UNIT 10: SUFI MOVEMENT

UNIT STRUCTURE

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10.1 LEARNING OBJECTIVES

After going through this unit, you will be able to:

- explain the origin of Sufism and describe the various Sufi orders active in the Indian subcontinent, and
- analyse the impact of Sufism on Indian society and culture.

10.2 INTRODUCTION

In the previous Unit, we have discussed the growth and development of art and literature under the Sulatanate period. In this unit we will be discuss on Sufism in India.

Mysticism is a part of almost every religion across the world. Mystics and mystic tendencies grow whenever an established religion is overburdened by dogmas, rituals and protocols. Sufism may be regarded as the mystic strand prevalent in Islam. It is essentially a religion of love without a creed or dogma where the individual attempts to realise in their personal experience the living presence of God. Sufism has been described by the famous historian Tara Chand as a “complex phenomenon” which is “like a stream which gathers volume by the joining of tributaries from many lands.” Further, according to Tara Chand, “Sufism is a religion of intense devotion; Love is its manifestation; poetry, music and dance are the instruments of its worship and attaining oneness with God is its ideal.”

The basic doctrine which guides the Sufi thought is that of *Wahdat-ul-wujud* which simply means 'Unity of Being'. In other words, it believes that God is the unity behind all plurality and the reality behind all phenomenal appearances. Further, it emphasises that there is nothing in existence except God or the Divine and a union with the Divine can be established through a complete detachment from the worldly affairs.

10.3 ORIGIN OF SUFISM

There is a lot of controversy regarding the origin of Sufism largely because mystic thoughts and ideas precede the emergence of Islam. According to Orientalist scholars, Sufism drew its core ideas through contacts with Christian missionaries and neo-platonic thinkers. In other words, western origin of Sufism was advocated by the Orientalists. Contrary to this, many scholars argued in favour of Persian origin of Sufism. It is believed that the conquest of Persia by the Arabs led to inculcation of mystic Persian beliefs within Islam leading to the emergence of Sufism. Yet another set of scholars talk about the Indian origin of Sufism particularly when the Islamic preachers came into contact with the Buddhists.

However, recent scholarship while accepting the external influences, argues in favour of the Quranic origin of Sufism. They argue that the *Quran* provided an ample scope for development of mystic thoughts. According to scholars like Ann Marie Schimmel and Carl W. Ernst, the earliest figures of Sufism were the Prophet Muhammad himself and his companions as they sought direct unity with God. A few others such as Ali Hujwiri have also referred to the Prophet Muhammad's son-in-law Ali as a Sufi saint. Similarly, Rabia of Basra (Hazrat Bibi) had an important role in the development of mystic thoughts within Islam. Rabia conceptualised prayer as free and intimate intercourse with God which requires no intermediary. Prayers, according to Rabia, should be a spontaneous outpouring of the heart to God and should not be guided or regulated.

However, the real metaphysical basis to Sufism was provided by the Arab philosopher and theologian Abu Hamid-al-Ghazali (1058-1111). He

advocated inward transformation and ecstasy without which no salvation is possible. Ghazali in many ways reconciled the mystic Sufi thoughts with the fundamentals of Islamic religion.

By the Middle Ages, Sufism started developing a institutional character with a number of Sufi saints establishing their own *khanqahs*. A *Khanqah* is a building or space designed for spiritual gatherings (*majlis*) of disciples (*murids*) in the divine presence of the Sufi saint (*Pir* or *Murshid*). Proliferation of such *khanqahs* belonging to a specific *Pir* or his followers further led to the development of various Sufi orders or *silsilah*. Each Sufi order had their own revered saint(s) and disciples. They often differed in their stand towards worldly affairs with mysticism being the only common thread.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Q. 1. What does the Sufi doctrine of *Wahdat-ul-wujud* literally mean?

.....

Q. 2. What is the spiritual gatherings of the followers of Sufi philosophy known as?

.....

