# Mystic Thought and its Impact on Indian Society

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Abul Hassan Nuri says, "Tasawwuf is neither external action, nor knowledge; it is all virtue (Khulq)[1].

Explaining the mystic life Shah Kalimullah observed that a Sufi's heart is always focused towards God and man. Apparently the directions seem different, but basically they are one, because he who desires the love of God, should learn to love His creatures. Sheikh Junaid Baghdadi remarks that "I found God among the poor people in the streets of Medina[2]". Meaning thereby that it was by assimilating the problems of the poor and helping them in the struggle of life that a man could attain the spiritual goal. This approach towards human beings had its roots in the mystic concept of God. For a sufi, God is neither a theological myth nor a logical abstraction of unity, but an all-embracing Reality present in his ethical and intellectual experience and giving the inspiration for creating an ideal realm of values in a distressed world.

Sufi saints identified religion with service to humanity and propounded a concept of Ta'at (devotion to God). Devotion to God is of two types: Lazimi and Muta'addi. Lazimi devotion includes the prescribed rituals like prayer, fasting, pilgrimage to Mecca, recitation of Quran, while Muta'addi devotion provides comfort to others by spending money on them and to help one's fellow human beings[3]. Therefore, the reward of Muta'addi devotion is endless. This thought was projected by all the sufi saints as Sheikh Jamal-ud-din Hansvi, a disciple of Shaikh Farid-ud-Din Masood Ganj-i-Shakar, remarks, "The mystic objective cannot be achieved through extra-ordinary number of prayers and fasts, but by fulfilling the needs of the people[4]."

With these revolutionary concepts of God, man and religion, the Muslim mystics entered the Indian social scene which had a multi-racial, multi-religions and multi-lingual pattern of society. They were God-conscious men, who rose above all narrow divisions of society and strove to find a unity for the heterogeneous elements. They preached 'unity of God' and 'Brotherhood of Man'. Faith in the 'unity of Godhead' led them to the belief that all humanity was basically one. They emphasised the dignity of man as man by rejecting all caste taboos and declared that through love, faith, toleration and sympathy we can create a healthy social order. They opened the doors of religious education for all by emphasising that the way to God did not pass through the lanes of caste, creed and colour, because Islam knew no artificial distinction between one man and another and believed in the basic unity and oneness of human society. The Holy Prophet also taught them that 'all God's creatures are His family; and he is the most beloved of God who does most good to His creatures[5].'' They treated all human beings as 'children of God on earth' and tried to bring their hearts closer and inspire them with the feelings of human love and sympathy.

Shaikh Abdul Quddus Gangohi once said; "Why this meaningless talk about the believer, the Kafir, the obedient, the sinner, the rightly guided, the misdirected, the Muslim, the pious, the infidel, the fire-worshipper. All are like beeds in a rosary[6]". This vast perspective of basic human unity and oneness became the corner-stone of the social thought of the saints of India. For them man was man first and anything else afterwards. Shah Wali Ullah Dehlavi considered the human individual as *insan-i-saghir* and humanity as a whole as *insan-i-Kabir*. His conviction was that all that contributes to unity and oneness of human society is a life-promoting process. The saints carried this concept still farther and propounded the "unity of human origin". In social surroundings where the higher classes claimed origin from the sun or the moon, and different castes were assigned different sources of origin, this concept paved the way for introduction of egalitarian principles in the social life of the people. It appears from Al-Beruni's account that the principle of caste, which formed the basis of the Indian social system at that time, had eaten into its very vitals. It struck at the root of individuality and amounted almost to a denial of personality; it resulted in the total annihilation of any sense of citizenship or of loyalty to the country as a whole.

The Muslim mystics did not approve of this classification of society. They directed their energies in combating the idea of caste and physical pollution which, in their view, cut across the very concept of oneness of human society. They demonstrated the working of the non-violent and pacific principles on their own lines. They tried to stress the fact, both by precept and example upon the minds of their followers, that a true mystic should always strive for creating love and affection in the hearts of men. Shaikh Farid advised his disciples: "Do not give me a knife, give me a needle. The knife is an instrument for cutting and the needle for sewing together[7].

Thus the mystic attitude always remained affectionate towards all those who even troubled and tortured them. The mystics tried to "develop the attributes of God"[8], as an ideal of life. It was necessary for a mystic to be benevolent towards all His creatures. They contended that God had provided the benefits of the sun, water and earth to all human beings, irrespective of their caste, creed, colour or character. So the mystic was expected to inculcate virtues which made him look upon all human beings as equally entitled to his benevolence. Shaikh Muin-ud-Din Chishti told his disciples that the qualities which endeared a man to God were "river-like generosity, sun-like affection and earth-like hospitality"[9]. This mystic morality saved human sympathy from running into narrow grooves.

