

Unit-I

(e) Sufi silsilas: Chishti and Suhrawardi; doctrines and practices; social roles; literature

1. Learning Objectives

- Explain the meaning of Sufism and the institutional concept of a silsila (spiritual chain/order).
- Trace the emergence and expansion of the Chishti and Suhrawardi orders in the Indian subcontinent.
- Identify major Chishti and Suhrawardi saints and locate them in the chronology of the Delhi Sultanate and its successor states.
- Discuss core Sufi doctrines such as tawhid, ishq, ma'rifa, tazkiya and spiritual discipline, while recognizing differences among individual shaykhs.
- Analyse practices including sama', zikr, muraqaba, khanqah life, suhbat, charity and discipleship.
- Assess the social role of khanqahs in urban and rural society, including relations across social and religious boundaries.
- Understand important Persian and Indo-Persian Sufi texts, biographical literature and poetic traditions.
- Compare the Chishti ideal of relative distance from political power with the Suhrawardi order's greater institutional engagement with rulers and state elites.

2. Key Concepts and Terminology

- **Sufi:** A practitioner of tasawwuf, emphasizing purification of the self, remembrance of God, spiritual discipline and experiential knowledge.
- **Tasawwuf:** The Arabic term commonly used for the mystical and ethical tradition associated with Sufism.
- **Silsila:** A chain of spiritual transmission connecting a disciple to a shaykh and ultimately to an established spiritual lineage.
- **Shaykh / Pir:** A spiritual guide who trains disciples and authorizes their progression in the path.
- **Murīd:** A disciple who places himself or herself under the guidance and discipline of a spiritual master.
- **Khanqah:** A Sufi hospice/lodge used for residence, instruction, devotional practice, hospitality and charitable activity.
- **Dargah:** A shrine associated with a deceased saint, visited by devotees and pilgrims.
- **Zikr / Dhikr:** Remembrance of God through repeated recitation of divine names, prayers or formulas.
- **Sama':** A devotional listening assembly, often involving recitation of poetry and, in some Chishti settings, music.

- **Khalifa:** A spiritual deputy appointed by a shaykh to guide disciples and spread the order.
- **Khil'at / Fath:** Terms found in political and Sufi contexts for robes/acts of honour and spiritual or material gifts; meanings vary by context.
- **Ma'rifa:** Experiential or spiritual knowledge of God.
- **Fana:** The annihilation or effacement of the ego/self in the awareness of God.
- **Baqa:** Subsistence or abiding in God after the experience of fana, a concept interpreted differently by Sufi thinkers.
- **Tazkiya al-nafs:** Purification of the self from pride, greed, hatred and other moral-spiritual defects.

3. Historical Background: Sufism in Medieval India

- Islamic mystical traditions had developed in West and Central Asia centuries before the establishment of the Delhi Sultanate. By the 12th–13th centuries, organized Sufi lineages had become influential social and religious institutions.
- The Ghurid conquest and expansion of the Delhi Sultanate created new networks of migration, urbanization and cultural exchange. Scholars, merchants, soldiers and Sufis moved between Central Asia, Afghanistan, Khurasan, Persia and North India.
- Sufis were not a single homogeneous group. Different orders and individual saints differed in doctrine, ritual practice, attitudes toward wealth and political authority, and relationships with local society.
- The institutional form of the khanqah became especially important because it combined spiritual teaching with hospitality, charity, instruction and social interaction.
- In North India, the Chishti order became particularly prominent in centres such as Ajmer, Delhi, Nagaur and later provincial towns. The Suhrawardi order became especially important in Multan and Uch, with links to the political and scholarly elites of the northwest.
- Sufi networks interacted with pre-existing Indian devotional, ascetic and literary cultures. This interaction did not create a single blended religion, but it did produce shared social spaces, vernacular adaptations and new forms of cultural exchange.
- The influence of Sufism should therefore be understood through institutions, interpersonal networks, ethical ideals, charity, literature and local memory, rather than only through the conversion narrative.

