

The Region of Punjab: A Sufi Perspective with Particular Focus on Chishtiya Sufism

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Abstract:

Medieval Punjab was amongst the first regions of South Asia to encounter the substantial impact of early Sufi mystics. This article aims to investigate the history of the Punjab from a Sufi perspective with particular focus on Chishtiya Sufism and its generous role in diverting the local community center of attention. For that, the prominent Chishti Sufi Dargahs of Baba Farid Ganj Shaker in Pakpattan is selected. The study tries to investigate Dargahs' impact on the socio-cultural and religious set up of the Medieval Punjab. How did it influence another important religion of the region i.e. Sikh belief, paper tried to highlight this impact as well.

A noteworthy characteristic of Islam in Pakistan is the significance of *Dargahs*. *Dargah* is a Persian name and literary means "Court", A mausoleum of a *Sufi*.¹ In English etymology the word Shrine is used for the mausoleums of *Sufis*. These Shrines or *Dargahs* are stick on to the remembrance of great *Sufis*. *Sufi* is an Arabic etymology and *Sufis* are those "Muslims who seek close, direct, and personal experience of God, and who are often, therefore, described as mystics.... Sufism is a major part of Islam, and Sufis have been particularly important in the spread of Islam...."² Their *Dargahs* have turn out to be the place of different customs, rituals and prayers, generally known as *Sufi* practices, performed by millions of followers and general population equally. Stories of phenomenal acts related to the *Dargahs* of great *Sufis* have involved countless pilgrims who make an attempt to gain therapy for their physical, mental, spiritual and other social problems. *Dargahs* of the *Sufis* therefore become mystical hubs which have to perform multi-tasks functions at the same time. In contemporary

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times, *Sufi Dargahs* have turned out as focal point for a broad series of local customs hence reflecting the inherent culture of the Punjab.

After Usman bin Ali Hajviri, commonly known as *Data Sahib*, who is the most distinguished *Sufi* of the whole region and whose *Khanqah's* generous function is still continued even after several centuries³, the second phase of evolution of Sufism in Punjab commenced with the popularity of *Chishtiya* school of thought. Throughout the region of Punjab it was undoubtedly Baba Farid who worked like a beacon in the region for the dark and dead human consciousness and elevated it to the light of wisdom.⁴

Following text tries to highlight some of the features of *Chishtiya* Sufism that attracted Punjabi masses at large scale.

The *Chishti Sufi* methodology was unique in a way that it included the Indian cultural element into Islam, formulating it more appropriate with the native inhabitants. They strongly countered to typical, conventional religion, religious authorities and the ruling classes. This ideological fight led the *Chishtis* implementing and developing local languages and culture. The taking up of native's languages by the *Chishtis* contrary to traditional Sanskrit, Persian and Arabic was a strong sign of a serious loyalty to the oppressed. Such as Baba Farid Ganj Shaker was well-known intellectual in Persian and Arabic and he could have lived in ease, but decided the people's mode of life. The *Chishtis* generous approach made them beloved for the Punjabi people. They passionately played their role towards the transformation of subordinate castes to Islam, or in any case endowed with a different substitute principles to the transformed Muslims which could uphold them morally and ethnically. *Chishti Sufis* were more loved by the masses of India in general and the Punjab in particular as compare to their contemporary *Suharwardis Sufis*. The reason behind the utmost love *Chishti* received was that *Chishti Khanqahs* were opened for everyone all the time. By keeping themselves at distance from the sovereign elite of the time *Chishtis* remained busy all the day and night in serving humanity.⁵

It is important to know that the *Chishti Sufis* hugely persuaded in Indian society. The rest of the *Sufi* schools stayed restricted to narrow circles while the *Chishti* Sufism was immensely accepted by the natives for the reason that it was more moderate and adaptive in essence and approach. They always found ways to help others more willingly than refusing. Rather helping every single visitor was the main principal of their teachings.⁶ Their compassionate company was easily accessible to every ordinary and trodden individual. To feel the starvation of a hungry one has to be in condition of starvation and to feel one's poverty one has to be in state of impecuniousness. Those were the *Chishti Sufis* who lived through both circumstances therefore their dealings were more accurate and near to the psyche of community around who found those *Chishti* masters alike themselves. This *Sufi* order adopted the local effects the most and it is considered the best representative of the local Punjabi tradition after the arrival of Muslims and one can consider it the finest example of indigenous thought.