Shaikh Nizam-ud-Din Auliya once narrated to his audience the story of a Bedouin who used to pray to God to have benevolence on him and the Holy Prophet. When the Prophet came to know of this, he said: "Why do you thus limit the mercy of God? His benevolence is for all"[10].The Shaikh advised his followers, "Give food to everyone whether you know him or not[11]". Following this approach towards society, the mystics appreciated those works of the rulers which were intended for the welfare of all humanity. Shaikh Nizam-ud-Din Auliya once stated that Iltutmish received divine mercy on account of the construction of the *Haug-i-Shamsi*[12], which provided water to all the people of Delhi without any discrimination. Any differentiation between man and man in matters of charity was therefore reprehensible.

The saints of India also tried their best to improve the moral tone of the society. Shaikh Rukn-ud-Din Abul Fath once said: "Pollution is of two types, of the heart and of the body. Physical pollution can be removed through ablution with ordinary water, but to wash off

pollution of the heart, one needs the water of the eyes"[13]. Pollution of
the heart, he maintained, was due to bad company and it produced
vices like black-marketing, back-biting, scandal-mongering, wine-
drinking and venery and disturbed the moral equilibrium of the society
and developed sin and immorality among the people. Moral well-being
of the society demands from everyone to fight within himself all evil
thoughts. Self-criticism, in order to purify one's own life was
instrumental in creating an ideal realm of values[14]. The mystics
believed that if someone carried on a struggle against the demands of
his base self (*Nafs*), he performed a *jihad-i-akbar*, which was greater in
value than *jihad* against the enemies. Shaikh Farid said; "The dervaish
prefers dying of starvation to incurring any debt for the satisfaction of
his desires. Debt and resignation are poles apart and cannot subsist
together"[16]. Similarly Shaikh Nizam-ud-Din Auliya always ate very
little which made him weak. When he was asked about it, he replied
with tears in his eyes: "So many poverty stricken people are sleeping
without dinner in the corners of the mosques and before the shops.
How can this food go down my throat ?"[17]. This was their  highest
form of devotion and love.

Social vices were checked by the mystics who said it was one's
moral duty to stop crime and immorality in society. If a man could
prevent the commission of any sin or crime by persuasion, he should
use his tongue to stop it; if he could stop it by hand, he should not
hesitate to do so; and if he could neither use his tongue nor his hand,
he should at least have condemnation for the act in his heart. The basic
reason for social disturbance and uneasiness, in the eyes of the Sufis,
was indulgence in material pursuits. His involvement in such activities
made him drift from the real source of spiritual enlightenment and
blessing. Too much absorption in materialistic affairs made him selfish
and egocentric. The best way to live in this world, was to live like a
swan. As a mystic poet says, "learn the style of living from the swan.
When it comes out of water its feathers are all dry".

Lethargy and parasitism were also criticised as social vices by the
Indian mystics. Shaikh Hamid-ud-din Sufi went to the extent of saying
that an indolent person stood on the border of Kufr[18]. Similarly Shaikh
Nizam-ud-din Auliya said "who-ever ate from some doubtful source,
spoiled his prayers and penitences."[19] Black-marketing and hoarding
were strongly condemned by the Sufis because of their baneful impact
on society. These acts, they said, were adopted to take advantage of

human misery. The mystics suggested the social boycott of all those guilty of these social crimes.[20] They considered it a duty of the state to order hoarders to sell what is over and above the yearly requirement of their families. Sayyid Muhammad Gaisu Daraz narrates the action of an honest merchant who ordered his agents, "who had waited to sell his corn till the prices went up, to dole out the entire stock in charity as atonement for their misdeed in withholding the grain."[21] Barani informs us that as a result of the teachings of contemporary saints, the incidence of crime had decreased in Delhi.[22] The mystics held aloft the principles of morality and inculcated in their visitors a sense of moral responsibility which helped in saving the society from vice and corruption.

Slavery was another common social evil. Male and Female, both were purchased for court glamour and also for domestic service. Though we come across some slaves in the *Khanqahs* and in the personal service of the saints[23], they were actually liberated slaves and they were given the facilities of free-born citizens. The mystics, in general, disliked the institution of slavery and advised their disciples to emancipate the slaves. The author of *Fawaid-al-Fuad* reveals that Maulana Sharaf-ud-Din had a slave girl, she wove a handkerchief and gave it to her master. In the meantime Maulana visited Ajodhan and placed the handkerchief before Shaikh Farid who remarked. "May Lord grant her freedoms". Maulana thought, "Shaikh has said that the woman will be set free, but she is a slave-girl of value and I cannot afford to set her free". But suddenly he had a second thought and came to the Shaikh and submitted, "I have set her free". The Shaikh was immensely pleased and remarked "you have done well."[24] Thus the mystics tried to eradicate slavery from society, sometimes openly but very often by hint and suggestion. In fact the *khanqahs* acted as a counterweight in maintaining the moral equilibrium of medieval society.

