"Be Hell for Those Who Call Me Saiyyid": * Social Stratification among the South Asian Muslims and the Sufi Worldview*

Tanvir Anjum**

Abstract

Historically, the Indian society has been and is still beset with hierarchical social divisions based on birth-ascribed ranks. Despite strict egalitarian principles of Islam, there existed racial and ethnic discrimination among the Muslims in South Asia, who were primarily divided into two social strata: the ashrāf (the so-called high-born) and the ajlāf (the so-called low-born). However, in the Sufi worldview, these social distinctions did not matter at all. The premodern Sufis of India, as elsewhere in the Islamicate, stressed on the notion of human equality, and preached it through their teachings, especially through poetic compositions. Many Sufis, including those who themselves

---

were Saiyyids, or the descendants of the Prophet (PBUH), discouraged all kinds of discriminations. The Sufis, in fact, tried to construct an alternative social universe through their distinct ethos. Some of them belonging to the so-called low castes, or were of humble origin and occupation were revered by the people, who addressed them as Shaykh or Khwaja, epithets symbolizing social prestige and political power. These Sufis did not drop off their caste names rather retained them, and by doing so imparted dignity to the so-called low professions. The Sufis and their adherents also tried to construct Sufi identities, which were acquired, unlike the ascribed identities which were considered inescapable in Indian social context.

Introduction

Historically speaking, racial and ethnic divisions have been the basis of social stratification in many societies. In Indian social order, caste system has been a key feature of social stratification. Caste has been a defining category which has existed for nearly 3000 years.[1] The term caste is an umbrella term which refers to social groups having distinctive character. Derived from the Portuguese term *casta*, it literally means lineage, or breed, race or kind.[2] The salient features of the caste system in India include the following: (i) endogamy (the practice of marriage within one's own social group, i.e., clan, tribe, caste, etc.); (ii) certain occupations or professions are hereditary; (iii) it is hierarchical wherein certain groups enjoy more power and prestige than others; (iv) the social identity is constructed along the lines of caste; and (v) certain groups are treated as outcaste and untouchable,[3] and are marginalized in social terms.

---

1   Ekta Singh, *Caste System in India: A Historical Perspective* (Delhi: Kalpaz, 2005), p. 13.

2   It has been argued by some historians that instead of using the Portuguese term for caste, the original Sanskrit terms such as *varna* and *jati* should be used to refer to social distinctions in the Indian society. See, for instance, Ramesh Chandra, *Identity and Genesis of Caste System in India* (Delhi: Kalpaz, 2005), pp. 26-27.

3   For a detailed discussion on the notion of untouchability, and the various castes belonging to the lower rungs of the Indian society, see Raj Kumar,

The sociological concept of social stratification as understood by its classical theorists such as Karl Marx and Max Weber emphasize more on its economic (dealing with class), social (dealing with status/prestige) and political (dealing with power and authority) aspects respectively. Therefore, the western models of social stratification are limited in their application to South Asia. They cannot adequately and befittingly explain the dynamics of South Asian society, especially when they are used to explain the traditional caste system. In South Asian society blood-based group identities (such as ethnic, racial, caste and occupational group identities) are the bases of social strata, though these identity markers have significant linkages with class, social prestige and political power. It is for similar reasons that some scholars have expressed reservations while using the concept of social stratification while studying caste in the Indian society, and have thus coined the term 'caste stratification'.[4]

The Muslim society in South Asia is different from the Hindu society in some ways, though at times a neat demarcation between the two cannot be assumed owing to pluralist nature of the society and the syncretic traditions. Caste system is a characteristic feature of the Hindu religion. Caste is a highly complex social phenomenon deeply embedded in the Indian society, which can be traced back to prehistoric times. However, the four-fold Hindu caste system cannot be equated to the hierarchical social divisions among the Muslims in South Asia for the following reasons:

1. Unlike the Hindu caste system, social stratification among the Muslims is not rooted in their religious doctrines.[5]

2. The Saiyyids or the descendants of the Holy Prophet (PBUH), generally Arab or Perso-Arab origin, have always

---

Encyclopaedia of Untouchables: Ancient, Medieval and Modern (Delhi: Kalpaz Publications, 2008).

4   See, for instance, Dipali Saha, *Sociology of Social Stratification* (New Delhi: Global Vision, 2006), pp. 169-73.

5   However, some researchers argue that caste is a social institution, which is an outgrowth of the political institutions of India. It has nothing to do with the Hindu religion. Singh, *Caste System in India*, pp. 12-13.

enjoyed a preferential status in the eyes of the Muslims, irrespective of their profession and class association, but they cannot be compared to the Brahmans.

3. The concepts of ritual purity and untouchability borrowed from the Hindu caste system have not taken firm roots in the Muslim society, and hence, the segregation is not complete. The hierarchical social divisions among the South Asian Muslims are less demanding as compared to the Hindus.[6] Mines also suggests that among the Muslims of India, social stratification structures are loose as compared to the Hindu caste system, and social mobility is easier among the Muslims as compared to their Hindu counterparts.[7]

For these and many other reasons, it has been argued by some scholars that there exists a quasi-caste system among the South Asian Muslims.[8] Therefore, in the present study the term social stratification has been employed but its usage is context-specific, and hence, it should not be equated or confused with the social stratification theories developed in the West in the light of specific socio-economic, political, social and historical factors.

Despite strict egalitarian principles of Islam and its *shariah* or legal aspect, based on the Qur'an and the Sunnah, the Muslim ruling elite in premodern South Asia could not formulate and implement policies based on social equality. The political environment was quite inegalitarian and discriminatory. There existed considerable racial and ethnic discrimination at state and societal levels. The ruling elite was Muslim, and was chiefly composed of the Turks, Central Asians, Persians, Afghans and the Mughals (Turco-Mongols). The Muslim society was divided into two main strata: *ashrāf*

---

6   For a detailed study, see Imtiaz Ahmad (ed.), *Caste and Social Stratification among the Muslims* (New Delhi: Manohar, 1978), and T. N. Madan, *Muslim Communities of South Asia: Culture, Society and Power* (New Delhi: Manohar, 2001).