4. The Silsila System

- A silsila was fundamentally a chain of spiritual authority. A disciple received instruction through a lineage believed to connect the living master with earlier authoritative saints.

- The chain helped establish legitimacy. Spiritual authority was not based only on book learning; it also depended on initiation, discipline, personal example and recognition by other Sufis.
- Khalifas enabled a lineage to spread without completely breaking the personal teacher-disciple relationship.
- Each order developed characteristic ethical expectations, methods of remembrance and institutional habits, although practices were never absolutely uniform.
- The silsila also functioned as a network connecting dispersed khanqahs, disciples, donors, scholars and local communities.

5. Chishti Silsila

5.1 Origin and Early Development

- The Chishti order derives its name from Chisht, a locality in the region of present-day Afghanistan. The lineage became influential in South Asia through the work of Mu'in al-Din Chishti and his successors.
- Mu'in al-Din Chishti (d. c. 1236) is traditionally regarded as the foundational figure of the Chishti order in India. Ajmer became the principal centre associated with his memory and shrine.
- The Chishti network expanded through disciples and khalifas rather than through a centralized administrative hierarchy.
- Important early Chishti masters in India included Qutb al-Din Bakhtiyar Kaki, Hamid al-Din Nagauri, Farid al-Din Mas'ud Ganj-i Shakar (Baba Farid), Nizam al-Din Auliya and Nasir al-Din Mahmud Chiragh-i Delhi.
- The order reached different regions through itinerant disciples and local establishments, contributing to the development of a broad social and cultural network.

5.2 Major Chishti Saints

- **Mu'in al-Din Chishti of Ajmer:** Associated with Ajmer; remembered for asceticism, generosity and compassion. His shrine later became one of the most important Sufi pilgrimage centres in South Asia.
- **Qutb al-Din Bakhtiyar Kaki:** Based in Delhi; associated with a disciplined, ascetic model of Chishti life and the extension of the order in the early Sultanate period.
- **Baba Farid / Farid al-Din Mas'ud Ganj-i Shakar:** Associated with Ajodhan (Pakpattan). His teachings combined intense spirituality, self-discipline and compassion; his Punjabi verse became highly influential.
- **Nizam al-Din Auliya:** One of the most famous Delhi Chishtis. His khanqah attracted people across social backgrounds and became a major centre of charity, spiritual instruction and literary conversation.

- **Nasir al-Din Mahmud Chiragh-i Delhi:** Successor in the Delhi Chishti tradition after Nizam al-Din Auliya. Associated with maintaining Chishti discipline while navigating the changing political circumstances of the Tughlaq period.

5.3 Chishti Doctrines and Ethical Ideals

- Tawhid (oneness of God): The spiritual path was rooted in intense awareness of divine unity and dependence upon God.
- Love (ishq) and devotion: Love of God and love expressed through service and compassion were central to Chishti ethical teaching.
- Poverty and detachment (faqr/zuhd): Many Chishti masters emphasized freedom from dependence on wealth, status and worldly luxury.
- Purification of the self: Spiritual training required control of anger, greed, pride, jealousy and excessive attachment to worldly goods.
- Reliance on God (tawakkul): The ideal of trusting God encouraged a life less dependent on royal patronage and material accumulation.
- Humility and service: Respect for ordinary people and hospitality to strangers became important markers of Chishti conduct.
- Spiritual companionship (suhbat): The presence of a spiritually advanced guide and disciplined companionship with fellow seekers were viewed as important for moral transformation.
- The Chishti outlook was not necessarily anti-state in a simplistic sense; rather, several major saints preferred to maintain enough distance from rulers to protect the autonomy of the khanqah and its moral authority.