Chishti Sufis learnt local languages in order to build the strong relationships. For *Chishtiya* Sufism religion is nothing but love, respect and brotherhood among all human beings irrespective of any social status. *Chishti* school of thought promoted mutual harmony by negating all sort of prejudices and hate among the different sects of the region. Sufism in Punjab put the similarities of different cultural groups as the foundation to remove the differences and *Chishtiya* school of thought was the most successful in this regard. *Chishti Sufis* merge themselves with Punjabi people and their indigenous traditions. They preferred people's needs than any other thing, by doing so they combine their *Sufi* thought with local conditions completely. In Punjab *Chishtiya* Sufism was flourished throughout the region by Baba Farid Masud-ud-Din Ganj Shaker.⁷ Today his *Dargah* in Pakpattan is a hub of Punjabi cultural expression that reflects folks' deep love and veneration for their beloved *Chishti Sufi*, a *Sufi* who gave them confidence of faith in the form of profound affection with the beloved.

Dr. Shahzad Qaiser articulates in his book that:

“Baba Farid wants people to establish a living contact with God. A living contact with God is established by virtue of loving God and humanity. It is a cultural understanding of God which helps in establishing a relationship of friendship with Him.... Baba Farid places the transcendent God amidst the cultural world of man. He inspires man to love Him, who is so near and Him his friend, who is sincere.”⁸

He further says,

Baba Farid “gives him a spiritual message of contact (*rabta*) without which religious code (*zabta*) tends to become lifeless. He transforms his deadness and enlivens him from within.... His deep concern of humanity elevates him to the higher station of wisdom.”⁹

The revolutionary notion in the Punjab established with the *Chishtiya's* ultimatum to the system with the seditious poetry of Baba Farid. Baba Farid was great scholar of Persian and Arabic but he expresses his poetry in Punjabi language. In effect he is regarded as the first Punjabi poet and his couplets have been referenced by Guru Nanak in his *Adi Granth*. He is highly revered by Sikhs and there is Baba Farid Chair in Punjab University, Chandigarh India where huge research on Sufism is carried out.¹⁰

Baba Farid's Punjabi *Sufi* poetry is one of the best samples of conventional poetry which beautifully assimilates divine existence and “immanence” in its poetic style and has cultural representation. He was the exceptional *Sufi* who exclusively underlined the philosophical apprehension for he beautifully explores on the philosophical significances of understanding, learning and love. Converting “religiosity into spirituality” through his poetic expression is his unique contribution indeed.¹¹

Baba Farid hardly ever rented a word or even expression from foreign languages like Persian and Arabic despite having excellent expertise in both languages. His whole poetic dissertation was entirely in the native language of the people of the

Punjab; the language of the common people. Actually he can be privileged as the first poet who wrote down in the Punjabi people's language for the first time in centuries.

Until the time of Baba Farid we have written material in Sanskrit, which was the language of the privileged class. Certainly a great Sanskrit writer like Panini produced perpetual classics of literature in the Punjab, but we do not discover anything written in the people's language. Most likely scripts may have been vanished, since except Sanskrit documents there was no body or means to save people's literature. For that reason, Baba Farid's stimulating poetry is the first written manuscript to be entrusted to us by courtesy of the Sikh Gurus' dedication to maintain Punjabi master pieces. Baba Farid's poems have many truth seeking aspects and depicts the state of people in the Punjab at that time.