7   Mattison Mines, "Muslim Social Stratification in India: The Basis for Variation*"*, *Southwestern Journal of Anthropology*, Vol. 28, No. 4 (Winter, 1972), pp. 333-49.

8   Jamal Malik, *Islam in South Asia: A Short History* (Leiden: Brill, 2008), pp. 152-55.

(sing. *sharīf*), meaning noble or persons of high extraction included all immigrants from Arabia, Persia, Central and West Asia, and Afghanistan, and their descendants as well as converts from the higher castes of Hindus; while the natives including the functional groups and the Muslim converts from lower ranks of the society were collectively referred to by the contemptuous title of *ajlāf* (literally meaning the wretched ones, or mean people).[9] The *ashrāf* included the political elite who were migrants, while the *ajlāf* generally included the people following hereditary occupations.

The *ashrāf* occupied the higher rungs of the social ladder and enjoyed high state positions under the Muslim rule, whereas the indigenous or native converts from Buddhism, Jainism or Hinduism, were at the lower rungs. The common people, including the Hindus and even the local converts or the Indian Muslims, were treated with contempt and distrust. Barring few exceptions, they were not generally employed in high posts in state bureaucracy. These groups have never been completely integrated in the Muslim society in India, and therefore, live at the margins. These two sections of the Muslim society were, in a sense, 'structurally alien' to each other.[10] The fourteenth-century historian Ziyā al-Dīn Baranī (b.1285-d.1360), who had served as an advisor under Sultan Muhammad ibn Tughluq (r. 1325-51) represented the *ashrāf* and their perception towards the so-called lowborn people. He expressed very derogatory and discriminatory views on social distinctions based on caste and professional groups. He advised the kings of Delhi that the low-born people should not be appointed in state bureaucracy.[11]

---

9   Imtiaz Ahmad, "The Ashraf-Ajlaf Dichotomy in Muslim Social Structure in India", *Indian Economic and Social History Review*, Vol. III (1966), pp. 268-78.

10   A.K.N. Karim, *Changing Society in India and Pakistan* (Dacca: Oxford University Press, 1956), passim.

11   Ziyā' al-Dīn Baranī, *Tārīkh-i Fīrūzshāhī* (comp. in 1359), ed. Saiyyid Ahmad Khān (Calcutta: Bibliotheca Indica, The Asiatic Society of Bengal, 1862), pp. 504-5.

Sufi *Khanqah*s as Alternative Social Universe

The notions of purity of race and blood upon which the entire social stratification structures were based in premodern India were meaningless in the Sufi worldview, according to which all human beings were equal, and the only distinction among them was based on their relationship with the Divine. In an inegalitarian social environment, the Sufis stood as the bastions of human equality and love in the premodern Indian society, as elsewhere in the Islamicate. Their attitudes and behaviours presented a sharp contrast to those of the *ashrāf* or the ruling elite in many ways. Contrary to the royal courts and camps, there was a classless atmosphere in the Sufi *khanqah*s. Young and old, rich and poor, righteous and evil-doers, in fact, people belonging to any age, status, caste and creed, etc. were treated alike by the Sufis, who preached egalitarian values, and their *khanqah*s were a practical manifestation of these beliefs and values. The Sufis had, in fact, tried to construct an alternative social universe with a distinct set of norms and values, which were in many ways in direct opposition to the established and prevalent societal norms.

The Quranic injunction that all social distinctions are merely for facility of reference[12] was internalized by the Sufis, who championed the ideal of human equality, and expressed universal respect for humanity at large without any regard for the religious, social, cultural, racial, ethnic, linguistic or class affiliation of an individual. Contrary to taking pride in lineage, humility or humbleness was a cardinal feature of the Sufi behavior, and as a virtue it has much been celebrated by the Sufis. The Sufis' pride, if any, lay in their relationship with God and the Prophet (PBUH), and not with descent or blood. The *khanqah*s of the Sufis as well as their *dargah*s or shrines were open to the low caste

---

12   The Quranic verse 49 in *Surah* 13(*al-Hujarat*) reads as such: O mankind! Lo! We have created you male and female, and have made you nations and tribes that ye may know one another. Lo! the noblest of you, in the sight of Allah, is the best in conduct. Lo! Allah is Knower, Aware. (English trans. Mohammed Marmaduke Pickthall (d. 1936) titled *The Meaning of the Glorius Qur'an*).

Hindus and the untouchables, who had been denied access to the Hindu temples, or were not allowed to perform certain religious rituals and touch the sacred scriptures. It is for this reason that a large number of people belonging to the low castes of the Indian society converted to Islam at the hands of the Sufis.

Victor Turner (d. 1983), British cultural anthropologist, has employed the concepts of structure and *communitas* (anti-structure) which may help explain the dynamics of the Sufi collectivities. According to Turner, structure, which works according to legal and political norms of a given society, justifies economic and hierarchical differences, while the *communitas* or the 'anti-structure' represents social reality as a homogeneous whole, stressing the equality of individuals.[13] Arthur F. Buehler, who employs the concepts of structure and *communitas* in his work on the Indian Naqshbandis, writes that the circles of disciples and the devotees of the Sufi Shaykhs around them represented the *communitas*. The homogenous nature of the *communitas* in the *khanqah*s attracted the poor and the rich, illiterate and the scholars alike, who all sat together next to each other as they were treated equally by the Shaykh. The anti-structural aspect of the *communitas* challenged the normal order by giving the power to the inferior and the humble, while demeaning the strong and the powerful. Those who outwardly appear weak but had subdued their *nafs* (carnal soul) were on higher spiritual status, and those who enjoyed temporal power and authority but were subservient to their *nafs* were spiritually poor and on lower rank. In the words of Buehler, the Sufis' "poverty was 'liminal,' the marginal condition associated with one who lives in *communitas*, instead of the literal poverty of everyday society".[14] However,

---

13   Victor Turner, *Dramas, Fields, and Metaphors: Symbolic Action in Human Society* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1974), pp. 231-99; *From Ritual to Theatre*, New York: Performing Arts Journal Publications, 1982, pp.20-59. See also Mathieu Deflem, "Ritual, Anti-Structure, and Religion: A Discussion of Victor Turner's Processual Symbolic Analysis," *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion*, Vol. 30, No. 1, (March 1991), pp. 1-25.

