
UNIT 15 SUFI TRADITION*

Structure

- 15.0 Objectives
- 15.1 Introduction
- 15.2 Salient Features of Sufism
- 15.3 Growth of Sufi Movement in the Islamic World
 - 15.3.1 The Formative Stage (Upto 10th Century)
 - 15.3.2 Growth of Organized Sufi Movement (10-12th Century)
 - 15.3.3 Formation of Sufi Orders or *Silsilahs* (Late 12th and 13th Centuries)
- 15.4 Growth of Sufism in India
- 15.5 Sufi Orders in India During the Sultanate Period
 - 15.5.1 The Suhrawardi *Silsilah*
 - 15.5.2 The Chishti *Silsilah*
 - 15.5.3 Other Sufi Orders
- 15.6 The Causes of Chishti Popularity
- 15.7 Social Role of the Sufis
 - 15.7.1 The Sufis and the State
 - 15.7.2 The Sufis and the *Ulama*
 - 15.7.3 The Sufis and Conversions
 - 15.7.4 Material Life in Sufi *Khanqahs*
- 15.8 The Impact of Contemporary Mystic Ideas of Islamic Countries on Indian Sufis —
- 15.9 The Sufi and Bhakti Movements and Cultural Synthesis
- 15.10 Summary
- 15.11 Keywords
- 15.12 Answers to Check Your Progress Exercises
- 15.13 Suggested Readings
- 15.14 Instructional Video Recommendations

15.0 OBJECTIVES

In this Unit, we will discuss sufi movement and ideas in medieval India. After going through this Unit, you would be able to:

- identify the salient features of sufism,
- learn about the growth of sufism in the Islamic World,

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- describe its development in India during the period of the Delhi Sultanate,
- know about the main sufi *silsilahs* that flourished in India during the period,
- comprehend the reasons for the popularity of Chishti *silsilah* in India, and
- analyze the impact of sufism on the contemporary Indian Society.

15.1 INTRODUCTION

Sufism or *tasawwuf* is the name for various mystical tendencies and movements in Islam. It aims at establishing direct communion between God and man through personal experience of mystery which lies within Islam. Every religion gives rise to mystical tendencies in its fold at a particular stage of its evolution. In this sense, sufism was a natural development within Islam based on the spirit of *Quaranic* piety. The sufis while accepting the *shariat* did not confine their religious practice to formal adherence and stressed cultivation of religious experience aimed at direct perception of God.

In this Unit, we will discuss the main features of sufism and its growth in the Islamic world and its spread in India. You will study about various popular sufi sects in India. We will also discuss the impact of sufi movement on the contemporary Indian society.

15.2 SALIENT FEATURES OF SUFISM

There developed a number of sufi orders or *silsilah*, in and outside India. All these orders had their specific characteristics. However, there were a number of features which are common to all sufi orders, such as:

- i) Sufism as it developed in the Islamic world came to stress the importance of traversing the sufi path (*tariqa*) as a method of establishing direct communion with divine reality (*haqiqat*).
- ii) According to the sufi beliefs, the novice has to pass through a succession of 'stations' or 'stages' (*maqamat*) and changing psychological conditions or 'states' (*hal*) to experience God.
- iii) The sufi path could be traversed only under the strict supervision of a spiritual director (*shaikh*, *pir* or *murshid*) who had himself successfully traversed it and consequently established direct communion with God.
- iv) The disciple (*murid*) progressed through the 'stages' and 'states' by practicing such spiritual exercises as self mortification, recollection of God's name to attain concentration (*zikr*) and contemplation.
- v) The sufis organized impassioned musical recital (*sama*). The practice of *sama* was intended to induce a mystical state of ecstasy. However, some sufi orders did not approve of certain forms of *sama* and the *ulama* were particularly hostile to this practice.
- vi) Yet another feature of sufism is the organization of the sufis into various orders (*silsilahs*). Each of these *silsilah* e.g. Suhrawardi, Qadiri, Chishti, etc. were found by a leading figure who lent his name to it. A *silsilah* consisted of persons who had become disciples of a particular sufi.

- vii) The hospice (*khanqah*) was the centre of the activities of a sufi order. It was the place where the *pir* imparted spiritual training to his disciples. The popularity of the *khanqah* and its capacity to attract disciples depended on the reputation of the *pir*. The *khanqahs* were supported by endowment and charity.

15.3 GROWTH OF SUFI MOVEMENT IN THE ISLAMIC WORLD

By the time the various sufi orders began their activities in India from the beginning of the 13th century, sufism had already grown into a full-fledged movement in different parts of the Islamic world. Sufism acquired distinct characteristics in the Indian environment but its growth in India, particularly in the initial phase, was linked in many ways with the developments that occurred in sufi beliefs and practice in the Islamic World during the period between 7th and 13th centuries. The growth of sufism in the central lands of Islam during this period can be divided into three broad phases.

15.3.1 The Formative Stage (Upto 10th Century)

Early sufis applied an esoteric meaning to verses in the *Quran* which stressed on such virtues as repentance (*tauba*), abstinence, renunciation, poverty, trust in God (*tawakkul*), etc. Mecca, Medina, Basra and Kufa were the earliest centres of sufism. The sufis, most of whom belonged to the 8th century, have been called 'Quietists' because they were more concerned with experiencing than with popularizing their ideas through mass contact. They believed more in guiding than in teaching. Sufism at Basra reached its height during the time of the woman mystic Rabia (d. 801).

