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SUFIS AND SUFISM IN THE TERRITORY OF KALPI 15th and 16th Centuries

The fifteenth century in the history of north India is a period of great cultural significance, but little work has been done on it. Many aspects of the Indo-Muslim Culture during the subsequent centuries, particularly the background of the rise of religious trends, both revivalist and syncretic, would remain obscure unless a detailed and indepth study is made of life and culture in the fifteenth century. No doubt, the Delhi Sultanate disintegrated towards the close of the 14th century, giving rise to centrifugal tendencies, the legacy of its cultural and political system remained. Soon, certain *muqta's* and *zamindars* managed to seize neighbouring territories, established peace and order there and thus carved out independent kingdoms and principalities for themselves. The hagiographic literature as well as chronicles produced in these kingdoms provide interesting information not only about the proliferation of the Muslim culture developed in Delhi but also shed considerable light on the activities of the *sufis* who had migrated from Delhi to different cities on the eve of Timur's invasion in 1398 A.D.

The *sufis* were considered indispensable for various reasons. Generally people had faith in their spiritual powers, regarded them as favourites of God and sought their blessings for success in their worldly careers as well as salvation in the hereafter. No doubt, genuine spirituality was the concern of a few only in medieval times as it is today, many *sufis* sincerely endeavoured to wean away people from the lures of worldly life and provided them with solace in distress. Besides, like the '*ulama*' and the nobles, the *sufis*, also played an important role in the process of urbanization and dissemination of learning in the new Kingdoms. The *khanqahs* of prominent *sufis* functioned as seats of higher learning where lectures were delivered on *tafsir* (the exegesis of the Quran), spirituality and even *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence). It is also worth-recalling that they accomplished a high degree of reconciliation between spiritual and worldly life. They patronised and encouraged intellectual creativity among their disciples; their contribution to Indo-Persian literature is of great importance.

The aim of this paper is to present a brief account of the emergence of Kalpi,¹ as an important urban centre in north India and it analyses the relevant evidence with regard to the social role of the *sufis* in the region. Attempt has also been made to study the influence of the Hindu Yogis on the Muslims and the *vice versa*.

The contemporary historian of Kalpi, Muhammad Bihamad Khani states that the village of Kalpi, surrounded by forests began to grow into an urban centre when Malikzada Mahmud Turk made it the headquarters of his army in 1390 A.D. after he had been driven away by the rebel Rajput chiefs of Etawah and Bhogaon in the *shiqq* of Firuzpur. On the arrival of a large number of refugees from Delhi after its sack by Amir Timur in 1398 A.D., the Malikzada assumed the title of Sultan and thus laid the foundation of the local dynasty.² Sultan Mahmud Turk demarcated a fairly large area,

encircled it with strong and lofty walls and had a massive palace-fortress built inside it. On the completion of the *hisar* (fortification) the Sultan named it Muhammadabad after the Prophet of Islam. He took pains to develop Muhammadabad (Kalpi) as a centre of culture on the model of Delhi. According to Muhammad Bihamad Khani, the task of the Sultan became easy owing to the coming of the *sufis* and '*ulama*' from Delhi. As a result, the village of Kalpi where the influence of Islamic faith and culture had not permeated so far was soon transformed into an Islamic centre.³ Sultan Mahmud Turk and his successors extended liberal patronage to the religious scholars and sages because they were needed for the development of their capital and various towns in the kingdom.

The early *sufis* of Kalpi chiefly belonged to the Chishti and Suhrawardi *silsilas* (orders). Afterwards, the Zahidi⁴ and Madariyya⁵ *sufis* also joined them. Each of them tried to turn Kalpi into a centre of their activities. The fact that most of these saints were mentioned by Shaykh 'Abd al-Haqq Muhaddith of Delhi in his biographical dictionary called the *Akhbar al-Akhyar* is proof enough of their eminence in the field of mysticism.

