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Chishti Sufis and the Ideology of Faqr in the Early Fourteenth Century

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Abstract:

This paper discusses the sufi virtue of *faqr* as evident in the *malfuzat* of Shaykh Nizam al-Din Awliya in the fourteenth century. It discusses the different ways in which poverty as a virtue was practiced by the piety-minded and sufis in the early fourteenth century and the morals underlined in the term *faqr* that Nizam al-Din prescribed as an ideal for his disciples. By citing anecdotes from lives of historical personages, the pragmatic aspect of the concept was delineated by Nizam al-Din for his audience.

Key words: *Faqr*, Chishti *silsilah*, Nizam al-Din Awliya, Sufism, *Malfuzat*, Renouncing materialism

1. Introduction

The making of sufi *silsilahs*, hagiographies of the sufi Shaykhs and the tenets of the sufi *tariqa* are oft-narrativized themes of historical research. In the Central Islamic lands, by the end of tenth century Islamic mysticism was a preeminent movement initially under itinerant preachers later canonized in the definitive sufi *tariqas*. The growth and spread of Islamic mysticism in South Asia was contingent on the expansion of Muslim community and settlement under the Delhi Sultans in the thirteenth and fourteenth century. The territorial expansion of the Sultanate regime and emergence of new political culture was concurrent to spread of multiple sufi orders in the subcontinent, particularly the Chishti, Suhrawardi and Firdausi *silsilahs*. While it is difficult to trace the temporal origins of these orders, most historians rely on the hagiographical literature to detail the precepts and practices of each *silsilah*. The hagiographers of the Chishti order have produced vast corpus of literature that detail the Chishti praxis.

The evolution of Chishti precepts in the fourteenth century was apparent in the detailing provided in the Indo-Persian texts produced in multiple genres such as the *malfuzat* (table talks) and *tazkirat* (biographies). The *tazkirat* such as the *Siyar al-Awliya* is a biographical encyclopaedia that commemorates the life histories of the Chishti Shaykhs in a linear fashion and provides normative details about the order and its praxis (Hermansen and Lawrence, 2002). The *malfuzat* such as the *Fawa'id al-Fu'ad* and *Khair al-Majalis*, on the other hand, are transcriptions of oral discourses of sufi Shaykhs and focus on the pedagogic aspect. Though both kinds of texts (*malfuzat* and *tazkirat*) detail the praxis, the narrative strategies used in the texts was not similar and hence they need to be scrutinized meticulously to underline the authorial motives. Most historians tend to focus more on the *tazkirat* genre to detail the sufi praxis as it provides a definitive codex of the Chishti *silsilah*. But the *tazkirat* literature was produced in the mid-fourteenth century by disciple-panegyrist when the norms of the order had crystallized and hence a linear narrative of the Chishti sufi order and its definitive precepts are put forward. My paper focuses on the *malfuzat* genre---*Fawa'id al-Fu'ad*--- that was produced in early fourteenth century when the Chishti order and its codex was still evolving and by focusing on the pedagogic aspect of the text I wish to underline the sufi ideals presented therein.

The *Fawa'id al-Fu'ad* carries the transcripts of discourses of Shaykh Nizam al-Din Awliya compiled by his disciple Amir Hasan Sijzi (Sijzi/Lawrence, 1992). It was compiled between 1308 and 1322 and comprises of several anecdotes on sufi precepts narrated in a didactic mode. Among the issues that are detailed in the text are the intuitive knowledge of the sufis, the spiritual prowess of the sufi Shaykhs, explications of Islamic doctrines and traditions of Prophet, *karamat* of the sufis, significance of *sama*, *faqr* and *futuh*, renouncing worldliness, *pir* and *murid* relationship and several others. Each precept was discussed in anecdotal mode and it carried the authoritative dicta of Nizam al-Din on the subject. In this essay, I wish to focus on the issue of *faqr* (religious poverty) and highlight Nizam al-Din's enunciation of the idea in his discourses. Though the concept of *faqr* was not new in mystical face of Islam, and formed an essential practice of the sufi masters in the Middle ages, Nizam al-Din Awliya chose not to discuss it directly in his narrative. I wish to elaborate on the multi-layered understanding of the concept of *faqr* and the diverse strategies that were used by Nizam al-Din to prescribe the importance of poverty and renunciation of materialism to his disciples and members of the audience present in his hospice and to the potential readers of the discourses. This would help in understanding the differential ideals that Nizam al-Din had in mind while addressing the issue of *faqr* and prescribing certain

codex to the masses and nature of motley crowd that was part of the congregation. In order to contextualize my research better I would analyze modern historiography with regards to the Chishtis and the concept of *faqr*.