14   Arthur F. Buehler, *Sufi Heirs of the Prophet: The Indian Naqshbandiyya, and the Rise of the Mediating Sufi Shaykh* (Columbia: University of South

Turner's study has its own limitations. He had developed and elaborated these concepts while studying the rituals of Ndembu tribe of Zambia in Southern Africa. Though in conceptual terms, social theories/models and concepts have explanatory power, yet they cannot satisfactorily explain the social realities in contexts, different from those in which the concepts have originally been conceived.

It has been pointed out that the Sufis too had hierarchical structures in their circles, but their notion of hierarchy was based on spiritual excellence and relationship with or proximity to God. The doctrine of hierarchy of Sufis was articulated by Ali al-Hujwiri (d. 1077), popularly known as Dātā Ganj Bakhsh, of Lahore in *Kashf al-Mahjūb*[15] but elaborated by Shaykh Ibn al-'Arabī (d. 1240), the renowned Spanish Sufi for the first time. He argued that there are different hierarchies among the Sufis. On the top of it is *qutb*, the spiritual ruler of the entire world, who is coexistent with the temporal Sultan or the king.[16] Later, Nūr al-Dīn 'Abd al-Rahmān Jāmī (d. 1492) further explained it.[17]

Coming back to the point, a large number of the Sufis were Saiyyids, i.e. the descendants of the Holy Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), but they never boasted of it. They deemphasized their Saiyyid lineage.[18] For instance, the early Chishtī Shaykhs of India, from Shaykh Mu'īn al-Dīn to

---

Carolina Press, 1998), pp. 49-50. He further adds: "a sufi pir, like the Prophet, maintains a state of permanent liminality between heaven and earth, which gives him, like other permanently liminal individuals, supernatural power." p. 50.

15   'Alī ibn 'Uthmān Al-Hujwīrī, *Kashf al-Mahjūb*, Eng. trans. R. A. Nicholson (Lahore: Islamic Book Foundation, 1976 rpt., first published 1911), pp. 214, 147, 229.

16   The *qutb* is assisted by two *imām*s, under whom work four *awtād*s, and seven *abdāl*s. See detail in Muhiyy al-Dīn ibn al-'Arabī, *Al-Futūhāt al-Makkiyyah*, Urdu trans. 'Allāmah Sā'im Chishtī (Faisalabad: 'Alī Brothers, 1986), pp. 56-57.

17   Nūr al-Dīn 'Abd al-Rahmān Jāmī, *Nafahāt al-Uns min Hazarāt al-Quds*, ed. with Introduction and Notes Mahmūd 'Ābidī (Tehran: Intishārāt Ittilā'āt, 1370 Solar A.H.), p. 15.

18   See, for instance, Tanvir Anjum, *Chishti Sufis in the Sultanate of Delhi: From Restrained Indifference to Calculated Defiance* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2011), p. 339.

Khwājah Gēsūdirāz, were Saiyyids, but they never used this epithet with their names. Instead they preferred to be addressed by distinctive epithets of Shaykh or Khwajah, which emphasized their spiritual status as Sufi masters rather than illustrious ancestry.[19] The Arabic term Shaykh meant a revered elder, while the term Khwajah implies a political undertone, as it was originally used as a title for a lord, master, noble, or an aristocrat. A Saiyyid Sufi of Narnaul (a city in the present state of Haryana in India) named Shaykh 'Alam al-Din Haji went a step further and deliberately kept his Saiyyid identity hidden from the people.[20] He was a contemporary of Sultan Sikandar Lodhi (r. 1489-1517), and his noble Alam Khan Mewati was the disciple of the Shaykh.

The Sufis included non-Saiyyids as well as those who belonged to the lower rungs of the society or were associated with the so-called low-caste professions. However, they were greatly esteemed and revered by the people, including those belonging to the so-called higher castes. Premodern Sufi literature is replete with references to the fact that in most of the cases, these Sufis continued their humble professions after joining the fold of Sufism, and did not make Sufism their means of livelihood[21] by consuming the *futuh* (unasked for charity or unsolicited offerings) which poured in their *khanqah*s.[22]

The famous tenth-century Sufi, Husayn ibn Mansur al-Hallaj, who raised the slogan of *ana al-Haqq* (I am the

---

19   Carl W. Ernst and Bruce B. Lawrence, *Sufi Martyrs of Love: The Chishti Order in South Asia and Beyond* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), p. 66.

20   Shaykh 'Abd al-Haqq Muhaddith Dehlavī, *Akhbār al-Akhyār fī Asrār al-Abrār* (Reports of the Righteous on the Secrets of the Pious; comp. in 1590), Urdu tr. Iqbal al-Din Ahmad (Karachi: Dar al-Isha'at, 1997), p. 281. In the Urdu translation the title has been shortened to *Akhbar al-Akhyar*, and henceforth, referred to as such.

21   Mohammad Mahmood Ali Qutbi, "The Early Sūfīs and Earning of Livelihood," *Studies in Islam*, Vol. XVIII, No. 1-2 (Jan-Apr, 1981): pp. 1-8.