The most prominent of the *sufis* who took up abode in Kalpi on a permanent basis was Shaykh Ahmad Thanasari, son of Maulana Muhammad Thanasari.⁶ His learning and association with Shaykh Nasir al-Din Chiragh of Delhi as a *murid* (disciple) and *khalifa* (spiritual successor) made him a popular saint in Delhi during the later half of the 14th century. It is said that he was arrested by the soldiers of Timur along with a large number of his disciples in Delhi in 1398 A.D. but his profound knowledge of religious sciences helped him in securing his release. Timur is reported to have been deeply impressed by his mastery over the Hanafite *fiqh* (jurisprudence).⁷ On his release, he left for Kalpi where he was received by the Sultan and people belonging to different strata of society became his *murids*. He imparted instructions in Islamic jurisprudence, emphasising the importance of complete adherence to the *shari'a* (religious law). In fact, the Chishti *silsila* gained popularity in Kalpi due to his presence there. On his death, Ahmad Khan, the younger brother of Sultan Mahmud Turk and one of the Shaykh's faithful *murids* had a beautiful dome constructed over his grave inside the fort.⁸

From the distinguished disciples and *khalifas* of Sayyid Muhammad Gisudaraz, (a *khalifa* of Shaykh Nasir al-Din Chiragh Dihlawi) who settled in Kalpi, mention may be made here of Shaykh 'Ala al-Din 'Qurayshi and Shaykh Abu al-Fath 'Ala'i. Both of them had settled in Kalpi sometime after the invasion of Timur. The former hailed from Gwalior and generally lived in seclusion, spending his time mostly in prayers and other religious activities.⁹ The latter lived in the midst of the people, wrote a number of treatises on *sufism* and taught his disciples esoteric as well as exoteric sciences.¹⁰ After his death, his disciples constructed a grand tomb over his grave in 1450 A.D. This is built of stone and brick in lime and covered over with lime plaster. Its lofty dome is carved on an octagonal drum. The inscription fixed on the southern doorway calls him *Zair al-Haramayn* (one who paid visit to the holy shrines in Mecca and Madina).¹¹ He was certainly one of the few Chishti saints who ever travelled to foreign countries.

The important Suhrawardi saint who won followers among various sections of people in Kalpi was Shaykh Siraj Sukhta. He was also a profound scholar. First, he

committed the Quran to memory and then studied other popular sciences of his time. For his deep learning, like Qadi Shihab al-Din Daulatabadi, he was also counted among the most distinguished pupils of Maulana Nahvi. It was due to his learning that Shaykh Jalal al-Din Bukhari, popularly known as the Makhdum-i Jahanyan-i Jahangasht, selected him as one of his *khalifas*. His *murids* included several important nobles of Kalpi and even Sultan Qadir Shah, son and successor of Sultan Mahmud Shah Turk (1411–1432 A.D.), held him in high esteem for his spiritual excellence.¹²

The other important Suhrawardi saint who flourished in the principality of Kalpi was Shaykh Yusuf Buda Erachhi. He was also a disciple of the Makhdum-i Jahanyan-i Jahangasht. Being a distinguished scholar of Arabic, known for his mastery over Islamic doctrinal and *sufi* texts, abundance of literary compositions and a refined sensibility to poetry, he had become one of the most popular and respected *sufis* of north India. He is credited with having written a number of books. His translation of Imam Ghazali's *Minhaj al-'Abidin* in the form of a *mathnawi* consisting of two thousand five hundred and twenty verses and named the *Futuhat-i Ahmad* was as popular as his *diwan* (the collection of poems). Like the Chishti *sufis*, he was also fond of listening to *sama'* (*qawwali*) and considered it a means to spiritual development. In 1430 A.D. he attended a *sama'* party in which he passed into an ecstatic state. After remaining in this state of mystic intoxication for several days he died at Erachh. It may, however, be pointed out that his biographical notice contained in the *Ta'rikh-i-Muhammadi* tend to show that the Shaykh seldom neglected the social obligations incumbent upon a *sufi* of his eminence. He took his duty of instructing his *murids* seriously and maintained the traditions of his *silsila*.¹³ Mahmud Khan, son of Mughith Khan, later Sultan 'Ala al-Din Mahmud Shah Khalji of Malwa had a mausoleum constructed over his grave. Its dome was well known for its grandeur.¹⁴