2. Modern Historiography and the Chishtis

Modern historians have paid immense attention to historicizing the role of Chishti sufis in the political and religious realm of the Sultanate period. Several scholars have deliberated on the relations between the Chishtis and the Sultans, the notions and codex of the Chishtis and the life histories of the Shaykhs of the order. A careful analysis of their writings would help in contextualizing the notion of *faqr* in early fourteenth century.

One of the early historians to analyze the interface between religion and politics and detail the life histories of the Chishti Shaykhs in the subcontinent was K. A. Nizami. He regarded Chishtis as uniformly otherworldly and detailed the importance and value attached to renouncing worldliness by the Shaykhs of the order. Further, he argued that the Chishti Shaykhs attached futility to the attachment to worldly goods and led a life of penitence and poverty. They despised government service, refrained from acquiring private property even though sometimes they had to lead a life of starvation (Nizami, 1974: 191, 195). In the same vein, S.A.A. Rizvi has elaborated on the various branches of the sufis in the subcontinent and through descriptions of lives and teachings of sufis he has enlarged on the importance of *faqr*. He traced the origin of the concept to the Prophetic age and argued that right at the outset, the teachers of the Chishti *silsilah*, such as Muin al-Din Chishti, argued against borrowing money or seeking charity from people even on the verge of starvation. Qutb al-Din Bakhtiyar Kaki led an impoverished life and was completely otherworldly and Baba Farid too led an ascetic life in his hospice in Ajudhan and showed abhorrence to borrowing money. Nizam al-Din Awliya also held that wealth and worldliness bring in unforeseen calamity. He apparently told a fellow friend that he may tread his own path of affluence and but he (Nizam al-Din) would prefer to be downtrodden (Rizvi, 1983: 148). Further, Rizvi contrasts the attitude of the Suhrawardis with the Chishtis to highlight the fact the unlike Chishtis, the Suhrawardis restrained from extreme austerity and led lavish lives. Both Nizami and Rizvi's research are largely derivative in nature and follow the narrative of the Chishti *tazkirat* with occasional corroboration from the *malfuzat*. They focus more on the life histories rather than the teaching component, especially the applicability of *faqr* in lives of ordinary Muslims.

In contrast, Simon Digby argues that there were differences between the precepts and practices of the sufis. Though the Chishtis subscribed to the notion of *faqr*, immense *futuh* was received at the hospice to fulfil the quotidian requirements. Furthermore, Digby argues that there was immense competition within and amongst different sufi *silsilahs* and differences existed even amongst the Chishtis over norms of the order and *khilafat* (Digby, 1990, 1996, 2003). Hence, he refrains from presenting an unchanging and timeless image of the Chishtis across time. Riazuul Islam has been careful to locate the essential differences in the narratives presented in different genres of sufi texts: *malfuzat* and *tazkirat*. Just like Digby, he finds differences in the way the Chishtis have been portrayed in the *malfuzat* and *tazkirat*. For instance, the idea of renouncing worldliness is highlighted in *malfuzat* and *tazkirat* but the fact that immense *futuh* was received daily is missing in *malfuzat* as it was difficult to accommodate the idea in the teaching component of the text (Islam, 2002). Both Digby and Islam have carefully brought out the differential narrative strategies of texts produced in different genres and in this paper, I wish to focus on the narrative style of the *malfuzat*.

My paper primarily focuses on one sufi tenet, the concept of *faqr* and by solely focussing on the *malfuzat* genre produced in early fourteenth century, I would focus on the early development of the idea at the time when the Chishti *silsilah* was evolving and norms of the order had not been structured. By focussing on the pedagogic aspect of Nizam al-Din Awliya's discourses and the strategies and narratives he used to underscore the differential components of the idea of *faqr* I wish to underline the pragmatic rather than the theoretical dimensions of the concept and delineate its import in the lives of sufis in early fourteenth century.

3. Shaykh Nizam al-Din Awliya's Prescriptions Regarding Faqr

The oral discourses of Shaykh Nizam al-Din were compiled by Amir Hasan Sijzi, a lay disciple of the Shaykh who was present in his hospice on select occasions from 1308 to 1322. The text was entitled *Fawa'id al-Fu'ad* and it is an easy, comprehensible and lucid text that discusses various aspects of Sufism in didactic mode. The authoritative voice of Nizam al-Din was apparent in the narrative tone and themes discussed in the *malfuzat* as he sought to educate the audience regarding Islam, morals, sufi tenets and prescribe a code of conduct that made the readers appreciate and recognize the authority of the sufi *Pir*. Nizam al-Din discoursed on variegated themes in his hospice and touched on various dimensions of Islamic faith, doctrines, traditions, mystical ideas, spiritual prowess and intuitive knowledge. Awliya did not discuss about the Chishti *silsilah* per se and its tenets because the order and its doctrines were still evolving and had not been codified yet; while edifying about an ideal *tariqa*, Nizam al-Din constantly referred to *faqr* and its relevance in a mystic's life and demonstrated how a lay individual may draw inspiration from the virtues of Sufism and hence achieve inner transformation.