5.4 Chishti Practices

- Zikr: Repeated remembrance of God through prescribed forms of prayer and invocation.
- Sama': Devotional listening, often including poetry and music in Chishti assemblies. Amir Khusrau is closely associated with the musical and poetic culture of the Chishti milieu, although individual saints and periods differed in practice.
- Muraqaba: Meditation, contemplation and inward watchfulness.
- Khanqah residence and gathering: The khanqah provided a setting for spiritual instruction, communal life and reception of visitors.
- Langar and hospitality: Food and material assistance were distributed to visitors and needy people. The ideal was generosity without discrimination.
- Futuwwa-like ethical ideals: Generosity, courage, service and selflessness were praised in Sufi moral culture, though "futuwwa" had multiple meanings across medieval Islamic contexts.
- Discipleship: Murids followed the discipline of a shaykh and could be sent to establish new centres after receiving authorization.

- Visitation of saints: Over time, shrine visitation (ziyarat) became an important element of Sufi devotional culture, though the intensity and forms of shrine practice changed historically.

5.5 The Chishti Attitude toward Political Power

- Many major Chishti saints sought to avoid dependence on rulers and court offices because they feared that political patronage could compromise spiritual independence.
- Nizam al-Din Auliya is especially remembered in literary sources for prioritizing the poor and maintaining distance from the court, even while political elites visited his khanqah.
- The principle was not total social isolation. Chishti saints interacted with governors, nobles and rulers when circumstances required, but often tried to avoid becoming institutional servants of the state.
- This relative distance enhanced the moral prestige of the khanqah as a space outside ordinary court hierarchy.

6. Suhrawardi Silsila

6.1 Origin and Development

- The Suhrawardi order emerged from the wider Suhrawardiyya tradition associated with Abu al-Najib al-Suhrawardi and his nephew Abu Hafs Umar al-Suhrawardi.
- Abu Hafs Umar al-Suhrawardi (d. 1234) was an influential Sufi scholar and author whose work helped systematize Sufi teaching and practice.
- In South Asia, Baha al-Din Zakariya (d. 1267) of Multan became the most important early Suhrawardi saint. Multan developed into a major centre of the order.
- The Suhrawardi order was prominent in the north-western regions of the subcontinent, especially Multan and Uch, and developed strong connections with scholars, urban elites and political authorities.
- Unlike the dominant Chishti ideal of non-attachment to court patronage, Suhrawardi shaykhs were more willing to receive gifts, endowments and patronage, provided they considered such resources compatible with religious and institutional goals.

6.2 Major Suhrawardi Saints in India

- **Baha al-Din Zakariya of Multan:** The central figure of the Indian Suhrawardi tradition. His khanqah at Multan accumulated considerable resources and became an influential institutional centre.
- **Sadr al-Din Arif:** Successor of Baha al-Din Zakariya and an important link in the Multan Suhrawardi lineage.
- **Rukn al-Din Abul Fath (Rukn-i Alam):** A major figure in the Multan tradition; his tomb in Multan became a prominent example of Indo-Islamic monumental architecture and shrine culture.

- **Jalal al-Din Tabrizi:** An important Suhrawardi associated with eastern India and Bengal; his career illustrates the geographical spread of the order beyond Multan.
- **Other regional Suhrawardi figures:** The order was represented by multiple lineages and local teachers; regional variations should be studied rather than reducing the order to a single institutional pattern.

6.3 Suhrawardi Doctrines and Practices

- The Suhrawardiyya shared broad Islamic and Sufi commitments with other orders: tawhid, remembrance of God, purification of the self, spiritual discipline and obedience to a guide.
- The order placed considerable value on disciplined organization, learned scholarship and the institutional stability of the khanqah.
- Spiritual life could coexist with material resources when wealth was used for charity, maintenance of the khanqah and support of scholars and disciples.
- Suhrawardi shaykhs generally showed greater acceptance of contacts with rulers and political elites. Such engagement could provide resources, protection and opportunities for institutional expansion.
- Sama' and devotional practices existed within broader Sufi culture, but the precise ritual profile of the Suhrawardiyya varied between masters and regions.
- The emphasis on scholarship distinguishes many Suhrawardi centres, where Sufi discipline was connected to formal learning and participation in elite urban culture.