The Sufis of medieval India preached the lesson of toleration, religious co-existence and amity that Indian society had to cherish and strive for. They fought against exclusivism and prejudice, because true toleration is of that spiritually powerful man who, while guarding the frontiers of his own faith, can appreciate all forms of faith other than his own. Shaikh Nizam-ud-Din Auliya once remarked on seeing the Hindus worshipping the idols: "Every community has got their path, their religion and their house of worship."[25] They tolerated the modes

of thought and behaviour of people of other faiths, and apart from all
the differences, they always listened to their problems sympathetically,
which made them cynosures of love and affection.

## Impact on Indian Religious Attitude

Indian society was based on the caste system, and the principle of
caste was the negation of the dignity of man as man[26]. The common
Hindus believed that whatever existed in the world was the property of
the Brahmans. During medieval times, Religion was the exclusive
monopoly of the Brahmans. They not only administered to the religious
needs of the people but stood like an intermediary between God and
man. Al-Beruni informs us that religion in every form was denied to
non-caste people, spiritual communion with God was impossible for
them and only the Brahmans and the Kshattriyas could learn the *Vedas*
and the *Upanshid*[27]. The mystics struggled against this situation and
finally succeeded in their efforts when the Indian society underwent a
change and religious leadership sprang up from the deprived sections
of society. The saints of the Bhakti school, like Kabir, Nanak, Dadu,
Dhanna, Pipa, Chaitanya and others, filled the atmosphere with
religious ideas and ideas of social equality. Many of these Bhakti saints
had spent some time with the Sufis in their *khanqahs*. They disciplined
their inner lives by a careful cultivation and control of their senses. It
was the influence of the sufis that the Bhakti saints rejected the caste
system and proclaimed egalitarian principles, opened religious
knowledge and places for all and declared that God was one and was
approachable by all human beings.

Monotheism acted as a great integrating force in the Indian
society. The Bhakti saints preached that devotion to God was the only
means of salvation. God, they said was the source of all joys or
internal bliss and was conceived as the supreme beloved; he does not
live in a temple but in the hearts of man[28]. They gave the message to
their followers that direct communion with God was possible for them.
It gave the down-trodden and sense of dignity and spiritual self-
confidence. In fact, many of the saints of the Bhakti school belonged to
the lower strata of society and came from the class of weavers,
cobblers, tanners and carders, while the other sections of society also
raised the standard of revolt against discriminations, and this was only
the result of the Sufis' quiet revolution which they brought about in
social thinking of India.

The impact of the Sufis can also be traced in the literature, language and ideas of the Bhakti saints. Nearly two hundred Arabic and Persian words have been found in their works and these words are from sufi lore and convey for instance, Kabir's spiritual message in terms which had come to assume definite connotations. The *Guru Granth* has also scores of Persian and Arabic words which show that Guru Nanak had come to acquire personal and intimate knowledge about the delicate concepts of Islamic mysticism. He absorbed the teachings of Shaikh Farid Ganj-i-Shakar which were floating in the atmosphere[29]. Dr. Trilochan Singh writes that "his free use of Quranic terminology to express some of his theological views in his later writings, shows that he studied the Quran and other Islamic scriptures available to him."[30] W.G.Orr observes about Dadu that 'his fierce intolerance of caste and idolatry, his vivid consciousness of God as creator, ruler and judge and his emphasis on moral freedom and responsibility, are part of his Muslim inheritance."[31] Tara Chand writes that Dadu was the disciple of Kamal, therefore he had greater knowledge of sufism than his predecessors. His description of the true Musalman also shows, how he rose above prejudices of creed and emphasised the true inwardness of religion[32]. Thus the Bhakti saints were largely inspired by the mystics who had established their hospices in every part of India.

Prof. Gibb remarks that 'from the thirteenth century, sufism increasingly attracted the creative social and intellectual energies within the community, to become the bearer or instrument of a social and cultural revolution."[33] Their *khanqahs* were the only place where people professing different religions, enjoying different social status and belonging to different backgrounds met and exchanged views. A careful analysis of the *khanqahs* would reveal the fact that most of them were established outside the caste-ridden cities in the midst of non-caste people. Their broad human sympathies, their practice of distributing among the needy and poor whatever came to them as gifts, and the classless atmosphere attracted the inferior sections of the Indian society to its fold. Here they found an entirely different social order from their own. All lived, slept and ate together, and, above all, their readiness to listen to the problems of every visitor made them centres of Muslim culture, love and affection for the Indian people. *Jamat khanas* remained open till mid-night. All types of people; scholars, politicians, soldiers, Hindus, Muslims, the *jogis* and the *qalandars,* old and young, villagers and men and women visited them. Every one in

need of sympathy and help turned towards the *Jamat-khana* because they believed that a saint could heal their ailments.