Other regions of the Islamic world where sufism spread early were Iran, Khurasan, Transoxiana, Egypt, Syria and Baghdad. As sufism spread to Iranian regions, it tended to express greater individualism, divergent tendencies, and heterodox doctrines and practices under Persian influence. The most famous of the early sufis in the Iranian regions was Bayazid Bistami (d. 874) from Khurasan. He gave a new turn to sufism by introducing in it the elements of ecstasy and mystic doctrine of 'all is in God'. He was also the first sufi to employ the Concept of '*fana*' (annihilation of the self) which exercised influence on later sufis.

In Baghdad, the capital of the Abbasid caliphate, Al-Junaid (d. 910) was the most well known of the early sufis. Al-Junaid won the approval of the Islamic orthodoxy and represented controlled and disciplined side of sufism and, therefore, those sufis who followed his line are regarded as sober. Both Junaid and Bistami exercised profound influence on their contemporary and later sufis. Two contrasting tendencies initiated by them came to be distinguished as Junaidi and Bistami, or Iraqi and Khurasani.

Another prominent early sufi from Baghdad was Mansur al-Hallaj (d. 922) who started his career as a pupil of Al-Junaid but later developed the method of Bayazid Bistami. His mystical formula 'I am God' played an important role in the evolution of sufi ideas in Iran and then in India. The ulama considered him a blasphemer and denounced him for claiming mystical union with God. He was condemned, imprisoned and finally hanged. His ideas provided the basis for the development of the doctrine of *insan-i kamil* (the perfect Man).

Early sufi groups were loose and mobile associations, quite unlike the later sufi orders. Members of a group travelled widely in search of master. In Arab regions, the wandering sufis were attached to frontier-posts or hostels called *ribat* while in the Iranian regions they were associated with hospices (*khanqah*). There were separate convents for women sufis.

15.3.2 Growth of Organized Sufi Movement (10th-12th Century)

Sufism began to acquire the form of an organized movement with the establishment of the Turkish rule under the Ghaznavids and then under the Seljuqs in various parts of Central Asia and Iran in the later 10th and 11th centuries. The period marks the development of two parallel institutions in the Islamic world – (a) the *madrasa* system (seminary, higher religious school) in its new form as an official institution of orthodox Islamic learning and (b) the *khanqah* system as an organized, endowed and permanent centre of sufi activities.

Khanqah was no longer a loose organization of individual sufis but a more effective and institutionalized centre of sufi teaching. However, the bond between the master and his disciples was still purely personal and had not yet acquired a ritualistic and esoteric character. Moreover, sufi orders had not yet begun to take concrete form. But *khanqahs* had now developed from mere hostels for sufis into popular and well-established centres of organized sufi teaching and practice with their own spiritual masters and circles of disciples.

The *ulama* continued to show their suspicion of sufism in general and were particularly hostile to such non-conformist practices as *sama* to induce ecstasy. However, certain sufis, with their background of orthodox Islamic learning, tried to effect a compromise between the *ulama* and the sufis. Most prominent of such sufi scholars was Abu Hamid al-Ghazzali (1058-1111). He was an *a'lim* (theologian) but later led the life of a sufi. He stressed on the observance of external and formal aspects of Islamic law in sufi practice. However, orthodox and sufi tendencies in Islam continued to follow separate and divergent paths.

This stage is also characterized by the appearance of sufi literary texts which argued and codified the sufi ideas and doctrines. Al-Ghazzali was the most outstanding sufi author. One of the most authentic and celebrated manual of sufism was *Kashful-Mahjub* written by al-Hujwiri (d. c. 1088).

Another salient feature of sufism during this period was the emergence of sufi poetry in Persian. While Arabic literature on mysticism is in prose, Persian literature is in poetry. Sufi poetry in Persian in the form of narrative poems (*masnavis*) reached its peak during the 12th and 13th centuries. Two of its greatest exponents were Fariduddin-Attar (d. 1220) and Jalaluddin Rumi (d. 1273).

15.3.3 Formation of Sufi Orders or *Silsilahs* (Late 12th and 13th Centuries)

- i) A few decades before sufism began to exercise influence on Indian society and religious life, organized sufi movement reached its peak in the Islamic world in the form of various *tariqa* (paths) or sufi orders. These orders began to crystallize when from the end of the 12th century each one of the sufi centres began to perpetuate the name of one particular master and his spiritual ancestry and focussed on its own *tariqa* consisting of peculiar practices, and rituals. A

sufi order (*silsilah*) developed as a lineage system or continuous chain through which successive spiritual heirs (*khalifa*) traced their spiritual inheritance to the founder of the order.