22   For a detailed study on the *futūh* system in South Asia, see Riazul Islam, *Sufism in South Asia: Impact on Fourteenth Century Muslim Society* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2002), see chap. 3, pp. 87-150.

Truth) was a cotton-carder by profession,[23] but greatly esteemed by the people. The premodern Indian Sufi literature reveals the Sufi attitude towards discriminatory social distinctions. To begin with the *malfūz* (table-talk or conversation) literature, Amir Hasan Sijzī, a disciple of Shaykh Nizām al-Dīn Awliyā', compiled the *malfūz* of his preceptor in the fourteenth century, with the title of *Fawā'id al-Fu'ād*, which records the conversations of the Shaykh from 1307-22. *Jawāmi' al-Kalim* is the *malfūz* of Shaykh Nasīr al-Dīn Mahmūd, compiled by his disciple and *khalīfah* Saiyyid Muhammad Husaynī Bandahnawāz Gēsūdirāz. Hagiographical or *tazkirah* literature of premodern times includes, *inter alia*, Amir Khūrd's *Siyar al-Awliyā'*,[24] *Siyar al-'Ārifīn* by Hāmid ibn Fazl Allah Jamālī (d. 1536),[25] and Shaykh 'Abd al-Haqq Muhaddith Dehlavī's *Akhbār al-Akhyār* composed in 1590.[26] These works are replete with references of the Sufis who were engaged in an ordinary professions but were revered by the people at large.

The early Sufi Shaykhs of South Asia adopted small-scale farming as profession. During the last decade of the twelfth century, when Khwājah Mu'īn al-Dīn Chishti came to India and finally settled in Ajmer in Rajasthan, there were large size landholdings in the region.[27] In contrast to the then socio-economic set up of the region, the Khwājah, whose life was characterized by austerity, world-renunciation and simplicity, started cultivating a small piece of wasteland near

---

23 For a detailed study, see Louis Massignon, *The Passion of al-Hallaj: Mystic and Martyr of Islam*, Eng. trans. Herbert Mason. 4 Vols. (Princeton; NJ: Princeton University Press, 1982).

24 For a review of the literary style and historical value of *Siyar al-Awliyā'*, see Mahmud Husain Siddiqui, *The Memoirs of Sufis Written in India* (*Reference to Kashaf-ul-Mahjub, Siyar-ul-Auliya and Siyar-ul-Arifin*) (Baroda: Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda, 1979), pp. 56-81.

25 For a review on the literary style and historical value of *Siyar al-'Ārifīn*, see *ibid.*, pp. 82-98.

26 For a brief review, see 'Alīm Ashraf Khān, *Hayāt-o 'Ilmī Khidmāt-i Shaykh 'Abd al-Haqq Muhaddith Dehlavī* (New Delhi: Islamic Wonders Bureau, 2001), pp. 112-14.

27 V.C. Misra, *Geography of Rajasthan* (New Delhi: National Book Trust, 1967), p. 66.

Ajmer for livelihood.[28] Similarly, Shaykh Hamīd al-Dīn Sūfi Suwālī (d. 1274), a prominent disciple of Khwājah Mu'īn al-Dīn Chishtī,[29] used to plough a small tract of land in the village of Suwal in Nagour (Rajputana).[30] Following his footsteps, his descendant, Khwaja Husayn of Nagaur (d. 1495), who was also a Chishti Sufi, had an orchard where he used to grow fruits.[31] Similarly, Shaykh Hussam al-Din Muttaqi Multani was engaged in farming.[32] Saiyyid Hasan Pai' Minar (d. 1535/36) of Delhi was also a farmer by profession.[33]

In Kashmir Valley, a renowned Kubrawi Sufi, Saiyyid Ali Hamadani (1314-1384) and the Suhrawardi Sufi, Baba Daud Khaki (d. 1585), struggled against caste discrimination.[34] Shaykh Nur al-Din Rishi of Kashmir (d. 1442) was a Domba or Dōm by caste,[35] which is considered to be very low in social hierarchy, but he was deeply revered by the Kashmiris.[36] Under the influence of the egalitarian teachings of Saiyyid Ali Hamadani and Shaykh Nur al-Din Rishi, Lalla, or Lal Ded, a renowned ascetic women devotee of Siva

---

28 Saiyyid Muhammad ibn Mubārak 'Alawī Kirmānī alias Amir Khūrd, *Siyar al-Awliyā'* (comp. in 1351-82 A.D.), ed. Chiranjī Lāl (Delhi: Muhibb-i Hind Press, 1302 A.H./1885 A.D.), p. 53. Henceforth, referred to as Amir Khūrd.

29 For a brief biographical sketch and views about Sufism, see B. A. Dar, "Shaikh Hamīd-ud-Din of Nagaur — Scholar-Saint of the Thirteenth Century", *Journal of the Research Society of Pakistan*, University of the Punjab, Lahore, Vol. XV, No. 1 (January 1978), pp. 21-50.

30 Saiyyid Muhammad ibn Mubārak 'Alawī Kirmānī (Amir Khūrd), *Siyar al-Awliyā'* (comp. in 1351-82 A.D.), ed. Chiranjī Lāl (Delhi: Muhibb-i Hind Press, 1302 A.H./1885 A.D.), p. 157. Henceforth, referred to as Amir Khūrd.

31 Abd al-Haqq, *Akhbar al-Akhyar*, p. 258.

32 *Ibid.*, p. 295.

33 *Ibid.*, p. 311.

34 Muhammad Ashraf Wani, *Islam in Kashmir (Fourteenth to Sixteenth Century)*, (Srinagar: Oriental Publishing House, 2004), pp. 188-89.

35 Domba or Dom is a distinct social and ethnic group treated as outcaste and untouchable in the Indian society, being 'ritually unpolluted'. Its members are considered the original inhabitants of India. In modern times, they are referred to as the scheduled caste or Dalit.