6.4 Suhrawardi Order and Political Authority

- The Suhrawardi attitude was comparatively accommodating toward relations with rulers. The acceptance of state gifts did not automatically imply subordination, although historians debate the extent and consequences of such relationships.
- Baha al-Din Zakariya's connections with the political world around Multan illustrate how a Sufi centre could become both a spiritual institution and a significant socio-economic hub.
- The resources available to Suhrawardi khanqahs supported large establishments and charitable activities but also generated a more visible social hierarchy within the institution.
- This model demonstrates that medieval Sufism cannot be reduced to a single "anti-worldly" or "anti-state" orientation.

7. Doctrines and Practices: A Thematic Explanation

7.1 Tawhid and Spiritual Orientation

- Tawhid – the oneness of God – provided the theological foundation of Sufi spirituality.
- Sufi practice aimed to transform intellectual belief into lived consciousness through remembrance, discipline, contemplation and ethical action.

- The distinction between outer conformity and inner realization is important in understanding why Sufi writers emphasized both sharia and spiritual experience.

7.2 Sharia and Tariqa

- Sharia refers broadly to the normative Islamic path, while tariqa means a spiritual way or method associated with Sufi training.
- Mainstream medieval Sufis did not generally present tariqa as a replacement for the sharia. Rather, the Sufi path was commonly understood as a disciplined means of deepening religious life.
- Individual saints differed in interpretation and emphasis, so statements about “Sufism” should not be treated as universally identical across all orders.

7.3 Zikr, Muraqaba and Spiritual Discipline

- Zikr cultivated constant remembrance and redirected the mind from worldly distraction toward God.
- Muraqaba cultivated inner concentration and self-awareness.
- Fasting, night prayers, recitation, solitude and controlled eating could be used as methods of self-discipline, depending on the teacher and lineage.
- The shaykh monitored the disciple’s progress and prescribed practices suited to the disciple’s spiritual condition.

7.4 Sama’ and the Question of Music

- Sama’ literally refers to “hearing” or devotional audition; in Sufi practice it could involve recitation, poetry and music intended to intensify spiritual remembrance.
- The Chishti tradition in India became especially associated with sama’. Nizam al-Din Auliya’s circle is frequently discussed in relation to this practice.
- The permissibility of music was debated by Muslim jurists and Sufis. Therefore, sama’ should be understood as a contested practice rather than a universally accepted feature of all Sufi orders.
- The emotional experience of sama’ was ideally controlled by spiritual discipline; ecstatic behaviour was not automatically treated as proof of spiritual attainment.

7.5 Faqr, Zuhd and Wealth

- Faqr signifies spiritual poverty or dependence upon God; zuhd refers more broadly to renunciation or detachment from worldly excess.
- Chishti hagiographical traditions strongly celebrated voluntary poverty, minimal accumulation and immediate distribution of gifts to the needy.
- Suhrawardi institutions show that Sufism could also manage substantial resources. The key issue was often the moral purpose and control of wealth rather than simple possession versus non-possession.

8. Khanqah: The Social Institution of Sufism

- A khanqah served as a residence, teaching centre, devotional space, charitable institution and point of contact between the saint and wider society.
- The khanqah welcomed disciples, travelers, students, poor people and visitors. This gave Sufi institutions a broad social base.
- Food distribution and hospitality enabled saints to become associated with social welfare and public generosity.
- Khanqahs could also function as centres of manuscript circulation, oral teaching, poetry and intellectual exchange.
- The social authority of a khanqah rested partly on its saint's reputation (baraka), but also on organization, patronage, charitable capacity and local networks.
- Some khanqahs possessed land grants or donations. Their economic history therefore provides an important link between religious culture and the wider agrarian and urban economy.
- The khanqah should not be romanticized as completely egalitarian. Access, hierarchy, patronage and distinctions between residents and visitors could still exist within the institution.

9. Social Roles of Sufis

9.1 Charity and Welfare

- Distribution of food, clothing and other forms of assistance established Sufi centres as visible institutions of welfare.
- The langar tradition associated especially with major Chishti shrines symbolized generosity and hospitality.
- Charity enhanced the saint's reputation and could create durable ties between the khanqah and local communities.

9.2 Mediation and Conflict Resolution

- Saints could act as mediators in interpersonal or local disputes because of their moral reputation and wide networks.
- Their authority was informal rather than identical with judicial authority. A saint's intervention depended on reputation, social relationships and the willingness of people to seek mediation.
- This informal moral authority allowed some Sufis to exercise influence beyond their immediate circle of disciples.

9.3 Interaction across Social Boundaries

- Khanqahs could bring together people of different occupations, social ranks and regional backgrounds.

- The common language of hospitality and service could soften social barriers even though wider caste, class and status hierarchies did not disappear.
- Sufi networks were also spaces of interaction between Muslim and non-Muslim populations. The forms and intensity of such interaction varied regionally.
- Conversion to Islam was one possible outcome of long-term social contact, but it should not be assumed that every shrine or khanqah functioned primarily as a conversion centre.

9.4 Rural and Urban Society

- Urban khanqahs often attracted merchants, artisans, scholars, soldiers and officials, linking the Sufi institution to the economic life of cities.
- Rural contacts developed through land grants, agricultural production, local patrons and shrine networks.
- Sufi establishments could therefore connect urban religious culture with rural society, creating networks that crossed regional and occupational boundaries.

9.5 Gender and the Social World of Sufism

- Women could participate in Sufi networks as devotees, patrons, family members of saints and visitors to shrines, although the surviving written sources often record men more extensively.
- Royal and elite women sometimes patronized religious institutions and shrines, while ordinary women also participated in devotional practices.
- The gendered organization of particular khanqahs and shrine spaces varied; therefore, generalized statements about women's exclusion or inclusion should be avoided.

10. Sufism, State and Political Culture

- The relationship between Sufis and rulers ranged from deliberate distance to close engagement. No single model describes all Sufi orders.
- Chishti hagiography often presents spiritual independence from the court as an ideal. The symbolic power of refusing royal gifts could strengthen a saint's reputation among common people.
- Suhrawardi shaykhs more often accepted political patronage and used wealth to maintain substantial khanqahs and charitable institutions.
- Rulers could visit shrines to seek legitimacy, blessings or public goodwill. Conversely, saints could criticize rulers morally without becoming political opponents in the modern sense.
- The interaction between Sufis and rulers illustrates a broader medieval pattern: religious authority and political power were distinct but deeply interconnected.

11. Sufi Literature and Intellectual Culture

11.1 Hagiography and Malfuz Literature

- Sufi literary culture preserved the memories, sayings and exemplary actions of saints through biographies and collections of discourses.
- Malfuzat are collections of a saint's spoken sayings, conversations and anecdotes recorded by disciples or followers. They are important for social history because they preserve details about visitors, food, gifts, disputes and everyday conduct.
- Hagiography idealizes saints and should therefore be read critically. Its purpose was often to display spiritual authority and moral excellence rather than provide a neutral biography.
- Despite this limitation, hagiographical texts are valuable for reconstructing social relationships, institutional practices and cultural values when compared with other sources.

11.2 Important Chishti Texts and Literary Sources

- **Fawa'id al-Fu'ad:** Compiled by Amir Hasan Sijzi from the discourses of Nizam al-Din Auliya. It is one of the principal sources for the study of Chishti ideals, social interaction and spiritual teaching in Delhi.
- **Siyar al-Awliya:** A biographical work associated with Amir Khurd that records the lives and teachings of Chishti saints and provides important material for Delhi's Sufi history.
- **Khair al-Majalis:** Associated with Hamid Qalandar; offers valuable material on the Chishti milieu and the sayings associated with Nizam al-Din Auliya.
- **Sufi poetry of Baba Farid:** Punjabi verses attributed to Baba Farid became an enduring part of Punjabi literary and devotional culture; some are preserved in later anthological traditions, including the Guru Granth Sahib.