10.4 DIFFERENT ORDERS OF SUFISM

Following the Ghaznavid conquest of Punjab, a large number of Sufi saints penetrated the Indian subcontinent. While Shaikh Ismail of Lahore was first among them, it was Shaikh Ali bin Usman al Hujwiri (popularly known as Data Ganj Bakhsh) who popularised the Sufi cult in India. He along with his contemporary, Ahmed Sultan Sakhi Sarwar (also known as Lakhdata) earned the faith of many of the inhabitants of Punjab cutting across religious boundaries.

Subsequently, between 1200 CE and 1500 CE, a large number of Sufi *silsilahs* established their *khanqahs* in different parts of India. Abu Fazl mentions as many as fourteen Sufi *silsilahs* active in the Indian subcontinent during the reign of Akbar (1556-1605). Among these the popular ones were the Chishti, the Suhrawardi, the Naqshbandi, the Qadiri, the Firdausi and the Shattari orders.

- **Chishti Order**

Founded in Herat by Khwaja Abdul Chishti, the Chishti order was brought to India by the famous Sufi saint Khwaja Muin-ud-din Chishti (1142-1236) who established his *khanqah* at Ajmer in Rajasthan. Considering service to humanity as the greatest form of worship he became quite popular among the lower castes and classes of the Indian population across religious denominations. He spent his entire life serving the down-trodden people. Khwaja Muin-ud-din Chishti was succeeded by two of his disciples Hamid-ud-din Nagauri and Qutb-ud-din Bakhtiyar Kaki. Kaki came to Delhi and settled at the outskirts of the city during the reign of Sultan Iltutmish. He refused the post of 'Shaikh-ul-Islam' offered to him by Iltutmish and led an austere life. The famous Qutub Minar of Delhi has been named after him.

Kaki was succeeded by his disciple Shaikh Farid-ud-din Masud Ganj-i-Shakar (1175-1265) who made Ajodhan in Punjab his base. He established many *khanqahs* at different places and exalted the status of the Chishti order to an all-India organization. Despite being immensely popular and influential, Baba Farid (as he was fondly called) continued the policy of his *Pir* and remained aloof from state politics. The Delhi Sultan Balban had great respect for Baba Farid.

Baba Farid was succeeded by yet another great Sufi saint of the Chishti order - Nizam-ud-din Auliya (1238-1325) who established his hospice in Delhi. Fondly known as *Mahbub-i-Ilahi* (the beloved of God), Auliya witnessed the reigns of seven sultans in Delhi. He was so popular with the inhabitants of Delhi and even outside that the Chishti policy to distance themselves from the court politics eventually made the Delhi sultans especially Muhammad bin Tughlaq, suspicious of Sufi activities. The policy of isolation which the Chishtis followed deliberately, in order to avoid unnecessary conflict with the orthodox *Ulamas* who dominated the royal courts eventually backfired. Muhammad bin Tughlaq and his successor Firoz Shah Tughlaq tried to humiliate the Chishti saints. Thus, the Chishtis faced a series of hostile political regimes which ultimately weakened their organisation.

Nasir-ud-din Mahmud (1274-1356), also known as Chiragh of Delhi, was the last great saint of the Chishti order in North India. He succeeded

Nizam-ud-din Auliya and faced the same hostility of the Delhi Sultans. After Nizam-ud-din Mahmud, the Chishti saints moved to the South making the Deccan kingdoms the sites of their activities. Notable in this regard was Khwaja Gaisu Daraz who was the disciple of Chiragh of Delhi. He established the new centre of Chishti order at Gulbarga, the capital of the Bahmani kingdom. Others moved towards the East and settled in Bengal. Siraj-ud-din Akhi Siraj and Nur Kutb-i-Alam were prominent Chishti saints who popularised Sufism in the Bengal region.

With the establishment of Mughal rule in India, the Chishtis once again shifted their base to Northern India. Akbar patronised the Chishti and had great respect for Khwaja Muin-ud-din Chishti. Shaikh Salim Chishti of Fatehpur Sikri was a contemporary of Akbar. It is said that Jehangir was born out of the blessings bestowed upon Akbar by Shaikh Salim Chishti. After the death of Shaikh Salim, Akbar erected a grand mausoleum over his grave which is located inside his new capital Fatehpur Sikri. However, the Chishtis could not produce saints of the same stature as that of Muin-ud-din Chishti, Baba Farid and Nizam-ud-din Auliya during the Mughal period and hence it lost its hold over the common masses.

- **Suhrawardi Order**

Like the Chishti, the Suhrawardi order was also founded outside India by Abu Najib as-Suhrawardi (1097-1168) in Baghdad and was developed by his nephew Shihab-ud-din Suhrawardi (1145-1234). Shihab-ud-din sent one of his disciples Shaikh Baha-ud-din Zakariya (1182-1263) to propagate the Suhrawardi order and teachings in the Indian subcontinent. Zakariya established his *khanqah* at Multan. Unlike the Chishtis, he accepted the gifts from kings and nobles and enjoyed the company of political elite.

After the death of Zakaria, Suhrawardi *silsilah* was divided into two branches. His son Badruddin Arif led the Multan branch while his disciple Jalal-ud-din Surkh Bukhari became the head of the Uchch branch in Sind. Bukhari successfully brought a large number of people from outside Islam into the Sufi mystic order. Later on another Suhrawardi saint Jalal-ud-din Tabrezi established a *khanqah* first at Lakhnauti and then at Devatalla, both in Bengal. He set up a *Langar* (community kitchen) for free distribution

of meals to the poor at his *khanqah*. It increased the popularity of the Suhrawardi order. The Suhrawardis are often accused of converting a large number of Hindus into Islam via the path of mysticism. They openly intervened in the politics of the time and received sumptuous grants and gifts from rulers and the nobility.



LET US KNOW

Differences between the Chishti and Suhrawardi Orders:

- While the Chishtis considered wealth as hindrance to spiritual salvation and hence believed in leading an austere lifestyle, the Suhrawardis did not consider wealth per se as hindrance to spiritual attainments; rather they condemned wrong usages of wealth. The Suhrawardis led a moderately affluent lifestyle.
- The Chishtis avoided contacts with the rulers so much so that Baba Farid believed that any *Darvesh* (or Sufi saint) who makes friend with kings and nobles will end badly. They repeatedly refused the requests of the rulers to visit their respective courts. But the Suhrawardis befriended the rulers and nobles and also accepted offices offered by the Sultans. Baha-ud-din Zakaria himself accepted the office of Shaikh-ul-Islam under Iltutmish, an offer which had been turned down by the Chishti saint Bakhtiyar Kaki.
- The Chishtis were immensely popular with the masses owing to their distance from the courtly authorities. On the other hand, the Suhrawardi saints were more popular among the nobles than the masses.
- The Chishtis were quite liberal in their attitude towards followers of other sects and religion; whereas, the Suhrawardis were conservative in their attitude, upholding Sunni ideals.
- The Chishtis allowed unorthodox practices like music and dancing (*sama* gatherings) as a mean to attain salvation. But the

Suhrawardis rejected the idea of *sama* gatherings and believed in routine prayers.

- While the Chishtis were quite popular among the non-Muslims, the Suhrawardis basically catered to the spiritual needs of the Muslim population alone.

- **Firdausi Order**

The Firdausi order was a kind of outgrowth of the Suhrawardi order and was active in Bihar. It was introduced in India by Shaikh Badlfaddin Samarqandi. However, it was popularized by Shaikh Sharf-ud-din Yahya whose centre of activity was at Bihar Sharif. He propounded a rather simplified version of Sufi mysticism. According to him, union with God is not like a physical union of a substance with a substance; rather it is simply detachment from all worldly things which are other than God. He emphasised service to humanity and advised his followers to serve the needy by pen, tongue, wealth and position. He wanted the rulers to work in this direction of helping the needy.

- **Qadiri Order**

The founder of Qadiri *silsilah* was Abdul Qadir Gilani (1077-1166) of Baghdad. This Sufi order reached quite late in India in the 15th century CE. Prominent saints of the Qadiri order in India were Shah Niamatullah and Makhdum Muhammad Gilani. Miyan Mir (1550-1635) was yet another important Qadiri saint who had influence over the Mughal Emperors Jahangir and Shah Jahan. He and his disciple Mulla Shah were great poets at the same time. Mulla Shah was the preceptor of Dara Shikoh, the eldest son of Mughal Emperor Shah Jahan. The followers of the Qadiri *sisilah* wore green turbans. This order was active particularly in the region of Sind and Agra.

- **Naqshbandi Order**

The Naqshbandi order derived its foundation from the teachings of Khwaja Pir Muhammad. It was popularized in India by Khwaja Baqi Billah (1563-1603) who came to India from Kabul during the reign of Akbar. This Sufi order was orthodox in its teachings and reconciled with the Ulamas. In fact, Baqi Billah voiced his opposition against the religious policy of Akbar

which was centred on a liberal framework of *Din-i-Ilahi*. Baqi Billah had influence over a number of nobles in Akbar's court.

The Naqshbandi order reached its zenith under the leadership of Shaikh Ahmad Sirhindi (1564-1624) who was the disciple of Khwaja Baqi Billah. He opposed both the Hindu and Shia philosophy and emphasized upon strict adherence of the *Shariat*. Sirhindi did not believe in remaining aloof from politics. He stated that "The monarch is to the world as the heart is to the body and vice-versa. The purity or impurity of the State depends upon its ruler." In this regard, Sirhindi vocally opposed the syncretised religious policy of Akbar and Jahangir. In a way, Sirhindi's teachings defied the inherent logic of Sufism as a syncretised spiritual cult. His ideas greatly influenced the Mughal ruler Aurangzeb.

Another great saint of the Naqshbandi order was Shah Walliullah (1702-1762) who toned down the orthodox elements of the order and followed the policy of reconciliation. He was a great scholar and wrote a number of books on mysticism. The legacy of Shah Walliullah was carried further by Khwaja Mir Dard who was a renowned Sufi poet of Persian and Urdu languages.

- **Shattari Order**

This order was established in India by Shah Abdullah during the rule of the Lodhi dynasty. The most important saint of this order was Muhammad Ghauth (1485-1562) of Gwalior. The Mughal ruler Humayun and the famous musician of Akbar's court Tansen were inclined towards this Sufi *silsilah*. The Shattaris led a spiritual life in comfortable worldly surrounding. They were open to the ideas of saints of other orders and religion. However, the number of their followers were not very large.



LET US KNOW

Besides organised Sufi orders, there was a number of wandering Sufi mystics known as *Qalandars*. They did not settle down at a particular place and led a life of mendicancy, moving from one place to another. They often demonstrated their spiritual power through performing magical and

occult practices which enchanted the audience. They believed in moving out of organised lifestyle and formalities of social life and material needs.

In the 17th century the Sufi Syed poet Shah Miran, (popularly known as **Ajan Fakir**) came from Baghdad (Iraq) and settled in the Sibsagar region of Assam. His *zikirs* and *zaris,* devotional songs are popular in Assam even today. They are greatly influenced by the *Borgeets* of the 16th century Neo-Vaisnavite saint Srimanta Sankardev. Ajan Fakir's liberal attitude helped popularise Islam in the Brahmaputra Valley of Assam.

10.5 IMPACT OF SUFISM

Sufism along with the Bhakti movement created a syncretised Indian culture in the medieval period. The element of mysticism and access to God attracted followers from all rungs of society towards the Sufi philosophy. Many lower castes and backward class Hindus while maintaining their Hindu religious affiliation paid visits to Sufi *khanqahs*. A large number of devotees were women who went to various Sufi tombs to pray for a child. The tombs of Sultan Sakhi Sarwar of Sind and Ghazi Miyan of the United Provinces (modern Uttar Pradesh) were particularly renowned in this regard attracting a large number of women devotees who were childless.

A controversial aspect associated with Sufism is the alleged involvement of Sufi saints in religious conversions particularly in regions like Bengal. More than the propagators of the orthodox Islam, it was the Sufis who won the heart of common people thereby bringing them within the fold of Islam. These conversions were usually voluntary and the element of force was altogether absent. However, as argued earlier, a large number of Sufi devotees maintained their erstwhile religious affiliations, while at the same time paying regular visits to Sufi tombs. This shows the fluidity of religious boundaries in the pre-modern era.

Further, Sufi saints often propagated their ideas through vernacular languages which led to development of these languages. A number of Sufi

saints were renowned poets of the time. Amir Khusrau, the disciple of Nizam-ud-din Auliya, was the first major poet of Khadi boli. Similarly, Khwaja Gaisu Daraz, a Chishti saint at Gulbarga, was the first one to use Urdu ('Deccani Urdu') as a medium to propagate his teachings. Furthermore, Mazhar Janjanan and Khwaja Mir Dard of Naqshbandi order exalted the status of Urdu to a higher terrain through their writings. Similarly, Sufi saints like Waris Shah and Bulleh Shah used Punjabi language to express their mystical ideas often through existing folklore of Punjab which, in turn, led to the development of Punjabi literature. On a similar line, Shah Abdul Latif used Sindhi for his poetic recitations. The writings of Sufi saints constitute an integral part of rich Indian literary and cultural heritage. Thus, Sufism left indelible mark on Indian society and culture.



CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Fill in the blanks–

3. The Chishti order was brought to India by the famous Sufi saint …….
4. The Sufi saint who carried the Chishti order to the South was ……
5. Shaikh Ahmad Sirhindi was the prominent saint of……..*silsilah*.



10.6 LET US SUM UP

After going through this unit, we have learnt about -

- the origin and spread of Sufism in India.
- Different schools of Sufi thought and *silsilah* which were active in the Indian subcontinent.
- the role of Sufi saints and their teachings in the development of the syncretised Indian culture.



10.7 FURTHER READING

1) Aquil, Raziuddin (ed.) (2010). *Sufism and Society in Medieval India*. New Delhi, India: Oxford University Press
2) Dandekar, Deepra and Tschacher, Torsten (eds.)(2016). *Islam, Sufism and Everyday Politics of Belonging in South Asia*. London, UK: Routledge
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4) Digby, Simon. (1990). The Sufi Shaykh and the Sultan: A Conflict of Claims to Authority in Medieval India in *Iran*, Vol. 28, pp. 71-81.
5) Hameed, Syeda Saiyidain. (1996). *Impact of Sufism on Indian Society*. New Delhi, India: Nehru Memorial Museum and Library
6) Nizami, K.A. (1948). Early Indo-Muslim Mystics and Their Attitude towards the State in *Islamic Culture*, Vol. 22, pp. 387-398.
7) Rizvi, Saiyid Athar Abbas. (1978). *A History of Sufism in India* (2 Volumes). Delhi, India: Munshiram Manoharlal



10.8 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS

Ans to Q No.1: Unity of Being

Ans to Q No.2: *Majlis*

Ans to Q No.3: Khwaja Muin-ud-din Chishti

Ans to Q No.4: Khwaja Gaisu Daraz

Ans to Q No.5: Naqshbandi



10.9 MODEL QUESTIONS

A) Very Short Questions (Answer each within 50 words)

1. Explain the Sufi terms *khanqah* and *silsilah*.
2. Who were the *Qalandars*?

B) Short Questions (Answer each question within 150 words)

1. Define Sufism and the basic doctrine which guides Sufi thought.
2. Discuss in brief the introduction and spread of the Chishti *silsilah* in India.
3. To what extent did the Naqshbandi order deviate from the syncretic ideals?

C) Long Questions (Answer each question within 500 words)

1. Delineate the differences between the Chishti and the Suhrawardi *silsilahs*.
2. Discuss the impact of Sufism on Indian society and culture.

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