Another Suhrawardi *sufi* of distinction was Shaykh 'Abd al-Hakim, popularly known as Gushanashin. He was the *khalifa* of Shaykh 'Abd al-Wahhab Bukhari (d. 1525 A.D.). His qualities of austerity and resignation to the will of Allah substantially contributed to his prestige and popularity. He is said to have lived most of the time in a state of ecstasy. He died at Kalpi in 1574.¹⁵

As regards the Zahidi *silsila*, Shaykh Baha' al-Din Ganj-i Rawan introduced it in Kalpi during the reign of Sultan Qadir Shah. Both the members of ruling elite as well as the commoners had faith in him. Ghauthi Shattari informs us that the Sultan and his officers offered him cash, landed property and orchards but he never accepted any gift from them. Nevertheless, he fed daily a large number of visitors to his *khanqah* and for this reason was known as *Ganj-i Rawan* (ever-flowing treasure). Towards the end of his life he occupied an unclaimed tract of land on the bank of the Jamuna and carried on cultivation there. He also built a house and planted a garden. His spiritual qualities and exceedingly high reputation helped his successors to keep Zahidi *silsila* alive after him.¹⁶

The founder of the Madariyya *silsila* in India, Shaykh Badi' al-Din, popularly known as Shah Madar, came to Kalpi during the reign of Qadir Shah. He was a Syrian *sufi* of Jewish descent. On his conversion to Islam, he got himself enrolled among the disciples of Shaykh Taifur Shami. He acquired mastery over Ibn-i 'Arabi's metaphysical philosophy known as *Wahdat al-Wujud*, in addition to his knowledge of Jewish and Christian mystic

thought and practices. However, the paucity of authentic information about him makes it somewhat difficult to attempt a detailed study of his life and teachings. The seventeenth century writers such as 'Abd al-Rahman Chishti, the author of the *Mir'at-i Madariyya*, and the compiler of the *Dabistan-i Madhahib*, have confused historical traditions with fiction and incorporated in their works all that they found floating down the stream of time. In fact, they wrote at a time when the followers of the Madariyya *silsila* had begun to indulge in all sorts of vices in complete disregard of the teachings of the Shah Madar. The odd bits pieced together from different standard works reveal that the latter was respected and generally held by orthodox *sufis* to be in the first rank of the Indian mystics. The Shah commanded great respect among people for his piety. A contemporary inscription dated 1436 A.D., found in a step-well in Chanderi, mentions the builder of the well as Taghi, the learned *wazir* at the court of Malwa along with his *pir*, Shah Madar. The latter has been referred to as 'the great, pious and religious-minded saint.'¹⁷ Likewise, the anecdote about Shah Madar, contained in the *Mulfuzat* of Shah Mina sheds interesting light on his popularity during his lifetime. Shah Mina calls him the king of saintly people and pays homage to him as a pious *sufi*.¹⁸ The interesting information contained in the *Najat al-Rashid* also casts light on the charming qualities possessed by the Shah. His compassion-radiating personality and the eloquence, flow and coherence of his sermons attracted crowds of people to his gatherings.