36 Wani, *Islam in Kashmir*, p. 192. It was considered to be a low caste along with the *Ćandālas* and *Śvapākas*.

forcefully denounced caste system in her poetic compositions.[37]

Shaykh ʻAyn al-Din of Delhi was a butcher by profession. Hagiographical and other contemporary sources reveal that he was Sufi of high spiritual caliber, and his prayers were granted. He was a contemporary of Shaykh Nizam al-Din Auliya, who also lived in the suburbs of Delhi, and had seen him in the city.[38] Shaykh Shahi Muyʻtab (d. 1235), also known as Sultan al-ʻArifin, and his brother Khwaja Abu Bakr Muyʻtab of Badaun were hair-rope makers, as reflected from their name Muyʻtab. *Fawaid al-Fuad*, the *malfuz* of Shaykh Nizam al-Din Auliya speaks high about their spiritual excellence, as Shaykh Nizam al-Din Auliya was also from Badaun, and knew them. Shaykh Shahi Muyʻtab had a very dark complexion, and he could heal the sick people.[39]

Shaykh Mahmud Muyina-Duz was a maker of leather garments or tailor of fur, as his profession is indicated by his name. He was well-respected in the Sufi circles for his spiritual accomplishments.[40] Sharaf al-Din Khayyat, a tailor by profession, was an accomplished Sufi, who could heal the sick. He was a friend of Shaykh Shahi Muyʻtab of Badaun.[41] Masud Nakhasi of Badaun was a coppersmith, as his name also indicates.[42] Hasan Afghan, a disciple of Shaykh Baha al-

---

37 Mohibbul Hasan, *Kashmīr under the Sultāns* (Delhi: Aakar Books, 2005 rpt; first pub. 1959), p. 254.

38 Amir Hasan ʻAlāʼ Sijzī Dehlavī, *Fawāʼid al-Fuʼād* (*Malfūz* of Khwājah Nizām al-Dīn Awliyāʼ), ed. Khwājah Hasan Thānī Nizāmī Dehlavī (Delhi: Urdu Academy, 1992 rpt., first published 1990), pp. 411-12. Henceforth, referred to as Sijzī. However, Jamālī has mentioned his name, whereas *Fawāʼid al-Fuʼād* fails to mention his name. Shaykh Hāmid ibn Hāmid ibn Fazl Allāh Jamālī, *Siyar al-ʻĀrifīn* (comp. between 1531-35 A.D.), (Delhi: Rizwī Press, 1311 A.H./1893 A.D.), p. 150. Henceforth, referred to as Jamālī.

39 Sijzī, *Fawāʼid al-Fuʼād*, pp. 288, 289; see also pp. 159, 291, 351. Jamālī writes his caste name as Rasan-tab, the twister of cords or rope-maker. Jamālī, *Siyar al-ʻĀrifīn*, pp. 151-52.

40 Sijzī, *Fawāʼid al-Fuʼād*, pp. 288-89, 425-26; and Jamālī, *Siyar al-ʻĀrifīn*, pp. 152-53.

41 Sijzī, *Fawāʼid al-Fuʼād*, p. 159; and Jamālī, *Siyar al-ʻĀrifīn*, p. 153.

42 Sijzī, *Fawāʼid al-Fuʼād*, p. 291. Jamālī, however, writes his name as Muhammad Nakhasi. Jamālī, *Siyar al-ʻĀrifīn*, p. 153.

Din Zakariyya of Multan, was an illiterate person but an accomplished Sufi. He was an artisan by profession, but irrespective of his professional association, *Fawaid al-Fuad* and hagiographical work *Siyar al-'Arifin* praise him for his spiritual eminence.[43]

Shah Husayn of Lahore (d. 1539) was probably a weaver by caste and profession, though the later hagiographical works concoct his noble lineage.[44] Shaykh Ahmad of Naharwān in Gujarat[45] was also a weaver by profession. He was a disciple of a Suhrawardi Shaykh Qazi Hamid al-Din Nagouri, and a contemporary of Shaykh Qutb al-Din Bakhtiyar Kaki and Shaykh Baha al-Din Zakariyya of Multan.[46] Shaykh Nizam al-Din Awliya narrated an incident from the life of the former, indicating that he was actively engaged in his profession. Similarly, Shaykh Taqi (d. 1492-93) of Kara (Manikpur) near Allahabad was also a weaver.[47] Shaykh Uthman, the father of Qadiri sufi-poet Shah Husayn of Lahore (d. 1599) was also a weaver.[48] Chishti Sufi Shah Nur (d. 1611-12), an accomplished *khalifa* of Shah Daud (d. 1592-93) was a *dhobi* (launderer) by profession, but left it when asked by his mentor.[49]

Shah Abadani of Silakot (d. 1805), who later shifted to Delhi, was a paper-maker by profession, but known for his spiritual excellence. His contemporaries drafted a decree stating their doubt that since he was a paper-maker, how he could be a Sufi. They tried to get it signed by some notable

---

43 Sijzī, *Fawā'id al-Fu'ād*, pp. 14-16.; Jamālī, *Siyar al-'Ārifīn*, pp. 110-11; and Anna Suvorova, *Muslim Saints of South Asia: The Eleventh to Fifteenth Centuries* (New York: Rutledge Curzon, 2004; first pub. 1999), p. 148.

44 Scott Alan Kugle, *Sufis and Saints' Bodies: Mysticism, Corporeality, and Sacred Power in Islam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2007), p. 308.

45 Sijzī, *Fawā'id al-Fu'ād*, pp. 431-32.

46 *Ibid.*, pp. 289-90; and Jamālī, *Siyar al-'Ārifīn*, pp. 149-50.

