across the Pamir plateau and Hindukush region. The exchange of ideas had been transforming from Central Asian to Kashmir culture since ancient period. The Silk route had played the major role for this intellectual and cultural development. Such economic exchanges also opened the spiritual routes for the common people of both the regions. These regions had political and economic relations too. Number of Sufis came from the Central Asian region to Kashmir Valley. Sufis composed the folk literature and translated the orthodox traditional literature into Persian and regional languages. It represented the folk touch of Islam in Kashmir. *Rishi* cult, developed in Kashmir during 12th century which gave the importance to the *Dhikr* practice and Vegetable meals within the daily day to day life of society. The tomb veneration culture also developed in Kashmir during these times. People from different religious background regularly come to *Dargahs* or Shrines for seeking solutions to their vows and problems from spiritual powers of the Sufi shrines even today

References

1. Literally. One who gives right guidance, *ruḥd*, *irshād*, in *Ṣūfī* mystical parlance, the spiritual director and initiator into the order (*ṭarīqa*) of the novice or *murīd* [q.v.] who is following the *Ṣūfī* path; *Encyclopaedia of Islam, Second Edition*. Edited by: P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C.E. BosworthE. van Donzel, W.P. Heinrichs. Brill Online. 2015. Reference. 19 October 2015 <http://referenceworks.brillonline.com/entries/encyclopaedia-of-islam-2/murshid-SIM_5548>
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