- ii) The relationship between the spiritual head of a *silsilah* and his disciples acquired an esoteric character because the disciples were now linked to the *silsilah* through various initiatory rituals and vow of allegiance. Each one of them formulated its own institutional rules to regulate the day-to-day life of the disciples in the *khanqah*. The spiritual director (*murshid*) now came to be regarded as protege of God (*wali*). The *murid* (disciple) was obliged to surrender himself completely to the *murshid*. The *murshid*, in turn, bestowed the *tariqa*, its secret word (a phrase of patterned devotion), formulae, and symbols on his *murid*.
- iii) The founders of various *silsilahs* accepted the Islamic law and ritual practices of Islam. The link between orthodox Islam and *silsilah* founders is also clear from the fact that many of the latter were professional jurists. However, they gave an esoteric orientation to orthodox Islamic rituals and introduced many innovations, particularly in their religious practices, which were not always in consonance with the orthodox outlook. Though the *silsilah* founders laid emphasis on strict adherence to Islamic law, many *silsilahs* later did develop many heterodox beliefs and practices.
- iv) The *silsilahs* which became popular in Iran, Central Asia and Baghdad and played significant role in the growth of sufism in various parts of the Islamic world included the Suhrawardi founded by Shaikh Shihabuddin Suhrawardi (d. 1234); the Qadiri formed by Shaikh Abdul Qadir Jilani (d. 1166); the Chishti of Muinuddin Chishti (d. 1236) and the Naqshbandi first known as Khawajagan, but later came to be associated with the name of Bahauddin Naqshbandi (d.1398). The sufis who had received their training in these *silsilahs* began to establish their branches in their countries or in new countries such as India. Gradually these branches became independent sufi schools with their own characteristics and tendencies.
- v) As sufism grew through these three broad stages in different parts of the Islamic world, Iran, Khurasan, Transoxiana and India, etc. It came under the influence of various mystic tendencies in other religions and philosophies such as Christianity, Neoplatonism, Buddhism and Hinduism. These influences were assimilated within the Islamic framework of the movement.

Check Your Progress-1

- 1) What are the salient features of Sufism?

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- 2) What is the concept of *pir* and *murid* in sufi terminology?

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- 3) What do you understand by sufi *silsilah*?

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- 4) Write two lines on each of the following:

Khanqah

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Mansual-Hallaj

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Al-Junaid

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15.4 GROWTH OF SUFISM IN INDIA

Al-Hujwiri *d.c.* 1088) was the earliest sufi of eminence to have settled in India (**Section 15.6**). His tomb is in Lahore. He was the author of *Kashf-ul Mahjub*, a famous Persian treatise on sufism. However, various sufi orders were introduced in India only after the establishment of the Delhi Sultanate i.e. in the beginning of the 13th century. India not only provided a new pasture ground for the propagation of sufi ideas but also became the new home of the sufis who along with many other refugees fled from those parts of the Islamic world which had been conquered by the Mongols in the 13th century. During the 13th and 14th centuries, *khanqahs* sprang up in various parts of India. The sufis introduced various orders in India from the Islamic world, built up their own organizations and established themselves in their respective areas of influence. By the middle of the 14th century, the entire country from Multan to Bengal and from Punjab to Deogiri had come under the sphere of their activity. According to the observation of an early 14th century traveller, there were two thousand sufi hospices and *khanqahs* in Delhi and its neighbourhood.

Sufism in India originally stemmed from the sufi thought and practice as it developed in various parts of the Islamic world, especially in Iran and Central Asia. However, its subsequent development was influenced more by Indian environment than by non-Indian variants of sufism. Once the sufi orders took root in different parts of India, they followed their own phases of growth, stagnation and revival. These were determined largely by indigenous circumstances, though the influence of developments in sufism outside India cannot altogether be discounted.

15.5 SUFI ORDERS IN INDIA DURING THE SULTANATE PERIOD

A number of sufi *silsilahs* became popular in India during the Sultanate period. In this Section, we will discuss some of the important ones.

15.5.1 The Suhrawardi *Silsilah*

The Suhrawardi *silsilah* was a major order of the Sultanate period. Its founder in

India was Shaikh Bahauddin Zakariya (1182-1262). He was a Khurasani and was a disciple of Shaikh Shihabuddin Suhrawardi who had initiated the *silsilah* in Baghdad and was directed by the latter to proceed to India. He made Multan and Sind the centres of his activity. Thus, one of the oldest *khanqahs* in India was established by him at Multan. Iltutmish was the Sultan of Delhi at that time, but Multan was under the control of his rival, Qubacha. Shaikh Bahauddin Zakariya as critical of Qubacha's administration and openly sided with Iltutmish in his conflict against the Multan ruler's overthrow. Bahauddin Zakariya received from Iltutmish the title of *Shaikh-ul Islam* (Leader of Islam) and endowment. Contrary to the Chishti saints of his time, he followed a worldly policy and built up a large fortune. He accepted state patronage and maintained links with the ruling classes. However, during the later period many independent sufi lines stemmed from him and some of them came to be known as '*beshara*' (illegitimate orders).

In addition to Shaikh Bahauddin Zakariya, many other *khalifas* were designated by Shaikh Shihabuddin Suhrawardi to spread the Suhrawardi *silsilah* in India. One of them was Shaikh Jalaluddin Tabrizi. After his initial stay in Delhi, where he failed to establish his supremacy, he went to Bengal. He established his *khanqah* there and made many disciples. He attached a *langar* (centre for the distribution of free meals) to his *khanqah*. He is said to have played an important role in the process of Islamization in Bengal.