47 Abd al-Haqq, *Akhbar al-Akhyar*, p. 248.

48 Mufti Ghulam Sarwar, *Khazinat al-Asfiya*, Vol.1 (Lucknow: Newal Kishore, 1873-1894), p. 141.

49 Abd al-Haqq, *Akhbar al-Akhyar*, p. 270.

Sufis, but they refused to do so.[50] A spiritually accomplished disciple of Khwaja Husayn of Nagaur was a janitor or scavenger, who had also accepted Islam at his hands.[51] In the Indian society, the members of the Bhangi caste traditionally are responsible for sweeping, particularly cleaning latrines, and handling dead bodies, and are considered untouchable. Shah Abd al-Latif Qadiri (d. 1556), who is popularly known as Bari Imam and buried in Islamabad, the capital of Pakistan, used to tend buffalos.[52] Shaykh 'Alam al-Din Haji of Narnaul was a grass-cutter and a wood-cutter.[53] Shaykh Abd-Allah Wahhab Afghani, a disciple of Fazl-Allah Chishti of Multan, was a woodcutter. He used to bring firewood from the forests and sell it.[54] Shaykh Bhūrū (d. 1574-75), a disciple of a renowned Chishti-Sabiri Sufi, Shaykh Abd al-Quddus Gangohi (1456-1537), was a dyer or *rangraiz*.[55] A *khalifa* of a certain Sufi Shaykh was a convert slave who used to plate the utensils.[56] As indicated by the names of some of them, the sixteenth-century Sufi Shaykh Musa *Ahangar* of Lahore, who died in the reign of Akbar, was an ironmonger by caste and profession, and Pir Hassu *Teli* of Lahore (d. 1602-3), a disciple of Shah Jamal of Lahore, belonged to the caste of the oilmen.[57] He was very popular among the low caste people of

---

50 Muhammad Ashraf 'Alī Thānvī, *Imdād al-Mushtāq* (Delhi: Maktaba Burhan, 1980), p. 61.

51 *Ibid.*, p. 259.

52 Muhammad Din Kalim Qadiri, *Tazkirah-i Mashaikh-i Qadiriyya* (Lahore: Maktaba-i Nabwiyya, AH 1395/AD 1975), p. 129.

53 Abd al-Haqq, *Akhbar al-Akhyar*, p. 281.

54 A. Rashid, *Society and Culture in Medieval India, 1206-1556 A.D.* (Calcutta, Firma K.L. Mukhopadhyay, 1969), p. 186.

55 Abd al-Haqq, *Akhbar al-Akhyar*, p. 303.

56 Yahya ibn 'Ali al-Asghar al-Husayni, *Malfuzat-i Hazrat Akhi Jamshaid Rajgiri*, University Collection no. 4/66, *Farsi Madhhab wa Tasawwuff*, Mawlana Azad Library, Aligarh Muslim University, Aligarh, f. 59 b, as cited in Muhammad Aslam, *Malfūzātī Adab kī Tārīkhī Ahammiyyat* (Lahore: Research Society of Pakistan, University of the Punjab, 1995), p. 270. Shaykh Akhi Jamshaid of Rajgir (d. 1398) was a *khalifa* of Makhdum Jahaniyan (b. 1308-d. 1381).

57 See a biographical sketch in a review on Khwaja Surat Singh's treatise *Tazkirah al-Shaykh wa al-Khadam (Tazkirah Hassu Teli)*, (composed between 1644-46) in Muhammad Aslam, *Sarmayah-i Umar* (Lahore: Nadwat al-Mussaniffin, 1976), pp. 71-93.

the Punjab. The ancestors of Mawlana Ubaidullah Sindhi (1872-1944) were goldsmith by profession,[58] though he did not continue their profession.

These Sufis retained their caste names as postfix, and did not drop them despite the fact that they were respectfully addressed by the disciples and devotees as Khwajah or Shaykh, epithets added to their names as prefix. In this way, the Sufis added dignity to the humble professions as well as enhanced the prestige of these menial workers.

Some of the Sufis associated themselves with the poor sections of the society, especially the marginalized and disadvantaged groups, who lived on the social margins, and earned immense popularity among them. Shaykh Badi' al-Din Shah Madar (d. 1437),[59] the founder of Madari *Silsilah*, won considerable following among the poor Hindu and Muslim jugglers, acrobats and those groups who earn their livelihood by performing tricks with monkeys and bears.[60] His tomb is in Makanpur, near the city of Kanpur in UP. The word *madari* is also referred to these jugglers and acrobats. Though he himself was of Syrian origin, he travelled to and settled in India, and got associated with an occupational group which is considered to be one of the lowest in the social hierarchy. Thus, he associated himself with a social group which was forced to live outside the margins of civilized society, but his association with them was not forced but voluntary or by choice.

---

58 M. Moizuddin, "Maulana Obaidullah Sindhi", in *The Muslim Luminaries: Leaders of Religious, Intellectual and Political Revival in South Asia* (Islamabad: National Hijra Council, 1988), p. 198.

59 He was the disciple of Shaykh Muhammad Tayfur Shami. For a brief biographical sketch, see Dara Shukoh, *Safinat al-Awliya*, Urdu trans. Muhammad 'Alī Lutfī (Karachi: Nafīs Academy, 1959), p. 236.

60 Srivastava, "The Qalandars and the Qalandariyya Path (tariqa)," in *Sufi Cults and the Evolution of Medieval Indian Culture*, ed. Anup Taneja (New Delhi: Indian Council of Historical Research in association with Northern Book Centre, 2003), p. 251.

A Sufi Voice from Punjab against Caste Discrimination: Bulhe Shah Qadiri of Qasur

Not only did the Sufis themselves believe in human equality, they also launched a crusade against discrimination on the basis of birth-ascribed identities through verbal and literary means. The best-known Persianate literary genre of romance (*qissa*) composed by Sufis commended the transgression of 'almost every conceivable kind of social as well as psychic boundary,' including those of caste, tribe, race or color, social status, class, and creed.[61] As Christopher Shackle has shown, Sufi literary conventions often transcend the multiple layers of identities, including the Hindu and Muslim religious identities. This boundary crossing gives Sufi poetry its power in shaping a distinctive language of identity. The worldly identities of religion, ethnicity, occupation or class are transgressed by human love, which is symbolic of divine love.[62] *Kafi*,[63] which is a distinct genre of Punjabi poetry, was employed by the Punjabi Sufi poets for challenging the prevalent social constructs about identity.