Baba Farid was born in Punjab (Khotowal near Multan) and after his education and toughest spiritual exercise were accomplished and he was made the head of *Chishtiya* order, he by disregarding the calm and ease, preferred to dwell himself in Pakpattan (Ajodhan at that time) where he had to had tough time with the ruler and the *Qazi* of the town. Baba Farid had to confront the socio economic and settled notions' complicatedness such as an ordinary public at the hands of the new unfamiliar rulers and their religious structure. More than anything else it is Baba Farid's poetry that portrays and reveals the miserable and ill-treated character of 12th century Punjab.¹² One more imperative characteristic of Chishtiya Sufism has been its effect on the well-known religion of Sikhism of the East Punjab (now part of India) region of Indian subcontinent.¹³ It could probably be credited to Guru Nanak's dealings with *Sufis* and acquiring wisdom from them. He had clearly paid a visit to Pakpattan and Multan to meet up the inheritor descendant of Shaikh Baha-ud-Din Zakaria and Baba Farid correspondingly. In the history of Sikh religion, Sufism had an imperative character to perform. The anthology of the Guru Granth Sahib is the important outcome of Punjabi literary and religious narration. The best collection of Nirguna Bhagat like Baba Farid and Namdev are included within it. Guru Nanak who was born in April, 1469 i.e., 204 years subsequent to the death of Baba Farid, had gone to Ajodhan to meet up Shaikh Brahm or Shaikh Farid Sani, who was in the line of *Chishti* order's sequence to accumulate hymns of Baba Farid, which were afterward integrated in the Guru Granth Sahib by Guru Arju Deve in 1604.¹⁴

Dr. Shahzad writes:

"Baba Nanak's metaphysical concept of the transcendent and immanent God paved the way to universality.... His collection of Baba Farid's Saloks subsequently found place in Garant Sahib. It was his gift to posterity."¹⁵

Making use of folk language to spread the message of truth was a central component of the *Sufi* ideology. The role of mother language cannot be undermined in understanding the traditional truths. Baba Farid used the strong connection of mother language and culture in his poetry by understanding the

desires of the lay man in their linguistic, artistic and folk expression. He communicated the locals of the Punjab in their own language hence awakening their consciousness and leaving everlasting impacts on.¹⁶

In Mughal era the popularity of the Order diminished and *Chishti Khanqahs* were unable to perform their actual role. Chishtiya Sufism revived again and reached to its climax in the Punjab with Khawaja Noor Muhammad Maharvi¹⁷ who appeared as another distinguished *Sufi* of *Chishtiya* school of thought. He established his *Khanqah* in Mahar Shrif, Chishtian district of Bahawalnagar, and made himself busy in spreading *Chishtiya* Sufism in the vicinity. After his demise his disciples established their *Khanqahs* throughout the region and Chishtiya Nizamiya Order surpassed all other orders of the area.¹⁸ Such as in Sial Sharif (Sargodha) and Golra Sharif (Rawalpindi/Islamabad) regions of the Punjab there are hugely venerated *Chishti Dargahs* of two of the most distinguished *Chishti Sufis* of eighteenth/nineteenth centuries, Khawja Shams-ud-Sialvi and Pir Meher Ali Shah (later was the disciple of the former).

Both *Chishti Sufis'* disciples established their *Khanqahs* far and wide in the region and continued the *Sufi* mission of *Chishtiya*. *Chishti Khanqahs* of Sial Sharif and Golra Sharif have been very active in pre and post-partition socio-religious and political activities. Most of all both *Khanqahs* have been the beacon for wisdom they inherited with themselves. They have produced hundreds of learned disciples who served and still serving, through their literary and scholastic offerings, to the peoples of Punjab in quenching their spiritual and intellectual needs. There are very few authentic research based studies which are available about *Chishti Dargah* of Sial Sharif of late eighteenth century.¹⁹ Likewise the *Chishti Dargah* of Pir Meher Ali Shah in Golra Sharif and its role in the nineteenth century there are few investigated studies are available.²⁰

Today the region of Punjab, like other regions of Pakistan, has distinctive local cultural expression of celebrating *Urs* which unfolds several local cultural based *Sufi* practices, amongst which the distributing *Langar* is the most regular and common *Sufi* practice at the *Dargahs*. *Urs* is an Arabic word and commonly used in *Sufi* literature which denotes marriage between bride and bridegroom. The demise of a *Sufi* is considered as a time of reunification with his creator, hence observed as a happy event. *Urs* is also the mutual name for various *|Sufi|* rituals at the death centennial of a *Sufi*. Each *Sufi* order observes its individual *Urs* performances.²¹ While the *Sufi* practice of Sharing *Langar* has effective social implication on the Punjabi native community in particular.