11.3 Amir Khusrau and the Chishti Cultural Milieu

- Amir Khusrau (1253–1325) was a major Persian poet, musician and intellectual associated with the court as well as with Nizam al-Din Auliya's spiritual circle.
- His career demonstrates that the cultural world of Sufism and that of the court were not completely separate. Individuals could participate in both spheres.
- Khusrau's Persian poetry and association with the Chishti milieu contributed to the development of a rich Indo-Persian cultural environment.
- Traditions attributing particular musical innovations to Khusrau should be treated cautiously because later musical memory often expanded or simplified his historical role.

11.4 Suhrawardi Literary Traditions

- The Suhrawardiyya placed considerable emphasis on learned scholarship and written exposition of Sufi ideas.

- Abu Hafs Umar al-Suhrawardi's Awarif al-Ma'arif became one of the best-known manuals of Sufi conduct and organizational thought in the broader Islamic world and influenced Sufi teaching in South Asia.
- Biographical and institutional traditions centred on Multan and Uch provide evidence for the social organization of the Suhrawardi order.
- Persian remained an important language of scholarly and Sufi writing, while regional languages increasingly carried devotional poetry and oral traditions.

12. Chishti and Suhrawardi: Comparative Analysis

Theme	Chishti	Suhrawardi
Major Indian centres	Ajmer, Delhi, Ajodhan/Pakpattan and related centres	Multan, Uch and centres in north-west and eastern India
Political relationship	Often emphasized distance from rulers and court patronage	More willing to accept patronage and maintain links with rulers
Economic ideal	Strong emphasis on faqr, detachment and rapid distribution of gifts	Greater institutional acceptance of wealth, endowments and organized resources
Khanqah pattern	Often remembered as open, charitable and socially inclusive	Also charitable, but often more institutionally resource-rich and scholarly
Sama'	Especially prominent in the Indian Chishti tradition	Present in wider Sufi culture but not as defining an emblem as for the Chishtis in India
Literary profile	Malfuzat, hagiography and Chishti poetry; strong association with Delhi literary culture	Strong connection with scholarly manuals, biography and institutional Sufi learning
Representative figure	Nizam al-Din Auliya	Baha al-Din Zakariya
Social prestige	Moral authority enhanced by relative independence from state	Prestige connected with learning, institutional resources and political-social networks

13. Historical Significance of Sufi Silsilas

- Sufi orders became durable institutions linking religion, society, economy and culture in medieval India.
- Khanqahs helped create channels of charity and hospitality, especially in expanding urban centres.
- Sufi saints supplied alternative forms of moral authority alongside the authority of rulers, jurists and other learned elites.
- Sufi networks encouraged the circulation of people, manuscripts, ideas, poetry and devotional practices across regions.
- The Chishti and Suhrawardi orders demonstrate that medieval Islamic society contained diverse attitudes toward wealth, music, social mixing and political power.
- Sufi literature is an important source for social history because it reveals everyday practices that administrative chronicles often overlook.
- The long-term growth of shrines created enduring pilgrimage economies and sacred geographies, although many of these developed substantially after the period under study.

14. Critical Perspectives for History Students

- Do not treat Sufism simply as a synonym for “peace” or “tolerance.” Sufi traditions contained debates, disciplinary boundaries and theological disagreements.
- Do not equate every Sufi saint with social equality in a modern sense. Their teachings existed within the social institutions of medieval society.
- Avoid assuming that Sufi influence always resulted in conversion. Social interaction, patronage, healing, pilgrimage, charity and cultural exchange were also important.
- Distinguish between the ideals expressed in hagiographical literature and the historical practices of institutions. Hagiography has a devotional purpose and may exaggerate miracles or saintly perfection.
- Use multiple kinds of evidence—literary works, inscriptions, architecture, chronicles, biographical dictionaries and regional traditions—to build a balanced interpretation.
- Remember that the “Chishti” and “Suhrawardi” categories describe broad traditions, not perfectly uniform organizations.

15. Important Terms for Examination

- Silsila, khanqah, dargah, murid, shaykh, khalifa, zikr, samaʿ, muraqaba, faqr, zuhd, tawakkul, maʿrifa, fana, baqa, langar, malfuzat, hagiography, ziyarat.