During the Sultanate period, Punjab, Sind and Bengal became three important centres of the Suhrawardi activity. Scholars are generally of the opinion that the Suhrawardi sufis converted Hindus to Islam and in this task they were helped by their affluence and connections with the ruling class. In this connection, a sharp contrast is drawn between their attitude and that of the Chishti sufis whose teachings did not aim at conversion.

15.5.2 The Chishti *Silsilah*

The growth of the Chishti order in India during the Sultanate period took place in two phases. The first phase ended with the death of Shaikh Nasiruddin (Chiraghi-Delhi) in 1356. The second phase is marked by its initial decline during the later part of the 14th century followed by revival and expansion in various parts of the country during the 15th and 16th centuries.

First Phase

The Chishti order which later became the most influential and popular sufi order in India, originated in Herat and was introduced in India by Khwaja Muinuddin Chishti (d. 1236) who was born in Sijistan in c. 1141. He came to India at the time of the Ghori conquest. He finally settled in Ajmer about 1206 and won the respect of both Muslims and non-Muslims. No authentic record of his activities is available. During the later period, many legends projected him as an ardent evangelist. However, he was not actively involved in conversions and his attitude towards non-Muslims was one of tolerance. His tomb in Ajmer became a famous centre of pilgrimage in later centuries.

The successor of Khwaja Muinuddin Chishti in Delhi was Khwaja Qutbuddin Bakhtiyar Kaki (d. 1235). Shaikh Hamiduddin Nagauri (d. 1274), another *khalifa* of Shaikh Muinuddin Chishti, made Nagaur in Rajasthan centre of his activity. Shaikh Hamiduddin Nagauri established the *silsilah* in Nagaur where he lived like

an ordinary Rajasthani peasant and dissociated himself from those in authority. He was a strict vegetarian. He and his successors translated many Persian sufi verses in the local language called Hindavi, these are earliest examples of translations of this kind.

Khwaja Qutbuddin Bakhtiyar Kaki was succeeded in Delhi by his *khalifa*, Khwaja Fariduddin Masud (1175-1265) known as Ganjshakar and more popularly as Baba Farid. Baba Farid left Delhi for Ajodhan in Punjab and lived in his *khanqah* there. He despised association with the ruling class and rich persons. Nathpanthi *yogis* also visited his *khanqah* and discussed with him the nature of mysticism. His popularity in Punjab is clear from the fact that more than three hundred years after his death, verses ascribed to him were included in the *Adi Granth* compiled by the fifth Sikh Guru, Arjan, in 1604. His tomb at Pakpatan soon developed into a centre of pilgrimage.

The most celebrated disciple of Baba Farid and the greatest sufi saint of the 14th century was Shaikh Nizamuddin Auliya (1236-1325). He made Delhi the most famous centre of the Chishti order. Two historians Ziauddin Barani and Amir Khusrau, who were his contemporaries, testify to his eminent position in the social and religious life of Northern India during the late 13th and early 14th centuries. Later, his successors spread the Chishti order in various parts of the country. His teachings and conversations (*malfuzat*) are recorded in *Fawa'id-ul Fuwad* written by Amir Hasan Sijzi. This work serves more as a guide to practical aspects of sufism than as a treatise on its metaphysical and theosophical aspects.

Shaikh Nizamuddin Auliya saw the reigns of seven successive Sultans of Delhi. But he always avoided the company of the kings and nobles and never visited the court. The *langar* (an alms-house for the distribution of free food) of his *khanqah* was open to Hindus and Muslims alike. In his *khanqah*, he had many conversations with the Nathpanthi *yogi* visitors. He adopted many *yoga* breathing exercises and was called a *sidh* (perfect) by the *yogis*. Amir Khusrau (1253-1325) was a devoted disciple of Shaikh Nizamuddin Auliya.

Shaikh Nizamuddin Auliya had many spiritual successors or *khalifas*. One of them was Shaikh Burhanuddin Gharib (d. 1340) who was one of those sufis who were forced by Sultan Muhammed Tughlaq to migrate to the Deccan. He made Daulatabad centre of his activities and introduced the Chishti order there.

The most famous of Shaikh Nizamuddin Auliya's *khalifas* and his successor in Delhi was Shaikh Nasiruddin Mahmud (d. 1356) who came to be known as Chiragh-i Delhi (Lamp of Delhi). He and some of his disciples discontinued some of those practices of early Chishtis which could clash with Islamic orthodoxy and, in turn persuaded the *ulama* to soften their attitude towards the Chishti practice of *sama*.

Decline of the Chishti Order in Delhi During the Later Tughluq and Saiyyid Periods

Some scholars hold the view that the decline of Delhi as a centre of the Chishti order was due to the attitudes and policies of Sultan Muhammad Tughlaq. However, it must be pointed out that the Sultan was not opposed to the sufis per se. Some sufis, including Shaikh Nasiruddin Chiragh-i Delhi, remained in Delhi though they were compelled by the Sultan to accept state service. Moreover, sufi activities in many *khanqahs* were restored after the death of Muhammad Tughlaq when his

successor Firuz Shah Tughlaq showered gifts on them. However, Delhi was left with no commanding Chishti figure after the death of Shaikh Nasiruddin in 1356. He died without appointing a spiritual successor. One of his chief disciples, Gesudaraz left Delhi for a safer place in the Deccan at the time of Timur's invasion (1398). As the Delhi Sultanate began to decline and disintegrate, the sufis dispersed to the more stable provincial kingdoms and established their *khanqahs* there. This dispersal of the Chishti order in different parts of the country during the later 14th and 15th centuries was accompanied by significant changes in the attitudes and practices of the Chishti sufis.