Langar means free public kitchen aiming sharing food with others irrespective of religion, class, color, doctrine, age, gender or social rank. The distribution of *Langar* has been the hallmark of *Chishtiya* Sufism since centuries. This free public kitchen at *Chishti Dargahs* is opened to all and meant to make available food to all devotees and visitors. Aficionados fervently donate to it either by contributing food stuff or by partaking in the cooking and delivery of the food. Thus the concept of *Langar* is to maintain the norm of impartiality among all

people of the globe. Moreover the ritual of *Langar* articulates the morals of sharing, community, comprehensiveness and unanimity of all human races. Frembgen elucidates *Urs* as follows:

“For the Wali physical death marks the entry into the ‘real’ life embodied in the mystical union (maqam al-wisal) with Allah, a moment of unification which is ritually celebrated as a ‘holy marriage’, an *Urs* with God.”²²

Urs is a “microcosm” of the Pakistani society in general and Punjabi society in particular with a logic that people from all regions and of all categories arrive here and put Islam into practice in a variety of modes. *Urs* is a perfect juncture to examine the regional culture at one place and in a very small moment. Since at the time of *Urs* followers pull together in great figures and offer reverence to the reminiscence of the *Sufi*. Soul stimulating music is performed and followers dance with a spiritual rapture. The music on such events is fundamentally folk and alluring and effectively conveys a spiritual message to its followers. Millions of gathering at the time of *Urs* in the Punjab is a perfect confirmation about this historical fact that these *Sufis* are loved and respected immensely. Officially local holidays in respective cities at the time of *Urs* is a sign that these *Sufis* and their *Dargahs* have not just a spiritual and social role to play but they do have their influence on the ruling consciousness.

Gilmartin revealed the heretical spiritual performances at *Sufi Dargahs* are a result of an extensive progression of connection between the local culture and Islam. He is of the view that the study about the genesis of Islamic establishment which exists in pastoral Punjab, shows that how indigenous, ethnic identities and religious institutions are not just grown together rather have strong alliance with each others.

He further writes:

"...the shrines embodied diverse local cultural identities, whose variety reflected both the diversity of ecological, social and kinship organizations in Punjab and the diversity in the spiritual needs of the people."²³

The explanation regarding *Dargah* of Baba Farid is presented by R. M. Eaton as:

“small memorial shrines to Baba Farid began appearing, scattered throughout the countryside of the central Punjab, and that the Baraka or spiritual power and authority of Baba Farid became physically established ...”²⁴

Likewise Dr. Shahazad Qaiser articulates about Baba Farid’s *Dargah* that:

“Baba Farid’s tomb is hub of cultural activities. There are many regular spiritual and cultural practices to attract grace (*baraka*) of the Saint.... The activity at the shrine of Baba Farid is an ample testimony of the vibrant Punjabi culture.” Baba Farid’s *Dargah* is the source of mental and spiritual peace for millions of devotees who venerate their *Sufi* with all their heart and soul.²⁵

So under the Islamic spiritual progress in the Punjab enormous focal points of *Sufi* wisdom were institutionalized. At present, both parts of the separated region are filled with *Sufi* shrines or *Dargahs*. The *Sufis* of Punjab have been respected

in the course of the centuries by Muslims, Hindus and Sikhs of the region. *Sufis* of all orders especially of *Chishtiya* order had played their part to the multifaceted culture of the Punjab.²⁶

Conclusion:

Sufism flourished all over India but it met with huge success in the Punjab because its attitudes and performances were closer to the basic temperament of the social affiliations in the Punjabi society. Further, Sufism was adaptable in its methodology for that reason people could carry out it along with their social and professional life. Among all the great and venerated *Sufis Chishtis* were the most distinguished because of their gentle tolerable and easy approach toward the other religions. Their merits and principles joined with their spiritual abilities they were most thrived in building an influential effect on the life of the people amongst whom they dwelled in.

Chishti Khanqah of Baba Farid of medieval Punjab was eagerly and strongly committed to its *Chishti Sufi* philosophy of love and respect to every single human being who approached it. This is the reason that today *Chishti Dargah* in Pakpattan is receiving the same love and respect from millions of devotees even today in modern times. Moreover the Sikh community's huge regard to Baba Farid's *Dargah* out of their deep love and veneration also shows strong impact on Sikh philosophy which was profoundly received by the founder of the creed centuries back.

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