

A Brief Account of Sufism and its Socio-Moral Relevance

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Abstract

Leaving aside the debate whether mystical religiosity is different only in degree or form in comparison to the non-mystical religiosity, this paper is going to address the brief account of Sufism and its moral exposition. In order to explore the moral vision of Sufism, it is necessary to examine the aims and practices of Sufis, their specific conception of religious knowledge and the popularization of their moral vision. By expounding the vision of Sufis, the paper will be concluded by analyzing the social-moral relevance of Sufism in current scheme.

Keywords: Sufism; Love; Peace; God-Man Relationship.

Introduction

Today, the world has divided into different camps and we are in a state of war. Religion has been used as a tool in order to promote the political enmity and hatred. On the other hand, Modern Western thought has severely influenced the youth of our society. For them their own culture, religion and traditions are merely orthodoxy and they feel ashamed of being Muslims.

In such a predicament, where the gap between religious teachings and the actions of its followers is so wide, the only way to reconstruct the relationship of Muslims with their religion could be possible through *Sufi* tendency. A harmonious unified system could only be maintained, when an inner and outer peace prevails in the society. As Individual and society are part and parcel of each other; the inner peace related with one's inner-self will in turn influence the outer peace. It is difficult for any law and organization to promote the real concept of peace without keeping balance between individual and society. When the concept of peace rests on the value system of a society, it becomes easy to

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achieve peace and harmony. In order to retrieve these values, a mystical approach targets to follow the laws of *Shariah*, paving the way towards the Ultimate Reality.

Islamic Mysticism or Sufism is one of the most outstanding movements which has an undeniable role in Islamic history. In the Ummayyad period, a direct contact between Islam and Christianity gave rise to mysticism, which was influenced by the Islamic faith and principles. Despite its Islamic cultural outlook, mystical religiosity deemed as an independent movement. It played a prominent role in effecting the traditional religious approach of the people. This influential movement is regarded as *Sufism (Tasawwuf)* and the people who adopt it are known as *Sufis*. One of the etymological interpretations of the word *Sufi* is that it is derived from Arabic word *Suf* which means a woolen cloth. Sufis were supposed to wear that woolen garment to avoid the worldly luxuries and to show simplicity.

However, it is interesting to note that ascetics in the pre-Islamic culture used to wear a specific dress of wool in order to depict a particular way of life. The early Muslims who practiced asceticism were duly named as Sufis. Later this has been adopted by several Muslims, giving way to mysticism in Islam.

Sufism, in principle, is the study of seeking the living knowledge of the One Ultimate Reality. A Muslim conceives Allah as the one who is unique in his attributes and essence and is unlike anything in the whole creation. While a Sufi on the other hand holds "God is the One Real Being which underlies all phenomena."¹ Actual purpose of a Sufi is to shackle himself off from his 'I-am-ness' by realizing that there exists nothing but God. Sufis pass through different stages (*maqamat*) in the process of purification of inner-self. They accomplish these stages through their subjective experiences i.e. *ahwaal*. After getting the inner-self purified, Sufi reaches the stage of annihilation i.e. *fana* and this is the stage where Sufi touches the peak of *kamliyat* (perfectness).

The above mentioned stages could only be achieved by a Sufi when he attaches himself to *Tariqat* which can be regarded as a Sufi order and his submission towards a Master or *Murshid*. The role of master is to polish his disciple and put him to a pilgrimage of the stages of *Tasawwuf*, directing him towards man-God communion.

"Accordingly, whenever an unknown dervish comes into a convent or wishes to join a company of Sufis, they ask him 'Who was the Pir that taught thee?' and 'From whose hand didst thou receive the khirqa?' Sufis recognize no relationship but these

*two, which they regard as all-important. They do not allow anyone to associate with them, unless he can show to their satisfaction that he is lineally connected in both these ways with a fully accredited Pir.*²

The particular order in which *Sufi* enters is based on a covenant known as *Bay'ah*. This covenant maintains the chain (*Silsilah*) between the master and the disciple. This relation is so strong that disciple seeks for the blessings of his master and submits himself before him. (*fana-fil-Murshid*)

Following verse of the Holy Quran reminds us about the evidence of man-God communion:

*"And [mention] when your Lord took from the children of Adam – from their loins – their descendants and made them testify of themselves, [saying to them], 'Am I not your Lord?' They said, 'Yes, we have testified.' [This] – lest you should say on the day of Resurrection, "Indeed, we were of this unaware."*³