Second Phase

The second phase in the history of the Chishti *silsilah* during the Sultanate period began with its decline in Delhi following the death of Shaikh Nasiruddin and its subsequent dispersal in various regional kingdoms. Though the sufis had begun to arrive in the Deccan from the late 13th century, it was Shaikh Burhanuddin Gharib who introduced the Chishti order there during the reign of Muhammad Tughlaq. Later, several Chishti sufis migrated to Gulbarga, the capital of the Bahmani kingdom (1347-1538). In Gulbarga, these sufis developed close relations with the court and accepted state patronage, thus causing a change in the attitude of the Chishti order towards the state. The Bahmani kings, on their part, purchased the political loyalty of these sufis and gave land grants to them.

The most prominent of these Chishtis was Muhammad Banda Nawaz, Gesudaraz (c. 1321-1422). He left for the Deccan and received land grant of four villages from Bahmani Sultan, Firuz Shah Bahmani (1397-1422). He was an orthodox sufi and declared the supremacy of Islamic law (*Shariat*) over all sufi stages. Gesudaraz discontinued many practices of early Chishtis which clashed with the attitudes of orthodox *ulama*. Unlike the early Chishti masters, he was a voluminous writer on *tasawwuf*. After his death, the Bahmani Sultans continued the land grants in favour of his family descendants. His tomb or *dargah* in Gulbarga later developed into a popular place of pilgrimage in the Deccan. But the transformation of his descendants into a landed elite and their indifference towards Chishti teachings led to the decline of living Chishti tradition in Gulbarga. The change of Bahmani capital from Gulbarga to Bidar in 1422 also contributed to the decline of the Chishti order in Gulbarga. It has been pointed out that the Bahmani court at Bidar, owing to its pre-foreigner and anti-Deccani bias, encouraged the immigration of foreign sufis and did not patronised the chishtis who were considered 'too Indian'.

However, the Chishti tradition began to thrive again in the Deccan from the end of the 15th century and it continued to grow during the 16th and 17th centuries. Its new centre was a place popularly known as Shahpur Hillock, just outside the city of Bijapur – the capital city of the Adil Shahi Sultans. The Chishti tradition of Shahpur Hillock was different from most of the later Chishti traditions such as that of Gulbarga in that it maintained distance from the court and the *ulama* and drew its inspiration from local influences. The Chishti saints of Shahpur Hillock were thus much closer in their attitudes to the early Chishti Sufis of Delhi, though it must be pointed out that the Shahpur Hillock Chishti tradition developed independent of both the Delhi and Gulbarga traditions.

In Northern India, the resurgence of the chishti order took place during the later 15th and early 16th century. The Chishti sufis belonged to three different branches of the Chishti orders – Nagauriya (after the name of Shaikh Hamiduddin Nagauri), Sabiriya

(after the name of Shaikh Alauddin Kaliyari) and Nizamiya (after the name of Shaikh Nizammuddin Auliya). Another important Chishti centre in Northern India during the later half of the 15th century and in the beginning of the 16th century was Jaunpur – the capital of the Sharqi Sultans. From the beginning of the 15th century, a Chishti centre flourished in Rudauli near Lucknow. Later, Bahraich (in modern Uttar Pradesh) emerged as another centre during the Lodi period. Gangoh in Saharanpur district of Uttar Pradesh became an important centre of the *silsilah* under Shaikh Abdul Quddus Gangohi (1456-1537). He wrote many books on sufi thought and practice and also on metaphysical subjects. He also translated *chandayan*, a romantic poem in Hindawi written by Manlana Daudin Persian.

During the second phase, the Chishti centres also flourished in Malwa and Bengal. Many Chishti saints of the second phase wrote commentaries on Arabic and Persian classics and also translated Sanskrit works on mysticism into Persian. Like the early sufis of Delhi, the later Chishti sufis made followers from all classes of society but, unlike their spiritual predecessors, most of them accepted state patronage.

15.5.3 Other Sufi Orders

In addition to the Chishti and the Suhrawardi orders, there were others such as the Firdausi, the Qadiri, the Shattari, the Qalandari, etc. which were introduced in India during this period. The Firdausi order was a branch of the Suhrawardi which established itself at Raigir in Bihar towards the end of the 14th century. The most prominent sufi belonging to this *silsilah* in India was Shaikh Sharfuddin Yahya Maneri (d. 1380).

The Qadiri was the important sufi order in the Central Islamic countries and was founded in Baghdad by Abdul Qadir Jilani (d. 1166). It was introduced in India in the late 14th century and established itself in the Punjab, Sind and the Deccan. The Qadiri had an orthodox orientation and its doctrinal positions were similar to those of the orthodox *ulama*. The Qadiri sufis had close relations with the ruling classes of various provincial Sultanates, and accepted state charity. The order was urban-based and attempted to reform the religious life of Indian Muslims of what it considered un-Islamic influences.