Bada'oni quotes the correspondence between Qadi Shihab al-Din Daulatabadi, the leading jurist at the court of Sultan Ibrahim Sharqi (1401–1440), and Shah Madar, showing the esteem in which the latter was held both by the scholars and commoners. Once Malik al-'Ulama' Qadi Shihab al-Din of Jaunpur wrote a letter to Badi' al-Din Shah Madar in which he reminded the latter of the popular tradition of the Prophet of Islam that the '*ulama*' were the Prophet's heirs. The Shah wrote in reply that his claim to be the Prophet's heir was not justified because inheritance came to the heirs without any struggle on their part. As the acquisition of knowledge by '*ulama*' involved study and a great deal of effort, the honour of being the heirs to the Prophet belonged to Muslim ascetics (*faqirs*) who acquired gnosis and were met by Grace as a reward from God.¹⁹

In another anecdote Bada'oni informs us that having found it difficult to get on with Sultan Ibrahim Sharqi and Qadi Shihab al-Din Daulatabadi, Shah Madar left Jaunpur and went to Makanpur, a dependency of Qannauj. Soon people began to come to Makanpur in crowds to seek his blessings. The Shah fixed one day in the week to appear before the visitors. He would come out from his cell on that day and address the crowd in a vast plain outside his *khanqah*; his speech being marked by flow and coherence from the beginning to the end. The Shah used to have a veil on his face and as soon as he lifted it, the whole crowd bowed down in prostration. Although the Shah addressed the crowd collectively, every one of the visitors found answer to his particular problem in his speech and returned home satisfied. They prostrated before the Shah again at the time of their departure. Thereafter the Shah would retire to his cell. Nobody ever saw him eating food or found anyone cooking for him. His clothes were also not taken out for cleaning. Once Qadi Mahmud of Qannauj came to question him on the adoption of un-Islamic practices in his *khanqah*. He arrived in Makanpur on the day of the Shah's public audience. Like

others in the crowd, the Qadi also unintentionally prostrated before the Shah as the latter removed the veil from his face. When the sermon was over, the Qadi sought interview and made queries. One, why did he allow the visitors to prostrate before him? The Shah replied that he was not to be blamed for it because people did so of their own accord. He also pointed out that the Qadi himself had prostrated like others. Astounded by this remark the Qadi enquired from his companions whether he had done so. They replied in the affirmative. The next question of the Qadi concerned the Shah's failure to join the obligatory congregational prayers on Fridays. The Shah justified his action on the ground that being a traveller he was exempt from doing so. The Qadi retorted that he had been residing there for a few years and could not be regarded a traveller. The Shah replied that it depended on one's intention, none should be considered a permanent resident of a place unless he decided to settle there on a permanent basis; no matter if he had resided for eighty years in a city. The third query was that how could the Shah manage to live without food for it was not possible to exist without it. At the same time, Qadi opened the packet of food he had bought in the bazar and requested him to partake of it. The Shah refused the offer, saying that he also had a market from where he got food to sustain him.²⁰ The documentary evidence tends to show that Islam Shah Sur (1545-1553) issued a *farman* granting villages for the maintenance of Shah Madar's *dargah*,²¹ while Aurangzib paid a visit to it on his way to Khajwah (1658). In the words of Khafi Khan: "The Emperor visited the tomb of the selected among the pure, Hadrat Saiyid Badi' al-Din, alias Shah Madar, and gave ten thousand rupees to its attendants. . . ."²²

In Kalpi Shah Madar got into touch with the Hindu Yogis and apparently discussed with them the Yoga philosophy. The testimony of Shaykh 'Abd al-Haqq Muhaddith of Delhi to the effect is significant.²³ It is worth recalling here that the association of the *sufis* with the Yogis was not at all considered objectionable during the 15th century. Some of the leading Chishti saints even adopted certain Yogic traditions. For instance, Shaykh 'Abd al-Haqq Radaulwi and 'Abd al-Quddus Gangohi regularly did the exercises of controlling breath, burying themselves alive or absorbed in devotion suspended upside down by a rope tied to the heels.²⁴