The famous Punjabi Sufi poet of Qadiri-Shattari Silsilah, Saiyyid Abd-Allah, better known as Bulhe Shah, (b. 1680-d. 1758), fervently questioned and denounced the birth-ascribed identities in his poetry. A verse from one of his popular *kafi*s best explains the Sufi position on this issue:[64]

> Neither am I an Arab, nor of Lahore
> Nor am I an Indian from the town of Nagour
> Neither I am a Hindu, nor a Turk from Peshawar

The Sufis not only stressed egalitarianism by setting personal examples, they also challenged the traditional

---

61 David Gilmartin and Bruce B. Lawrence, eds., *Beyond Turk and Hindu: Rethinking Religious Identities in Islamicate South Asia* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2000), see Introduction by the editors, p. 7.

62 Christopher Shackle, "Beyond Hindu and Turk: Crossing the Boundaries in Indo-Muslim Romance," in *Ibid.*, p. 58.

63 Saeed Bhutta, "Kafi: A Genre of Punjabi Poetry", *South Asian Studies*, Centre for South Asian Studies, University of the Punjab, Lahore, Vol. 23, No. 2 (July 2008), pp. 223-29.

64 *Kulliyāt-e Bullhe Shāh*, ed. Faqir Muhammad Faqir (Lahore: Panjabi Adabi Academy, 1960), kāfī no. 27, p. 83.

forms of social hierarchy through their actions and practices. They condemned caste antagonism and deprecated noble ancestry as of no avail in the eyes of God. In India, closeness to Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) in blood has been the basis for social distinction among the Muslims. The Saiyyids, the lineal descendants of the Prophet, have traditionally enjoyed a privileged social status in the society.

The case of Bulhe Shah is worth-mentioning here: Bulhe Shah was a Saiyyid by lineage, whereas his mentor Shah Inayat Qadiri (d. 1728) was an Ara'in by caste, the members of which are generally engaged in vegetable gardening or are petty-cultivators. It is considered to be relatively low in social hierarchy in the Indian society. When Bulhe Shah got himself enrolled as the disciple of Shah Inayat, the former's family members complained about it and reminded him that he was a Saiyyid. Bulhe Shah argued in response that he was no more a Saiyyid, and he should never be addressed as such. All human beings including the high- and the low-born are equal before God. The incident has also been recorded by Bulhe Shah in one of his *kafis*, which reads:[65]

> To counsel Bulleh
> His sisters and sisters-in-law have come.
> "Pay heed to us
> And give up mixing with the low-caste Araeen.
> You are a scion of Ali, the Prophet,
> Why must you shame our fair clime?"
>
> Those who call me Syed
> Are destined to hell made for them;
> Those who call me Araeen
> Have the swings in heaven laid for them.
>
> The low-caste and the high-caste

---

65 *Sain Bulleh Shah: The Mystic Muse*, transcreated by Kartar Singh Duggal (New Delhi: Abhinav Publications, 1996), *kafi* no. 34, pp. 96-97.

Are created by God who cares not for family;
He disregards the beautiful
And cherishes the not-so-comely.

If you wish to enjoy the glory of the Garden,
Go and serve the Araeen.
Why bother about Bulleh's caste?
Obey the command that comes from Saeen.

Bullhe Shah launched a crusade against caste discrimination through his powerful poetry. In the above-quoted *kafi*, he forcefully rejects the objections made by his family upon becoming the disciple of a low-caste *murshid* or preceptor. He declares that he has ceased to be a Saiyyid after submitting before his *murshid*, and should not be addressed as such. He transcends the rigid barriers of caste, and denounces his noble lineage if it is an obstacle in the way of God. He prefers to attach himself with his low-caste preceptor, and urges others to address him by the caste name of his preceptor.

Bullhe Shah openly rejected caste system in many of his *kafis*.[66] He boldly asserted that he had forgotten his caste after joining the Sufi circle,[67] as his mentor was least bothered about caste and origin.[68] He celebrated his 'emancipation' as he considered himself no more a prisoner of being born a Saiyyid after joining the path of Sufism.[69] He urged others to transcend all differences of caste, ethnicity, creed and color.[70] He not only denounced sectarian identities of Shia and Sunni,[71] he also urged others to transcend and think beyond religious identities of Hindu and Turk/Muslim, and

---

66   See, for instance, ibid., *kafis* no. 7, pp. 42-43 and *kafi* no. 83, pp. 214-15.

67   *Ibid.*, see *kafi* no. 54, pp. 142-43

68   *Ibid.*, see *kafi* no. 73, pp. 190-91.

69   *Ibid.*, see *kafi* no. 60, pp. 158-59.

70   *Ibid.*, see *kafi* no. 75, pp. 196-97.

71   *Ibid.*, see *kafi* no. 49, pp. 132-33.

stated that there is no difference between Ram and Rahim.[72] While cherishing his emancipation, he proclaimed that he was neither a believer nor a non-believer.[73]

A Sufi Voice from Sindh against Caste Discrimination: Shah Abd al-Latif of Bhitshah

Shah Abd al-Latif of Bhitshah (1689-1752) is a very renowned Sufi of Sindh, who is greatly loved and remembered by the people owing to his beautiful poetic compositions in the form of *Shah Jo Risalo*. Himself a Saiyyid, Bhitai vehemently opposed the caste system, and challenged the discriminatory social divisions in the society through *Shah Jo Risalo*, which includes seven folk tales of tragic romances. The romantic folktale of Sassi and Punnu (also spelled as Sasui and Punhoon) narrates the story of a girl named Sassi, who was born in a royal family, but was raised by a family of washermen in the village of Bhambore, and thus practiced the same occupation. A Prince of Makran named Punnu falls in love with her, but the lover and beloved could not unite owing to caste barriers but by death, which united them in spirits.[74] The tale has a Sufi symbolism, in which Sassi symbolizes the human soul, while Punnu, her beloved, represents the Divine beloved. Bhitai suggests that the social barriers of ethnicity, caste, profession and class do not let the human soul reach and recognize its Divine destination.