This verse is very important pertaining to the real Sufi spirit because it shows the revival of that pact to God, which was once made between man and God. It is beginning of lover-Beloved relationship which William Chittick puts in such words:

*"Nonetheless, there is also a second sort of love-relationship between God and man that comes into play when we consider the manner in which people grow and mature in their humanity. God loves man by definition and he created the universe because of his love for human beings. But people are not simply static recipients of divine love. They can change their situation through the gift of free will. They are able to make themselves receptive to a more intense love from God if they follow His instructions on how to live the life of love. The Koran refers to these instructions in another verse that the texts frequently quote: 'Say [O Muhammad!]: If you love God, follow me, and God will love you" (3:31).*⁴

The famous Sufi orders found in the history are *Suhrawardiyya*, the proponent of which is Shihab Al-Din Suhrawardi, *Qadiriyya* attached with one of the famous Sufis Abdul Qadir al-Jilani, *Chishtiyya* named after Mu'iniddin Chishti, *Mawlawiyya* – a Turkish order spread after the fame of Jalaluddin Rumi, and *Naqshabandiyya* founded by Shah Baha Al Din Naqshband.

Sufi Stages and Experiences – A Brief Account

Sufi grasps the knowledge of God in such a manner, which reduces the gap between the knower and the known. The main goal is to

develop a unique and strong relationship between the Creator and the created. In the same lines, Sufi like a religious man rejects the concept of incarnation and also denies the belief that God can incarnate in man. True Sufis, who are not influenced by Western mystical tendencies, reject the pantheistic approach and clearly distinguish God from his servants. Furthermore, they maintain that the actual goal must be to develop one's self to such a high level of consciousness so that it may resemble the character and essence of God. In order to reach this stage, man would have to strive hard to gain knowledge through the mystical experience.

*"Of course the Sufis never tire of emphasizing that the end of Sufism is not to possess such and such a virtue or state as such but to reach God beyond all states and virtues. But to reach the Transcendent beyond the virtues, man must first possess the virtues; to reach the station of annihilation and subsistence in God, man must have already passed through the other stages and stations."*⁵

Nicholson interprets the same concept in such words:

*"The Sufi who sets out to seek God calls himself a 'traveller' (salik), he advances by slow 'stages' (maqamat) along a path (tariqat) to the goal of union with Reality (fanafi'l-Haqq). The Sufi's 'path' is not finished until he has traversed all the 'stages', making himself perfect in every one of them before advancing to the next, and has also experienced whatever 'states' it pleases God to bestow upon him."*⁶

Self-realization is a pre-requisite for traveling on a spiritual path. Here, self-realizers put their 'full being' in everything they do which helps them in beginning a spiritual journey. They take every moment as an opportunity and participate whole heartedly. Once they realize that this life is a probationary then there develops a strong sense of responsibility, keeps connect the self-realizers with God and others.

On the other hand, in the later centuries, the decline Sufism faced was perhaps due to the manipulation of the common people, which worsened its practical image. Mir Valiuddin maintains that when,

*"The Sufi who is conversant with the Knowledge of Nearness knows the secret of the relation between Haqq and Khalq, God and the phenomenal things, the secret of nearness and proximity, immanence and transcendence, Firstness and Lastness, Outwardness and Inwardness of God with the phenomenal things."*⁷

Sufis strive for nearness to God and enjoy an ecstatic experience of His presence. External manifestation plays a vital role in maintaining such practices. Through his worships, a Sufi finds tranquility and contentment imagining himself in front of God. As Nicholson has rightly mentioned in his writing that,

*“The whole of Sufism rests on the belief that when the individual self is lost, the Universal Self is found, or, in religious language, that ecstasy affords the only means by which the soul can directly communicate and become united with God”.*⁸

Only then he can be the one "who has fully realized his essential oneness with the Divine Being in whose likeness he is made"⁹. Thus following his goal he remains consistent and passes the stages of *fana* silently. In this period, a proper development of his personality may occur, which changes his inner life and his consciousness may only focus to reach the Ultimate Being. The mystical experiences which we have mentioned earlier as *ahwaal* illuminate the life of Sufi with new discoveries of truth and light. This has been beautifully described by Trimmingham:

*“In the Sufism of the orders this ecstasy or trance-like 'state' is called a hal, though in Sufism proper hal more strictly refers to the succession of illuminations, through experiencing which the Sufi progresses a further 'stage' (maqam) towards the goal of spiritual perfection.”*¹⁰

Different levels in the Sufi Quest

There is a controversy on the exact number of Sufi stages or orders, however, everyone agrees on one fact that the ultimate end is to reach the True Reality (*Al-Haqiqah*). This is the stage which we have described earlier as well i.e. the stage of *fana* – annihilation or absorption in Divine Reality. The journey starts from *Shariah* which provides the basis for the fundamental beliefs. True Sufi hence, starts his spiritual journey from the code given by the Quran and the *Sunnah*. Both of these are authentic religious sources which pertain to the true Sufism as well. When a Sufi truly follows *Shariah*, he becomes able to act according to the commands of God.

The actions, according to the basic laws of Islam (*Shariah*) referred to as *Tariqat* could be understood as a path, which exactly presents the law and order given by Islam. These laws enlighten the mind and heart of a Sufi and he feels himself in complete harmony with the commandments of God. These two stages; *Shariah* and *Tariqah* together lay the foundation of next stage

which is known as *Marifah*. It is the stage which could also be understood as *gnosis* or the true knowledge of God. This comprehensive word depicts a complete envisioned stage of Sufism, where one gets aware of the presence and the essence of God. Afterwards, these three stages collectively turn to the final and ultimate goal, to say, the absorption in God. These stages have been well explained by Trimmingham:

*“Nasut is the natural human state in which one lives following the rules of the shari'a;
Malakut is the nature of angels, to reach which one treads the tariqa, the path of purification; whilst
Jabarut is the nature of power, to attain which one follows the way of enlightenment, ma'rifa, until one swoon into
Fana, absorption into Deity, the State of Reality (Haqiqah), often called in the order literature `Alam al-Ghaib, 'the (uncreated) world of the mystery'.”¹¹*

Sufi believes that everything good or adverse comes from God and thus, by realizing this he entirely submits himself in front of Him. This submission leads him towards a complete surrender to the will of God. The firm belief in God and His will brings serenity and tranquility to him. These small efforts make him habitual to rush towards the final stage of *fana* – an ultimate goal where the Sufi loses his identity. Dhu al-Nun Misri says:

“The sentiment of love for God ultimately unites man with God. Man is submerged in the Being of God. Himself does not remain his own but becomes a part and parcel of the Self of God.”¹²

It is also of genuine concern that a true Sufi will never proclaim to reach the stage of absorption because this stage of *fana fil haqq* or *fana fit tawhid* leaves with no consciousness of self-identity and personhood. Nicholson has described it in such words:

“the highest stage of fana is reached when even the consciousness of having attained fana disappears. This is what the Sufis call 'the passing-away of passing-away' (fana al-fana). The mystic is now wrapped in contemplation of the divine essence”.¹³

One famous method to induce ecstasy is through *zikr*. It can be done by either taking the names of Allah repeatedly or by simply saying 'Allah'. Usually, group of Sufis get together and practice *zikr* regularly. The purpose of *zikr* is to develop the habit of concentration which is a pre-requisite for remembrance because without focusing, one cannot fix his mind in one direction.

Sufism in the view of Quran and Hadith

In the academic circle, we usually confront a question that if Sufism, a new off-shoot developed later in Islamic history then how could it be related to the Quran and *Sunnah*? This is one of the most important objections raised against Sufism. The Sufi answer for this question is that on deep study of Quran and Hadith, it would be clear enough that the true spirit of Sufism is consistent with Islam. Although there have been so many controversies between Sufism and Islam but they are due to certain pseudo Sufis. Sufism contains the spirit as found in the religion itself.

“Sufis as testifying to God's Nature and Attributes, His Self-revelation to mankind through the voice of Gabriel speaking to Muhammad. For these mystical texts are the chief encouragement and justification of the Sufi in his belief that he also may commune with God.”¹⁴

This verse “To God we belong, and to Him is our return”¹⁵ indicates the true spirit of communion of man with God. The same spiritual devotion in the Sufi tradition can be observed as in the Quranic text. Sufi's whole philosophy depends upon the ‘return’ towards the Ultimate Reality.