A few words may be added about Shah Madar's departure from Kalpi to the Sharqi Kingdom of Jaunpur. It is said that he refused to receive Qadir Shah of Kalpi who was desirous of calling on him. Feeling insulted, the Sultan asked Shah Madar to leave his territory. Thereupon Shah Madar went to Jaunpur and finally settled down in Makanpur, a small town now included in the district of Kanpur²⁵ where he died in 1436 A.D.. One of his disciples and successors, Qadi Mazhar, however, stayed in Kalpi. Ghauthi Shattari states that Qadi Mazhar was an '*alim* and a profound *sufi*, sincerely devoted to the cause of religion.'²⁶

Another scholarly *sufi* who flourished in Kalpi during the 15th and 16th centuries was Shaykh Burhan Ansari. Devoted to religion and piety, he always preferred a life of poverty to that of comfort. He spent his time either in offering prayers in his cell or imparting knowledge of religious sciences. In his daily public lectures he explained the significance of the Quranic verses. Mulla 'Abd al-Qadir Bada'oni visited him at Kalpi and found him more than hundred years old.²⁷ People considered him a Mahdawi but

according to Ghauthi Shattari this was not correct. Shaykh Burhan Ansari composed verses in Hindawi, as well as in Persian. His *diwan*, entitled *Firaqnama* was available at least until the 17th century. Admiring it, Ghauthi Shattari says that every line of *diwan* was full of pathos and effect.²⁸

We may also mention here Shaykh Mubarak Harawi who came from Herat and settled down in Mahoba, an important town of Kalpi, sometime in the beginning of the 16th century. The Shaykh possessed an attractive personality. Influenced by Ibn al-'Arabi's doctrine of *Wahdat al-Wujud* (Unity in essence of the Creator and the Created), he did not attach any importance to the traditional prayers. He was never seen joining the congregational prayers in the mosque and never got up to receive any visitor to his *khanqah*, however great he might have been. The 'ulama' were hostile to him for his indifference towards the *sharia*. It is said that he built a spacious *khanqah* with a small cell inside where he spent most of his time. Every day, drums were beaten at the gate and people gathered there in large numbers and money was distributed among them.²⁹ He also lectured on the Quran and people listened to him with respect. He was, however, a popular *sufi* and had a constant flow of *futuh* (unasked for gifts) to his *khanqah*.

In passing we may briefly discuss the sociological implications of the influence of the philosophy of *Wahdat al-Wujud* on people. Some anecdotes contained in the *Waqi 'at-i Mushtaqi* reveal its adverse effects on the morality of the ignorant people in the society. The dervishes belonging to the lower strata of society paid no heed to customary religious law and showed eagerness for *'ishq-i-majazi* (Platonic love) as a means to spiritual development. They fell in love with a beautiful girl or boy at the very first sight and then pined for union. The anecdotes show that in all cases the lover died of sorrow and the beloved followed him in the grave, the union being possible only in death.³⁰ Even a *sufi* of Shaykh Jamali's eminence seems to have been the advocate of *'ishq-i-majazi* in his famous *mathnawi* entitled *Mihr-o-Mah*.³¹

In conclusion it may be emphasised that the social role of the *sufis* in the territorial unit of Kalpi during the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries was highly significant. Their *khanqahs* served as centres of higher learning and, at least, in their lives and practices Islamic concepts of egalitarianism and universal brotherhood found expression. The spiritual ideals held by the genuine *sufis* transcended sensory sensations and inspired their followers to control their desires for pleasurable things and devote themselves selflessly to the service of the people. In fact, the *sufis* acted as a bridge between the Muslims and the Hindus and thus brought the two communities close to each other. The contribution made by the *sufis* to the progress and growth of Indo-Persian literature is also great, some of the best Persian *ghazals* were composed and sung in the *khanqahs* of *sufis* in medieval times. It was also in the *khanqahs* that poems composed in Hindawi became a powerful vehicle of thought and expression. In short, no social and cultural history of any region in the South Asian subcontinent would be complete without a reference to the social role played by the *sufis* there.