The Rishi order of sufism flourished in Kashmir during the 15th and 16th centuries. Before the emergence of this order, a religious preacher from Hamadan, Mir Saiyyid Ali Hamadani (1314-1385) had entered Kashmir with a group of followers to spread Islam. The missionary zeal of Hamadani, his sons and disciples made little impact on the people of Kashmir. The Rishi order, on the other hand, was an indigenous one established by Shaikh Nuruddin Wali (d. 1430). It prospered in the rural environment of Kashmir and influenced the religious life of the people during the 15th and 16th centuries. The popularity of the Rishi order was due to the fact and it drew inspiration from the popular Shaivite bhakti tradition of Kashmir and was rooted in the socio-cultural milieu of the region.

Check Your Progress-2

1. List the main characteristics of the Suhrawardi *silsilah*.

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2. List the following:

a) Names of five sufis of Chishti silsilah.

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b) Names of five sufis orders that flourished in India.

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3. Write a brief note on Shaikh Nizamuddin Auliya.

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4. Write a brief note on the Chishti saints who settled outside Delhi.

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15.6 THE CAUSES OF CHISHTI POPULARITY

All the sufi orders of the Sultanate period believed in achieving the basic sufi goal of establishing direct communion with God by traversing the sufi path under the supervision of a spiritual guide. However, different sufi orders observed distinct rituals and customs of their own and differed in their attitudes to state and society. Of all the orders of this period, the Chishti emerged as the most popular, and it was also widespread. The Chishti rituals, attitudes and practices made it an essentially Indian *silsilah*.

The causes of its popularity are as follows:

- i) Many practices of early Chishtis bore close resemblance to the attributes of some of the already existing non-conformist religious orders in India such as asceticism, bowing before the master, shaving the head of a new entrant into the order and organizing spiritual musical recital. In this sense, the Chishtis came to be regarded as part of an established tradition in India.
- ii) The Chishtis adopted an attitude of religious tolerance towards the non-Muslim population of India and adjusted themselves to the needs of a predominantly non-Muslim environment. They made use of popular imagery and popular idiom to convey their ideas to their Indian followers and adopted many of their customs and rituals. Many of the Chishti saints made Hindawi the vehicle for spreading their teachings.
- iii) The egalitarian atmosphere of the Chishti *khanqahs* attracted large number of people from lower sections of Indian society. The Chishti attitude towards religion was characterized by sympathy towards the deprived sections of the society. Caste distinctions of the Brahmanical social order were meaningless in

the Chishti *khanqahs*. Merchants, artisans, peasants and even sweepers became the followers of the Chishti order. Nor did they accept the two-fold racial division of the people by the Turkish ruling class into noble-born and low-born.

- iv) The inspired leadership of the early Chishti masters, their aloofness from the court and their unwillingness to accept state patronage, their rejection of the orthodoxy and externalist attitudes of the *ulama*, and, finally, the combining of the simple precepts of Islam with the sufi teachings contributed to the popularity of the Chishti order.
- v) The popularity of the early Chishtis rose after their life time as the cult of saints began to develop in the later centuries around their shrines (*dargahs*). Later, legend-makers and writers of hagiographic literature sometimes attributed the popularity of the early Chishti sufis to their ability to perform miracles. In the subsequent centuries, traditions were invented to represent the early Chishtis as being actively involved in the conversion of the non-Muslims who were believed to have been drawn to them due to their alleged miracle-performing powers. However, the early Chishti sufis disapproved of the display of miraculous powers, though they did believe in the possibility of miracles. They did not consider the miracles of primary importance in sufi teaching and practice. Nevertheless, the miracle stories about the early Chishtis played an important role in enhancing the popularity of the Chishti shrines and the posthumous popularity of the sufis themselves.

15.7 SOCIAL ROLE OF THE SUFIS

Sufis played an important role in society and at times in polity. Here we will discuss their role in different spheres.

15.7.1 The Sufis and the State

It has already been mentioned above that with the exception of the early Chishti sufis and the Chishtis of the Shahpur Hillock in the Bijapur Kingdom, the sufis belonging to most of the other silsilah, including the later Chishtis, were involved in the affairs of the state and accepted state endowments. There are instances of expression of disagreement by Chishti sufis over the policies pursued by individual Sultans as during the reign of Muhammad Tughlaq. While the sufis belonging to other sufi groups served the state machinery by becoming an integral part of it, the early Chishtis helped the state by creating a milieu in which people belonging to different classes and religious communities could live in harmony.

The sufis, including the great Chishti masters of the early period, never questioned the existing political system and the class structure. At the most, they advised the state officials to show leniency in collecting land revenue from the peasants. On the other hand, they did not forbid their ordinary followers from seeking state favours and involvement in the affairs of the court. It was perhaps due to these limitations of the otherwise radical sufi order that the later transition within the Chishti *silsilah* to the acceptance of state patronage and involvement in court politics was a smooth process.

15.7.2 The Sufis and the Ulama

We have already noted that the *ulama* continued to show their disapproval of the

sufis despite various attempts made by al-Ghazzali to effect a reconciliation between the two. The attitude of mutual distrust between the two continued during the Sultanate period, though orthodox sufi orders such as the Suhrawardi, the Qadiri, etc. pandered to the *ulama*. The *ulama* were in particular hostile to the early Chishti sufis and their practices. They pronounced against the Chishti practice of *sama* and objected to the Chishti quest for religious synthesis. However, Chishti sufis, such as Shaikh Nasiruddin (Chiragh-i Delhi) and Gesudaraz gave an orthodox orientation to the Chishti order to mitigate the hostility of the *ulama* towards the Chishti practices. It appears that as the Chishtis began to involve themselves in court politics and accept state endowments, they adopted doctrinal attitudes similar to those of the *ulama*.