Another romantic folktale of Noori and Jam Tamachi in *Shah Jo Risalo* focuses on the social theme of identities of low and high birth, and how these identities can be transcended. According to it, Jam Tamachi was a prince of royal descent, who falls in love with Noori, who belonged to the occupation group of fishermen, which is considered to be

---

72   *Ibid., kafi* no. 40, pp. 110-11.

73   *Ibid., kafi* no. 60, pp. 158-59.

74   *Risalo of Shah Abdul Latif Bhitai*, Eng. trans. in verse Ameena Khamisani (Bhitshah; Hyderabad: Bhitshah Cultural Centre Committee, 1994), see pp. 122-23 for the reference of caste and professional identities in the folktale of Sassi and Punnu.

quite low in social hierarchy.[75] Despite opposition and resistance, the prince transcended the social barriers and they were united. Though their human love is a metaphor of divine love, the story has significant social underpinnings with reference to birth-ascribed and hereditary occupational identities, and breaking away from them.

The Making and Unmaking of Identities in the Social World of the Sufis

The identity of an individual is how he or she is perceived, recognized and identified by others. Generally speaking, identities can be of two types: ascribed or acquired. In contrast to the acquired identities which an individual can achieve, ascribed identities are attributed to an individual over which he or she has no control. Birth-ascribed identities are assigned at birth, and are therefore involuntary identities, which an individual cannot choose. It includes blood-based (i.e. racial or ethnic) and sexual identities. Modern theorists insist that the idea of individual freedom embodies an individual's choice to form groups and seek identities. A famous English philosopher and anthropologist, Ernest Gellner (d. 1995), for instance, observes that the modern conception of freedom entails 'the requirement that identities be chosen rather than ascribed'.[76] It means that the identities should not be imposed by birth and kinship, rather the people should have choice to make and unmake their identities.

In premodern South Asia, there existed multiple layers of ascribed social identities. Social stratification was, and to a greater extent are still, centred round kinship, tribes, castes and clans, known as *beraderis*. This stratification has furnished a complex system of birth-ascribed identities, which are hierarchal, discriminating between the high-born or noble and the low-born or impure castes or tribes. It has created a

---

75   *Ibid.*, pp. 183-88.

76   Ernest Gellner, *Conditions of Liberty: Civil Society and its Rivals* (New York: Penguin Books, 1996), pp. 6-7, 9, 103.

severely demanding system for the members of these social groups. However, in premodern South Asian society, the people could escape these otherwise considered inescapable identities by associating themselves with any of the Sufi Shaykhs or *silsilah*s, and hence forge fresh and new spiritual identities, which were even reflected by their names like Hasan *Nizami*, indicating that he was a disciple of Shaykh Nizam al-Din Awliya.[77] Contrary to the prevalent custom of ascribed identities, these identities were neither based on blood, nor on territory or region. These particularistic spiritual/sufistic identities were defined primarily in relation to an individual Sufi Shaykh or a *silsilah*. Thus the post-fix in names such as Chishti, Suhrawardi, Firdawsi, Shattari, Qadiri, Naqshbandi, and those containing reference to sub-lineages such as Chishti-Nizami, Chishti-Sabiri and Naqshbandi-Mujjaddidi were markers of group identity denoting allegiance or loyalty to a particular Sufi Shaykh or *silsilah* or its branch.

This voluntary identity choice can also be seen as a mode of agency of the common people, who enjoyed freedom to choose these identities. The adoption of these identities by the adherents of Sufism also gave them a sense of security. Through replacement of kinship identities with membership in a spiritual community, people sought to shape or reshape their collective identities. The importance of these Sufi identities can be understood in contrast to the existing social identities, often inescapable for the common people, yet these could be transgressed and transcended in Sufi context.

These spiritual identities were also reflected from the appearance of the Sufis. The symbolic cap worn by

---

77   The practice of adding post-fix in names became more popular later on.

the adherents of the Sufi path, for instance, not only reflected the spiritual identity and affiliation of an individual, it also performed some functions. Empirical evidence reveals that such symbols could at times save lives of the people as well.[78] It also shows that these Sufi symbols had functional value as well.

For the propagation of the Sufi values and teachings regarding equality, and for challenging the stifling barriers of discriminatory social distinctions, the Sufis of premodern India employed the medium of poetry. Many Sufis, including those who themselves were Saiyyids, or the descendants of the Prophet (PBUH), discouraged discrimination on the basis of birth-ascribed identities. They tried to construct an alternative social universe in their *khanqah*s, where the Sufi values and norms were put into practice. The Sufis belonging to the so-called low castes, or those engaged in humble occupations were revered by the people at large despite their position in social hierarchy. They were addressed as Shaykh or Khwaja, and their epithets symbolized social prestige and political power. These Sufis did not drop off their caste names but retained them, and by doing so imparted dignity to the so-called low professions. The Sufis also tried to construct new Sufi identities, which were acquired, unlike the ascribed identities, which were considered inescapable in Indian social context. Thus, in certain ways, the Sufis of premodern India were able to break the fetters of the prevalent discriminatory social distinctions and barriers.

---

78   See, for instance, ʿAlī ibn Mahmūd Jāndār, *Durr-i Nizāmī* as cited in Aslam, *Malfūzātī Adab kī Tārīkhī Ahammiyyat*, pp. 122-33.