NOTES

1. Kalpi is now the headquarters of a tahsil of the same name in the district of Jalaun, Uttar Pradesh, situated on the Jamuna river, 22 miles away from the district headquarters.

2. *Ta'rikh-i Muhammadi*, MS. British Library, London, Or. 137, f. 418b.
3. *Ibid.*, ff. 441b, 451ab.
4. Zahidi *silsila* was founded by Shaykh Fakhr al-Din Zahidi, a contemporary of Shaykh Qutb al-Din Bakhtyar Kaki. He lies buried in Meerut (U.P.). See Ghauthi Shattari, *Gulzar-i Abrar* Urdu tr. *Adhkar-i Abrar*, Fadl Ahmad Jiwri, Agra, 1326 A.H., pp. 45-46, hereafter cited as *Gulzar-i-Abrar*, Urdu tr.
5. The founder of the Madariyya *silsila* was Shaykh Badi' al-Din Shah Madar. He is buried at Makanpur, in the district of Kanpur (U.P.).
6. *Ta'rikh-i Muhammadi*, f. 443a.
7. Shaykh 'Abd al-Haqq Muhaddith Dihlawi, *Akhbar al-Akhyar*, Ahmadi Press, Delhi, n.d., p. 166.
8. *Ta'rikh-i Muhammadi*, f. 443a.
9. *Akhbar al-Akhyar*, *op. cit.*, pp. 185, 188.
10. *Ibid.*
11. See *Epigraphia Indica*, Arabic and Persian Supplement, Calcutta, 1953-54, pp. 35-36.
12. *Akhbar al-Akhyar*, p. 188.
13. *Ta'rikh-i Muhammadi*, ff. 169b-173b.
14. *Ta'rikh-i Muhammadi*, ff. 174, 174a. *Akhbar al-Akhyar*, p. 178. Erachh is included in the district of Jhansi in Uttar Pradesh.
15. *Gulzar-i Abrar*. Urdu tr., p. 317.
16. *Ibid.*, pp. 192-199.
17. Cf. *Epigraphia Indica*, Arabic and Persian Supplement, ed. Z.A. Desai, 1964, p. 64.
18. *Malfuzat-i Hadrat Shaykh Muhammad al-ma'ruf ba-Shaykh Mina*, Muhi al-Din bin Husayn Radawi al-Husayni, MS. Habib Ganj Collection, Aligarh, No. 21/244 Farsi, ff. 77b-78a.
19. Abd al-Qadir Bada'oni, *Najat al-Rashid*, ed. Syed Moinul Haq, Lahore, 1972, p. 173.
20. *Ibid.*, pp. 147-48.
21. Iqtidar Husain Siddiqui, *History of Sher Shah Sur*, Aligarh, 1969, p. 17, n. 4.
22. Khafi Khan's *History of Alamgir*, Eng. tr. Syed Moinul Haq, Karachi, 1975, p. 52.
23. *Akhbar al-Akhyar*, p. 188.
24. Cf. Simon Digby, 'Abdul Quddus Gangohi: The Personality and Attitudes of a Medieval Indian Sufi', *Medieval India—A Miscellany*, Aligarh, 1975, Vol. 3, pp. 36-39.
25. *Akhbar al-Akhyar*, p. 188.
26. *Gulzar-i Abrar*, Urdu tr., p. 77.
27. 'Abd al-Qadir bin Muluk Shah, *Muntakhab al-Tawarikh*, Eng. tr. Wolseley Haig, Calcutta, 1925, Vol. III, p. 12.
28. *Gulzar-i Abrar*, Urdu tr., p. 305.
29. *Ibid.*, pp. 269-270.
30. *Waqi'at-i Mushtaqi*, B. MS., ff. 13 a, 20ab, 21 b, etc.
31. *Mihr-o Mah*, ed. Sayyid Husam al-Din Rashidi, Rawalpindi, 1974, pp. 161-164.