This *Hadees e Qudsi* “I was a hidden treasure and I desired to be known; therefore I created the creation in order that I might be known”¹⁶ also refers to the quest of a Sufi to gain the knowledge of God. Such traditions encourage Sufi to seek a true relation with God as God also wants His servants to seek Him.

Role of Some Famous Sufis in the History

History is full of the contributions of certain famous Sufis who have left some everlasting impacts on the people of their time as well as the people of the present age. They played their essential role in the development of Islam. One such servant of God and true Sufi was Junayd Bhagdadi who “was the greatest exponent of the 'sober' school of Sufism and elaborated a theosophical doctrine which determined the whole course of orthodox mysticism in Islam.”¹⁷ Being an early Sufi Junayd introduced the method of *self-denial* which had laid the foundation of the concept of *fana* in the later period because he was the first to use this expression.

Bayazid al-Bistami is another famous name who is known as “first of the 'intoxicated' Sufis who, transported upon the wings of mystical fervor, found God within his own soul and scandalized the orthodox by ejaculating, 'Glory to Me! How great is My Majesty'.”¹⁸ He established and promoted the concept that the

Creator and the Created is united in such a way that there left no difference in the identities of both. He magnified this experience to its peak.

Abu Sa'id ibn Abul-Khayr was a Sufi like Junayd- one of the prominent early masters who promoted the view of *fana* by losing one's consciousness and get absorbed in God. Like other great *Sufis* he was also of the same view that practice and concentration in order to keep alive the *zikr*, the purification of soul, abstaining from the worldly pleasures, ultimately lead towards the actual goal i.e. the love of God.

In the very early days of *Sufism*, Rabi'a al-Adawiyya a woman Sufi in the great mystic movement of Islam was the native of Basra. The major contribution of Rabi'a, was her effort to draw attention towards the point that God must be loved and worshipped for the sake of Him only instead of the fear of punishment or the greed of reward. Her famous saying regarding this concept is:

*"O God! If I worship Thee in fear of Hell, burn me in Hell; and if I worship Thee in hope of Paradise, exclude me from Paradise; but if I worship Thee for Thine own sake, withhold not Thine Everlasting Beauty!"*¹⁹

Similarly, a legend has also been associated with her that once she was seen carrying a bucket of water in one hand and a burning torch in the other hand. Upon asking, she replied that she is going to set fire to Paradise and quench the fires of Hell so that human beings may worship God for His own glory alone.

Mansooral-Hallaj was a famous Sufi who was hanged due to his claim of "*ana'lHaqq- I am the Tuth*" which led him towards brutal dismemberment and finally he was crucified for refusing not take back his words.

Al-Ghazali is generally recognized as a theologian but he declared himself Sufi after a certain period of depression and agnosticism. He then claimed to find peace and harmony through his mystic experience.

One of the great Sufis who left an everlasting mark on both the history of sub-continent and Sufism as well, was Ali Hujwiri popularly known as *Data Ganj Baksh*. His marvelous work is *Kashf al Mahjub* which is considered an icon in the history Sufism. He had learned under several teachers, few of which he had listed in his book. Describing a complete and comprehensive system of Sufism, he clearly showered light on the difference between true Sufi and a so-called Sufi.

The role of Baba Farid in the history of Sufism, particularly his influence on *Sikhism* is highly appreciable. His poetry has several philosophical dimensions which were meant to purify one's inner self. Thousands of the pupils of Baba Farid used to gather in his *Khanqah* to learn from him the methods 'to refrain from evil and to acquire good'. Through his Punjabi poetry, Baba Farid criticized the rulers of that time and provoked them to minimize the difference between rich and the poor. Despite several hardships in his way, he did not give up his efforts to promote spirituality.

Bulleh Shah, another eminent Sufi, raised his voice against the orthodox Mullah by shaking the mind of a blind follower. He criticized the so-called religious traditions and practices prevalent at his time and highlighted the contradictions in one's lifestyle and the true religious teachings.

The role of Sufism the sub-continent is unforgettable and splendid. They strived hard to sensitize people about the teachings of Islam and molded their characters. A large number of non-Muslims were impressed by the simple teachings of Sufis and their fair attitude towards them. Many Sufis migrated to India to devote their lives for the cause of Islam and faced innumerable hardships and dangers. They endured these hardships just for the pleasure of Allah Almighty and shared their spiritual bounty regardless of race or creed. They made people attracted towards Islam through their kind attitude presenting the true Sunnah of Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). They never forced people to follow the teachings of Islam rather due to their high moral deeds; people themselves got attracted towards Islam. These services were done by the Sufis like Khwaja Bakhtiyar Kaki, Makhdoom Jahania Jahangasht of Bahawalpur, Data Ganj Baksh of Lahore, Khwaja Moinuddin of Ajmer, Sheikh Bahaudin Zakriya of Multan, Baba Farid of Pakpattan and Sheikh Nazimudin of Delhi.