The concept of *Faqr* was not of recent origin in the thirteenth century. Several Persian treatises produced in the Middle Ages dealt with various stages and ideals of mysticism and had prescribed the importance of *faqr* in the lives of sufis. *Kashf al-Mahjub*, a Persian treatise on Sufism produced in the eleventh century by al-Hujwiri discusses the need to separate heart from all but God (Hujwiri/Nicholson, 1980). He further underlined that *faqr* or perfect poverty was equal to God and Prophet Muhammad chose poverty over worldliness. There were several instances in the *Quran* that show the Prophet preferred the poor and the destitute. Furthermore, Hujwiri stated that all sufi Shaykhs preferred poverty to wealth for the reason that the *Quran* and *sunna* declare it to be superior to anything else and hence most Muslims agree to it. While al-Hujwiri focussed on the tenet of *faqr* with regards to its spiritual quotient, Nizam al-Din Awliya illustrated the pragmatic aspect of *faqr* through illustrations from the lives of the pious and anecdotes drawn from the past.

Nizam al-Din Awliya waxed eloquently about ritual poverty and its virtues as an important ingredient of life by citing instances from the lives of Prophet Muhammad and several historical personages, especially his *Pir*, Baba Farid. In one of the discourses,

Nizam al-Din narrated an anecdote about poverty and cloak of the Prophet (Sijzi/Lawrence, 1992: 300). He narrated that on the night of Divine ascent, the Prophet asked Abu Bakr, Umar, Usman and Ali: 'What would you do on getting my cloak of poverty?' Abu Bakr argued that he would be righteous, obedient and generous; Umar replied he would be just and fair; Usman pointed out that he about liberal and generous and Ali argued that he would wrap it around himself and God's servants. The Prophet, Nizam al-Din pointed out, gave the cloak to all of them. Further, he pointed out that though Prophet Muhammad was wealthy, he had love for poverty and considered only those people as truly indigent who had renounced everything external and internal and had complete *tawakkul* (trust) in God. Nizam al-Din emphasized the simple living of the Prophet to portray his life as a role model for the sufis and piety-minded individuals amongst the laity.

Further, Nizam al-Din cited episodes from the life of his *Pir*, Baba Farid to show that he had immense love for poverty. He established his *khanqah* away from the city and whatever cash gifts were received in charity, they were distributed immediately and hence at the time at his death there was hardly any money to build his grave (Sijzi/Lawrence, 1992: 161, 319). Similarly, in another anecdote Nizam al-Din pointed out that Shaykh Najib al-Din Mutawakkil had argued that one should expend all the money in lifetime and not leave it unexpended for his heirs (Sijzi/Lawrence, 1992: 210). Another sufi *Pir*, Shaykh Jalal al-Din Tabrizi had argued that one should refrain from becoming slave of worldly objects. Through examples from the lives of great *Pirs*, Nizam al-Din sought to highlight the spiritual merit obtained from the leading a life of poverty. The historical anecdotes impressed the audience about the morals embedded in them and added weight to his teachings and helped him in legitimizing his codex through a select usage of the history. Unlike a *tazkirat*, lineage and chronology were not prime focus of Nizam al-Din in his discourses as the narratives from the lives of great Shaykhs was not narrated in sequence but by recollecting select episodes from their lives and portraying them as epitome of virtues that were carefully chosen for their didactic import, Nizam al-Din Awliya sought to depict his mystical path as ideal and worth emulating.

In addition to poverty, renouncing materialism, worldliness and expending money without holding any attachment to the material world are recurrent themes in the discourses. Nizam al-Din argued that love for God and for this world would not go together but he did not prescribe any individual to become ascetic but the real wisdom laid in ability to resist temptation and face hardships in complete composure. He did not ask people to remain in solitude

Instead rejection of the world meant that one may put on clothes and take food. What comes unasked should be accepted but not hoarded one should not take place one's heart on anything. Only this is rejection of the world. (Sijzi/Lawrence, 1992: 13)

He cited traditions of Prophet to illustrate the distinction between permissible earning and interdicted earning and one can be punished if one earns money from inappropriate sources. (Sijzi/Lawrence, 1992: 126) Further, he argued that one need not loath worldliness or love it but the best approach is to be equidistant from it as was evident in the life of a sufi, