

# Harmony and Devotion: Exploring the Socio-Cultural Fabric of Chishti Khanqahs

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## Abstract

This paper comprehensively analyses the historical significance of Chishti Khanqahs, particularly during the 13<sup>th</sup> and 14<sup>th</sup> century in Indian subcontinent. It focuses on their profound impact in shaping the spiritual and religious landscape of the Indian subcontinent. Exploring various facets that contributed to the appeal of Chishti abodes, the study critically examines their multifaceted roles. The research investigates the pivotal role of Chishti Khanqahs in training and educating disciples. These centres were more than places of faith; they transformed individuals by instilling values of humility, compassion, and devotion under the guidance of Shaikh. The paper also highlights the symbolic importance of the *Langar Khana* (free kitchen) in Chishti Khanqahs, embodying their commitment to equality and selflessness across societal strata.

Addressing the interplay between Sufis and local communities, the paper discusses how these spiritual enclaves acted as bridges between the spiritual and temporal realms, shaping the socio-political landscape. Cultural enrichment through Chishti Khanqahs is another aspect explored, where diverse faiths, cultures, and backgrounds converged, promoting mutual understanding and coexistence. The paper acknowledges Khanqahs' transformation into centres of learning, fostering knowledge dissemination and intellectual growth. Lastly, the research highlights the humanitarian dimension of Chishti Khanqahs, providing sanctuary to the marginalized. This compassionate outreach underscores their commitment to societal welfare.

**Keywords:** Chishti, Khanqah, Jama'at Khana, Langar Khana, Silsila, Shaikh, Sufi.

## Introduction

Sufism originated in Arabia and gradually gained prominence as a significant movement in various Islamic lands. Numerous Sufis enriched Sufism with their mystical abilities and exemplary moral character. This mystical dimension of Islam served as a primary means for its expansion, influencing people's perspectives on different faiths and religious practices, and fostering the development of a syncretic culture. Sufis became integral to Islamic culture and played a vital role in shaping and propagating it. As Muslim

rule expanded to different parts of the Indian subcontinent, the fame and influence of Sufis also spread, providing an avenue for interaction with people in other regions.<sup>1</sup>

In the Indian subcontinent, the earliest and most distinguished spokesperson of Sufism was Khawaja Moin-u'd-din Chishti.<sup>2</sup> Who founded the first Sufi order in the Indian subcontinent.<sup>3</sup> The Shaikh selected Ajmer as the abode, where from Chishti silsila spread to other regions. The Chishti order is the most popular and widespread order in the Indian subcontinent. Within a short period, the Chishti Sufis established their centres in different parts of the country, by well-established network of the khanqahs, with the single aim of serving humanity at all levels.<sup>4</sup>

The institution of Khanqah occupies an important place in the spread and popularity of Sufism. Etymologically, Khanqah is a combination of two words, *Khan* and *Gah*. *Khan* is from the Persian word '*Khana*', which means a house, and '*gah*,' which is Arabic in origin and means a 'practice' or an 'act of worship.' In modern literature, the terms like hospices, monasteries, or convents are frequently mentioned as equivalent to Khanqah, but these terms signify their sense in the perspective of Christianity. These terms do not fulfil the dynamic nature of the Sufi Khanqah.<sup>5</sup> Khanqah is a complex associated explicitly with a Sufi brotherhood's get-together and is a place for spiritual learning and character restructuring.<sup>6</sup> On the evolution of Sufism and Khanqahs, Prof. Gibb argues that initially, the Sufis started to appear as a collective organization in the eighth century as small groups. After that, they developed their dwellings.<sup>7</sup>

Jonathan Berkeley writes:

"One of the characteristic features of later medieval Sufism was the spread of institutions, variously known as Khanqahs ..., complete with buildings and endowments which housed and supported the activities of the mystics. Their origins are obscure, but their roots likely lie in ninth and tenth century Iran."<sup>8</sup>

From onwards, Khanqahs were founded both within the city and rural areas throughout the Islamic world, particularly in Central Asia, Iran, and South Asia. Khanqah worked as a spiritual organization founded on human knowledge and responsiveness. Throughout the medieval age and even after, people of different religions, races, classes, and beliefs were accustomed to visiting khanqahs for blessings and spiritual contentment. Khanqahs not just instructed spiritual learning; they also worked as the centres of education. In other words, the primary objective of the Khanqah was to emphasize practical education, i.e., the actual execution of learned knowledge by the trained Sufis.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See for detail note on the origin and development of Sufism in Islamic world with particular focus on Indo-Pak subcontinent, S. A. A. Rizvi, *A History of Sufism In India*, two volumes; Farida Khanam, *Sufism: An Introduction*, New Delhi, Goodword Books, 2009.

<sup>2</sup> Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimension of Islam*, Lahore: Sang-e-Meel Publications, 2003, p. 345.

<sup>3</sup> S. M. Ikram, *A History of Muslim Civilization in India and Pakistan: A Political and Cultural History*, 7th ed. (Lahore: Institute of Islamic Culture, 1997), 71. Also see *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, Juane E. Campo, New York, Fact on File Inc., 2009.

<sup>4</sup> Laxmi Dhaul, *The Sufi Shrine of Ajmer*, New Delhi, Rupa and Co. 2004, p. 103.

<sup>5</sup> See for detail Tahira Anjum, *Chishti Sufis in the Sultanate of Delhi (1190-1400)*, pp. 54-55; Some Aspects of Religion and Politics in India during the thirteenth century, K. A. Nizami, Idara Adabiyat-i-Delhi, 2009, pp.189-202.

<sup>6</sup> See for the detail note on the evolutionary process of Sufi orders Ibid. pp. 54-59.

<sup>7</sup> Hamilton A.R. Gibb, *Mohammedanism: A Historical Survey*, New York: Oxford University Press, 1963, p. 132.

<sup>8</sup> Jonathan p. Berkey, *The Formation of Islam: Religion and Society in the Near East 600-1800*, UK, Cambridge University Press, 2003, op. cit., p. 157.

<sup>9</sup> Nisaar Ahmad Farooqi, *Khanqahi Nizam Ki Ehmiyat, alma'ruf*, Vol. No, Oct-Dec., 2004, pp. 57-73.

Khaliq Ahmad Nizami highlights the Khanqahs purposes and advantages in his book: *Tarikh-i-Mashaikh-e-Chisht*, “as Khanqah provided a shelter to venerable Sufi, a particular place where he could train and educate people according to his temperament and principles; Khanqah was the place where he could stay and dedicate themselves for the Religion (Deen). A typical Khanqah was a self-reliant hostel, a meeting and socialization place, a madrasah and a school, and to some extent, a mosque, with all of the necessities where people of diverse intellect and different areas could sit together and learn from each other which led to building a solid spiritual connection of love and respect; Khanqah was an Institution where spiritually deteriorated souls found peace. Khanqahs spiritual environment affected their mind and hearts. Visitors irrespectively from their class and creed got highly influenced by the khanqahs' chaste atmosphere; Khanqahs are not only the places where one could satisfy his spiritual hunger, but instead, they also provide religious education, especially in Chishti Khanqahs.”<sup>10</sup>

The major decisions of Khanqah were mainly taken by the head Sufi (Master) in conformity of the socio-cultural environment of the neighbouring expanses of the Khanqah. In the initial phases, the primary source of income for the maintenance of Khanqahs depended on three sources: *Futuh*, land grants, and *Waqfs*. Over time, the institution of Khanqah became a central point of Muslim and Non-Muslim communal life in medieval India. Khanqah's spiritual, social, educational, and cultural roles, which they performed without any prejudice, ascended their respected and admired status in their hearts. The liberal, social, and humble environment of khanqahs, which was different from the class-based social structure of the time, was highly welcomed. During the early tussle between Sultans and Indian rulers, the Khanqah was the only social institution that tried to provide solace to the distressed souls.<sup>11</sup>

This paper tries to unfold the historical significance of Chishti Khanqahs in medieval India and how these Khanqahs were able to spread the universal message of love, peace, and respect for humanity into the marginalized and caste-ridden Indian social setup. In such an unusual socio-religious setup, Chishti Sufis emphasized the love of Allah. The Khanqah was a place where both its residents and the visitors came into contact with equivalence. These khanqahs were open to all, from commoner to noble, old visitors or new, pious and immoral, Muslim or non-Muslim, and they were all treated alike and served food without any discrimination. Good virtue at any cost was the hallmark of the Chishti Khanqahs. Chishti Khanqahs were hugely involved in the moral development of people.<sup>12</sup>

Another essential facet associated with the Chishti Khanqahs was the *Jama'at Khana*. It was the social centre where spiritual and ethical Culture was formulated.<sup>13</sup> In *Jama'at Khana*, visitors lived together in one big hall and engaged themselves in prayers and worship.<sup>14</sup> At Baba Farid's *Jama'at Khana*, renowned Sufis and Yogis, used to meet him to converse and deliberate on various aspects of Sufism.<sup>15</sup>

<sup>10</sup> K. A. Nizami, *Tarikh-e-Mashaikh-e-Chisht*, Vol 1, Karachi, Oxford University Press, 2007, pp. 316-320.

<sup>11</sup> K. A. Nizami *Some Aspects of Religion and Politics in India during the thirteenth century*, Idara Adabiyat-i-Delhi, 2009, pp.190.

<sup>12</sup> K. A. Nizami, *Tarikh-e-Mashaikh-e-Chisht*, Vol-1, p. 296-98.

<sup>13</sup> Shahzad, Ghafir, *Punjab Mein Khanqahi Culture*, Lahore, Sang-e-Meel Publications, 2009, p. 81.

<sup>14</sup> Nizami, *Tarikh-e-Mashaikh-e-Chisht*, Vol-1, p. 318.

<sup>15</sup> See for details Saiyid Athar Abbas Rizvi, *A History of Sufism in India*, Vol.1, Manohar Publications, Delhi, 1971, pp. 141-43.

The essential element of Chishti Khanqahs was the *Langar khana*.<sup>16</sup> Food in *langar* was distributed among all the visitors freely. The expenditure of the *Langar khana* was managed by the *futuh* and offerings.<sup>17</sup> These khanqahs used to receive a large amount of *futuh* in the form of grain and money, but it was distributed by the end of the day among the poor and needy.<sup>18</sup> In the *Jam'at Khana*, the inmates had to pluck *pelu* and *delah* from three *Kareel* trees, fetch water, collect wood from the jungle, and then a salt less dish could be prepared.<sup>19</sup>

Chishti Sufis loved to interact and mingle with the masses and participated in their happiness and sorrows. As per them, to serve humanity was the main aim of religion.<sup>20</sup> The Chishti Sufis, with their moderate and compassionate approach, were close to the general public. They ate less and treated everyone equally who came to seek blessings and guidance.<sup>21</sup> Travellers were warmly welcomed, whether there was food available or not, and unexpected guests always enjoyed their warm and generous hospitality.<sup>22</sup> The Chishti Sufis made themselves accessible to all. In Chishti khanqahs, nobles and beggars were looked at with similar reverence and benevolence. Poverty is a big equalizer and can effectively split the false and manufactured blockades. They were always busy in human service, and this made them highly admirable and beloved to the Hindu community also. Hindus found their way of living just similar to their own.<sup>23</sup>

Moreover, the inmates of Khanqah never tried to convert the people, but people accept the faith on their own. This was slow and gradual due to the behaviour and moral character of Sufis. Those who convert their religion were never forced to follow new religion immediately.<sup>24</sup> The statement by Rai Bahadur Harbilas Sarada in his book on Ajmer shows how much Chishti Sufis were respected in Hindu society. He offers tribute to Khawaja Moin-u'd-Din Chishti in these words, "He never preached aggression, was a man of peace and goodwill towards all creatures."<sup>25</sup>

Chishti Khanqahs not just inspired and produced an environment of respect and tolerance for people of other faiths but also laid the ground for the Indo-Islamic Culture, which was the clear manifestation of how indigenous forms mingled with mystic thought of that time.<sup>26</sup> The genesis of Indo-Islamic Culture can

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<sup>16</sup>The tradition of an open kitchen (*langar*) among the Indian Chishti saints was probably established by Shaikh Farid. We do not hear about any *langar* in the hospice of Khwaja Moin-u'd-Din Chishti, while it is explicitly mentioned about Khwaja Qutb-u'd-din Bakhtiyar that (*Siyar-ul-Aaliya*, p. 48). Shaikh Farid's *langar* did not function regularly as very often he had no *futuh* which alone could keep a *langar* going. During his earlier years Shaikh Nizam-u'd-din Auliya also did not have a *langar*, His friends and companions very often starved. Later on, when *futuh* came to him, he established a *langar* which distributed free food to people from early morning till late into the night.

<sup>17</sup> Shahzad, *Khanqahi Culture*, p. 81. *Futuh* is a Persian simply means "gifts or offerings or unasked charity etc., given to any person or institution.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid. pp. 90-92

<sup>19</sup> Sijzi Amir Hasan, *Fawa'id ul-Fu'ad*, New Delhi, 1996, p.74; Hamid Qalandar, *khair -ul Majalis*. Ed. by K. A. Nizami, Aligarh, 1959, pp. 138-150.

<sup>20</sup> Qazi Javaid, *Hindi Muslim Tehzib*, Lahore: Vanguard Books Limited, 1983, pp. 159-60.

<sup>21</sup> Riaz-ul Islam, *Sufism in South Asia: Impact on Fourteen Century Muslim Society*, Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2002, p. 198.

<sup>22</sup> Schimmel, *Mystical Dimension of Islam*, p.346.

<sup>23</sup> Muneera Haeri, *The Chishti: A Living Light*, New York: Oxford University Press, 2000, p. 30.

<sup>24</sup> Ibid. 96.

<sup>25</sup> S. M. Ikram, *A History of Muslim Civilization in India and Pakistan: A Political and Cultural History*, 7th ed. Lahore: Institute of Islamic Culture, 1997, p. 71.

<sup>26</sup> Zeenut Zaid, ed. *The Magnificent Mughals*, Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2002, xxi.

be traced through Chishti Khanqahs, which were the centres of promoting art, local languages and literature.<sup>27</sup> Whether it is the historical background of the Urdu language or the evolution of Indo-Islamic Music, one has to look at these Chishti Khanqahs. Chishti Sufis learned the local language to build a better, close, and strong relationship with natives.<sup>28</sup> In fact, devotional music was already a component of the Hindu spiritual legacy, and Chishti Sufis used these established customs as a source of producing illumination. They successfully merged both "knowledge of the laws and those of the spirit."<sup>29</sup>

They not only extended the humanistic message of Islam but were also an instrument for circulating Muslim Culture. The Local languages were frequently used in mystical poetry, another endeavour from the Sufi realm. Likewise, the Musical genre, *Qawali*, a tremendous artistic blend of spiritual poetry and blissful music, was an essential activity in gatherings at the Chishti Khanqahs.<sup>30</sup>

Chishti Sufis endorsed the Syncretic Culture in the sub-continent, especially in the land of Punjab. The flexible attitude of Chishtis unleashed syncretic forces that led to the Indo-Islamic cultural fusion. They embraced an approach of religious tolerance towards the native people of India and accustomed themselves to the needs of a non-Muslim setting. They used popular descriptions and expressions to communicate their thoughts to their Indian followers and adopted many of their customs, rituals and practices.<sup>31</sup>

According to Richard M. Eaton, "the Sufi canon of *Suleh-Kul* or Universal brotherhood had a great humanistic appeal behind which it crossed all religious barriers and developed fellow feelings between the Hindus and the Muslims."<sup>32</sup>

The day Khawaja Moin-u'd-Din institutionalized himself at Ajmer, the Sufis of the Chishti Silsila held their influence over the Sub-continent. The history of the region can never ignore the contribution of the Chishti Sufis to developing Indo-Islamic Culture.

They always maintained a distance from the officials and rulers and strictly turned away from taking any political activity.<sup>33</sup> They always kept the ruling elite at distance. The early Chishtis lived in Khanqahs that remained in physical disconnection from the bureaucratic social hierarchy. Their Sufi abodes were founded on classless values where both dwellers and the visitors experienced impartiality. This is one of the reasons that they had strained link with the kings. Instead they kept themselves busy in serving humanity at their best. The history of early Chishti Khanqahs helps us in understanding the circumstance and conditions of the medieval Indian socio-religious set-up. This is their most significant contribution indeed. They were successful in their attempt to convert hostile groups of society into compassionate and tolerant one.

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<sup>27</sup> Maksud Ahmad Khan, *Khanqahs: Centres of Learning*, Chapter in book- Mansura Haider (ed.), Sufis, Sultans and Feudal orders- Professor Nurul Hassan Commemoration Volume, Delhi, 2004, p. 60.

<sup>28</sup> Qazi Javaid, *Tehzib*, pp. 159-60.

<sup>29</sup> Haeri, *The Chishtis*, pp. 52-53.

<sup>30</sup> Zeenat Zaid, *The Magnificent Mughals*, xxi.

<sup>31</sup> K. A. Nizami, *State and culture in Medieval Indian*, Adam Publishers & Distributors, Delhi, 1985, op. cit., p. 180.

<sup>32</sup> Amir Khan Shahid, "Religious Syncretism in Pre-Modern Punjab" *The Historian*, (Vol 7 No. 2, July-December 2009), pp. 107-111.

<sup>33</sup> In its best days, the order shunned from politics and Chishti Sufis strictly kept themselves away from the majestic and the sphere of the nobles. Even they turned down all favours through land grants.



The way they welcomed the deprived and the subjugated at their Khanqahs has no any other example in history. The unrestricted and classless environment of the Chishti Khanqahs attracted large number of people from lower sections of Indian society. The Chishti attitude towards religion was characterized by compassion towards the underprivileged sections of the society. Chishti Khanqahs were not only the places where people just spiritually benefited directly from the charismatic personality of the Chishti Sufis but it was the institution that set the standard for the rest of the humanity from the soil of Indian subcontinent. The humanizing influence of Chishti teachings along with Chishti Khanqah's amazing role led the fundamental changes in a person's life and consequentially brought radical modification in the congested and strict Indian social setup. All that immensely contributed to the everlasting regard of the Chishti Sufis which is quite obvious even today in the form of millions of Muslims and non-Muslims visitors to their Dargahs (tombs). Today in modern times the immense gathering at Chishti Dargahs around the region of Indo-Pakistan keeping the tradition of Chishti Khanqahs alive in many ways.

### **Conclusion**

Chishti Khanqahs hold a central role in spreading Sufism, transcending conventional classifications and social boundaries. These centres fostered spiritual growth, education, and compassion. Originating in the eighth century, they evolved into structured entities, impacting Central Asia, Iran, and South Asia. Khanqahs served as hubs of practical learning, uniting diverse individuals in mutual respect. They promoted equality, seen through practices and institutions like *Langar khana*, and *Jam'at Khana* leaving a lasting impact on Indian society. Their influence extended to language, music, and culture, fostering unity among various communities. Chishti Khanqahs remain a blend of spirituality, education, and compassion, evident through their continued reverence and relevance today.