Every culture possesses a specific archetype which shapes it. By understanding the archetypes of the sub-continent, i.e. above mentioned Sufis felt the pulse of the people at that time which led them to succeed in transforming their hearts. In this respect, they contributed to the languages spoken in the sub-continent, poetry and music. They succeeded in bringing up the socio-moral diversion to the society due to the following causes:

- Their first purpose was to free a religious person from the rigidity associated with Islam, their basic emphasis was to divert the attention of people towards the love of God instead of His wrath and anger only

- they persuaded people to practice the religious teachings instead of merely raising slogans,
- Sufis taught people to avoid lust and greed for material world
- they encouraged people to stand against the cruel leaders and to restore the Islamic moral values
- they give people an insight to combat those tendencies which create hurdle in Muslim societies
- they promoted the message of brotherhood among Muslims by shunning the racial and linguistic differences

Relevance of Sufism in Today's Milieu

Sufism, in every age and era, has sought to establish an infrastructure which now in modern parlance is termed as private social welfare. The purpose that infrastructure was to uplift the society as a whole, in moral, spiritual, physical and psychological perspectives. In this way, Sufism played a leading role to affect the societies in which it functioned.

Today, militancy, rage and violence have culminated the peace and harmony of our country. Murder on the verge of race, religion and creed is not a big deal now. Every day, with a rising sun, brutality, ferocity and ruthlessness has also been increasing. Humanity has travelled a long way down the wrong path. It is the time when spiritual guidance can act as panacea for the suffering humanity. Evil cannot be eradicated by evil rather it can be done through the strength of character, faith and wisdom. One of the primary messages, Sufis intend to give is that of sacrifice, patience and tolerance, equality and peace through which the growing threats of extremism, fundamentalism, terrorism and obscurantism can be countered. Tolerance helps in developing an inclusive approach and lessening the activities of extremists. Keeping in view the present scenario, Sufi's inter-ethnic, inter-racial and cross-cultural understandings are quite relevant to improve the deteriorating society.

Steps should be taken by the Sufi community to renew set-up and establish small institutions to teach people a lesson of socio-moral conduct, giving them an insight to ponder upon the duties to be fulfilled as vicegerent of God. Similarly, like Sufis, the pyramidal system of charities and trusts should be introduced. This paradigm could be quite similar to the present day government operated social programs like public schools, hospitals, public hostels (*saraey*) etc. In educational institutions, seminars and

discussions based on practical exposition of Sufism could play an affective and healthy role. Modern scientific mind demands evidences as proofs for the claims of Sufism. Instead of using the old methods it should pursue and explain the same teachings in a new scientific order.

In contemporary modern milieu, one can act on the Sufi teachings, by focusing upon the society's welfare and the progress of humanity. The basic point is to serve humanity as much as, it could be. Apart from Sufi tradition, one can uphold Sufi spirit, by simply taking into consideration, the small acts of virtue. For example, to perform the assigned duties, to be helpful to needy, to be virtuous, polite and kind to others, to be honest and true, and to be patient to the unwanted conditions etc. These virtuous acts will pave the way for a spiritual journey which will serve as two ways connection between 'an individual to society' and 'an individual to God'.

Sufism also teaches what religion promotes and it clearly declares that the ultimate refuge of Muslims is in developing a strong relationship with Ultimate Being leaving behind the debate of different sects and ideologies. We all seek for one Ultimate Being through different paths so it is pointless to try to eliminate others. As revealed in the Holy Qur'an: "Whatever you have been promised is truth."²⁰ And it is religion which is the stable reality.²¹

Thus, Sufi approach is relevant today because Sufis could interpret the moral aspects in Shari'ah more affectively. They can use their mystic skills to reduce the rigid attitude towards religion and promote the message of love for all. Sufism has the potential to significantly pin down the essence of religion which could maintain the socio-moral upbringing of the society in an appealing way.

Notes and References

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