15.7.3 The Sufis and Conversions

The sufis of the Sultanate period have been generally considered as propagators of Islam in India. Several traditions and legends of the later medieval period also represented the sufis as active missionaries. The later hagiographic accounts of the life of Shaikh Muinuddin Chishti showed him as being actively involved in the conversion of non-Muslims to Islam. Similarly, the first sufis who entered the Deccan in the late 13th century and early 14th century have been portrayed in the later legends as militant champions of Islam who waged a *jihad* (war against non-Muslims). There were certain active evangelists among the Suhrawardi sufis. Mir Saiyyid Ali Hamadani and his followers who entered Kashmir in the 14th century were also imbued with proselytizing zeal though they did not achieve much success in their mission. However, it must be pointed out that conversion of non-Muslims to Islam was not a part of the activities of all the sufis. Shaikh Muinuddin Chishti was not an evangelist and was not actively involved in conversions. His attitude and that of his spiritual successors towards non-Muslims was one of tolerance. Shaikh Nizamuddin Aulia on one occasion observed that many Hindus considered Islam a true religion but did not accept it. He was also of the view that every religious community had its own path and faith and its own way of worship. Also, there is little historical evidence to show that the early sufis in the Deccan were warriors fighting for the expansion of Islam.

However, large number of non-Muslims, especially from the low castes, were attracted to the sufis and later to their *dargahs* where they belonged to the wider circle of devotees. There they gradually came under the influence of Islamic precepts which eventually led to their Islamization. Later, the descendants of many groups which were Islamized claimed that their ancestors were converted to Islam by one or another medieval sufi. Such a claim seems to have been motivated by their desire to establish their long association with the *dargah* of the sufi and their long standing in Islam.

15.7.4 Material Life in Sufi *Khanqahs*

We have seen above that there are instances of prosperous *khanqahs* supported by state endowments, of sufis forging links with the state and finally of the transformation of some sufis into landed elites. Ideally, however, the sufis such as the early Chishtis lived in *khanqahs* which remained in physical separation from the court and social hierarchy, and where life was based on egalitarian principles. We have pointed out that the early Chishtis accepted the logic of the existing class structure at the broader social and political level and did not see any alternative to

it. Nevertheless, life in their own *khanqahs* was characterized by a lack of hierarchy and structure. The *khanqah* was a place where both its inhabitants and the pilgrims experienced equality. For their necessary expenses such *khanqahs* depended not on state patronage but on *futuh* (unsolicited charity).

The Chishti *khanqahs* were open to all sections of the society and to all communities. The *qalandars* and *jogis* made frequent visits to the *khanqahs* where they were provided accommodation. The *khanqahs* also contributed to economic life in various ways. Some of them undertook the cultivation of waste lands. Others were involved in the construction of buildings both of religious character and public utility and planted gardens. The institution of the *khanqah* played an important role in the process of urbanization. The annual *urs* (the festival commemorating the death of a spiritual master) gave impetus to trade, commerce and production of local handicrafts.

15.8 THE IMPACT OF CONTEMPORARY MYSTIC IDEAS OF ISLAMIC COUNTRIES ON INDIAN SUFISM

Although the growth and expansion of the sufi movement in India was primarily determined by the Indian environment, it continued to be influenced by various developments in sufism in the Islamic world. The sufi thought of great masters such as al-Ghazzali continued to influence successive generations of Indian sufis belonging to various *silsilahs*. The ideas and poetic imagery of the Persian sufis like Faiduddin Attar (d. 1220) and Jalaluddin Rumi (d. 1273) also inspired Indian sufis of the Sultanate period. The Chishtis of this period are generally believed to have been influenced by the work of the Spanish-born mystic, Ibn Arabi (d. 1240) who propounded the doctrine of *wahdat al-wujud* (unity of the phenomenal and noumenal world) which was opposed by the *ulama* and orthodox sufis. However, it should be noted that most of the sufis, including the Chishtis, did not consider doctrines such as *wahdat al-wujud* of primary importance in the sufi way of life. For them, sufism was not so much a doctrine but a practical activity of traversing the sufi path.

The ideas of Alauddaula Simnani (1261-1336), an Iranian who opposed Ibn Arabi's doctrine, also influenced some Indian sufis. Gesudaraz came under the influence of Simnani's orthodox ideas and denounced the views of Ibn Arabi and Jalaluddin Rumi.

15.9 THE SUFI AND BHAKTI MOVEMENTS AND CULTURAL SYNTHESIS

The interaction between sufism and the bhakti movement is clear from the remarkable similarities between the two. These similarities included emphasis on monotheism, on the role of the spiritual guide (*pir* or *guru*), and on mystical union with God. Moreover, both the bhakti saints and many sufi orders were critical of the orthodox elements in Hinduism and Islam, respectively. One prominent example of the influence of the bhakti movement on sufism is offered by the Rishi order of the sufis in Kashmir. Here, the non-conformist ideas of the famous 14th century woman, bhakti preacher, Lal Ded, exercised profound influence on the founder of the order Shaikh Nuruddin Wali.