In the *khanqahs* views were exchanged between the Sufis and yogis in an atmosphere of good-will and understanding. It was their impact that the general public showed an inclination to religion and prayer. There were no topics of conversation among the people except inquiries about prayer. According to Khaliq Ahmed Nizami, "the hearts of men having become virtuous by good deeds, the very name of wine, gambling and other forbidden things never came to any one's lips. Sins and abominable vices appeared to people as bad as infidelity."[34] Thus the Muslim mystics always looked upon social service as their supreme objective and tried to achieve this mystic mission. No social contract could be of any avail if there was no identification with the society. When the people found that the mystics had identified themselves with their life-conditions, the impact of their teaching became stronger. Shaikh Hamid-ud-Din settled at Nagaur and adopted the life of a Rajasthani peasant. His poverty and humanism attracted the people to his fold. Sayyid Muhammad Ghauth Shattari was another famous saint whose generous treatment of every Hindu visitor made his *khanqah* at Gwaliar "a haven of refuge for Hindus and Muslims alike."[35]

The contribution of the sufi saints in the sphere of language was that they discouraged linguistic chauvinism, developed regional languages and evolved and common medium for communication known as Hindivi. Wherever the mystics settled they tried to build linguistic bridges to establish contact with the local people. Their role in the evolution of vernacular languages in different regions of the country cannot be ignored. They helped in the development of Hindivi, Punjabi, Bangali, Dakhani, Gujarati and other regional languages. The early history of these languages reveals that it was the *khanqah* which stood out prominently as the main nursury where the language of the elite and the language of the common man came together and paved the way for the emergence of new languages intelligible to both. In the *Jamat-khana* of Shaikh Farid-ud-Din Ganj-i-Shakar the earliest Hindivi sentences were uttered."[36]

It is also recorded that many of the siants spiritual literature was in the Punjabi dialect[37]. Their writings in different languages also opened a new and effective channel of communication with the people around them. The Sufis considered it a social obligation to convey their

message in the language of the masses. When Shah Walliullah started his movement, he first thought of translating the Quran into Persian. In fact, he acted upon a long established mystic tradition of bringing people closer to the main sources of religion. Shah Abdul Qadir and Shah Rafi-ud-Din, the sons of Shah Walliullah, continued the practice and translated Quran into Hindivi. Thus the sufis encouraged mother tongues to express their views more effectively and they also adopted native dialects. By taking to the language of the people around them, the sufi saints accelerated the pace of social and emotional integration.

While social contacts paved the way for communication of ideas and brought the people closer, the sufis turned their attention towards ideological and emotional integration. Ideological integration was a slow and long-drawn process and remained confined to the higher intellectual class, but emotional integration which could be brought about through *sama'* (mystical music or qawwali) was easier and more fruitful, because from the religious point of view music was a well-known aspect of Indian society. Sama consisted of mystic songs and it was a source to relieve the strain on a man's emotions, but it also quickened his emotional responses. Shaikh Qutb-al-Din was very fond of sama. He often arranged *sama* majalis, and one day at the *khanqah* of Shaikh Ali Sijzi he was overtaken by a state of ecstasy and for four days he could not get out of this emotional storm[38]. Shaikh Farid was also very fond of *sama* and often arrange its majalis. Consequently it became one of the popular institutions of medieval mysticism, and the common man incapable of understanding the mystic principles at a higher level, readily accepted its ceremonial aspects. He was attracted to its fold and emotional integration was developed through *sama*. The common people looked upon mystic more as a blessed miracle worker than the teacher of a higher morality. At the intellectual level the process of integration was also encouraged by the concept of *wahdat-al-wujud* (unity of being). Those who believed in *wahdat-al-wujud* tried to give an ideological support to the Muslim mystic movement and interpreted the Quran and the Sunnah in the light of their doctrine. Its aim was to bridge the ideological gap between Islam and Hinduism. However, saints like Ghauth Shattari, Mian Mir, Shaikh Nur-ud-Din Abd-ul-Rehman Chishti and Mirza Mazhar sought to bring about an intellectual harmony between Hindu and Muslim religious thought.

Thus the conciliation between the various cultural groups was not only a moral and intellectual demand but a social necessity of the time.

It was difficult for the Muslims to rule subjects whose majority differed from them in race, language, religion and culture. Muslim mystics rose to the occasion and helped in breaking the spirit of distrust and isolation. Toynbee remarks, after surveying the role of mystics in the growth of civilizations:

> It is through the inward development of personality that individual human beings are able to perform those creative acts in the outward field of action, that cause the growth of human societies[39].

Thus Muslim mystics contributed a great deal to the splendour and spread of Muslim culture. They strove to create a conformity in the split Indian society by their preaching of equality and brotherhood and aided a lot in the development of a balanced society.

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