The interaction between the Chishti sufis and the Nathpanthi *yogis* during the Sultanate period is a well established fact. The movement of the Nathpanthis had attained considerable popularity in Northern India, in particular among the lower sections of the society, during the 13th and 14th centuries. The Nathpanthi *yogis* frequently visited the *khanqahs* of the leading Chishti Shaikhs and had discussions with them on the nature of mysticism. The translation of the *yoga* treatise *Amrit-kund* into Persian from Sanskrit even before the advent of sufism in India led to the adoption of many meditative practices by the sufis. The early Chishtis approved some of the ethical values of the Nathpanthi *yogis* and their corporate way of life. Like the Chishtis, the Nathpanthis had opened their doors to all sections of society, irrespective of caste distinctions. The common outlook of the two popular movements provided a basis for mutual understanding between Muslims and non-Muslims.

The adaptability of the Chishtis in the non-Muslim environment of India released syncretic forces and led to cultural synthesis. Many early Chishtis spoke in Hindawi and composed verses in it. Many *khanqahs* inspired the composition of mystical poetry in regional languages. Some early Hindi works such as *Chandayan* by Mulla Daud (second half of the 14th century) combined mysticism with Hindu mythology and philosophy. The sufi folk literature of the later times was a mix of the simplest precepts of Islam and sufi terminology and the existing popular imagery and idiom and, thus, contributed to the growth of eclectic religious life, particularly in the rural areas. The Chishti practice of *sama* provided the basis for a syncretic musical tradition such as the repertoire of religious songs called *qawwali* which is said to have begun with Amir Khusrau.

Check Your Progress-3

- 1) What were the factors for the popularity of the Chishti order in India?
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- 2) What role did the sufi play in the state affair?
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- 3) What do you understand by *wahadat al-wujud*?
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- 4) Write a note on the interaction between sufism and the bhakti movement.
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15.10 SUMMARY

Early sufi saints came to India even before the establishment of the Delhi Sultanate. The basic features of sufism in India continued to be the same as they were in the Islamic World. In the Islamic world it developed into an organized movement during 10th-12th centuries. During 12th and 13th centuries there developed a number of sufi orders or *silsilahs*. Like in the Islamic world a number of sufi orders became popular in India during the Sultanate period. Of these Suhrawardi and Chishti orders were more prominent. In India, the Chishti order became most popular among the masses.

Sufis played a very important role in the social life of the period. In general, they did not get involved with the affairs of the state but we come across a number of cases where the sufis accepted state patronage and got involved with the affairs of the state. Throughout this period we witness an attitude of distrust between sufis and *ulama*. The latter disapproved of a number of practices popular with sufis.

The *khanqahs* were the centre of activity of sufis and their disciples. Sufis in India continued to be affected by the developments of mystic ideas in the contemporary Islamic world. In India, there was a regular interaction between the sufi and bhakti movement. This interaction had a positive impact on the social and cultural life during the Sultanate period. This interaction resulted in a cultural synthesis in the fields of art, music and literature.

15.11 KEYWORDS

Beshara	<i>Be</i> =without, <i>shara</i> = <i>Shariat</i> i.e. those who do not strictly adhere to the <i>Shariat</i> (Islamic law)
Dargah	Sufi shrine/tomb
Futuh	Income received gratuitously
Khanqah	Place where sufi saints lived
Malfuzat	Sufi literature
Qalandar	Muslim mendicant who abandons everything and leads a wandering life
Ribat	Frontier posts
Sama	A sufi gathering where music is played and songs are recited.

15.12 ANSWERS TO CHECK YOUR PROGRESS EXERCISES

Check Your Progress-1

- 1) See Section 15.2
- 2) See Section 15.2
- 3) See Sub-section 15.3.3
- 4) See Sub-sections 15.3.1 and 15.3.2

Check Your Progress-2

- 1) See Sub-section 15.5.1
- 2) See Section 15.5
- 3) See Sub-section 15.5.2
- 4) See Sub-section 15.5.2

Check Your Progress-3

- 1) See Section 15.6
- 2) See Sub-section 15.7.1
- 3) See Section 15.8
- 4) See Section 15.9

15.13 SUGGESTED READINGS

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Nizami, Khaliq Ahmad, (2009 [1991]) *Religion and Politics in India During the Thirteenth Century* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press).

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Rizvi, Athar Abbas, (1978) *A History of Sufism in India*, Vol. I (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal).

Rizvi, Athar Abbas, (1983) *A History of Sufism in India*, Vol. II (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal).

Siddiqi, Mohammed Suleman, (2001) (Reprint) *The Junaydi Sufis of the Deccan* (New Delhi: Primus Books).

15.14 INSTRUCTIONAL VIDEO RECCOMENDATIONS

Sufism in India: Rise and Growth | CEC-UGC

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iTmwmvnsWBA>

The Indian Story: Sufi Culture of India | DD News

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=y8N7iDYhgVw>

A Lecture with Sufi Scholar and Teacher Pir Zia Inayat-Khan

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MSpsGls13Jo>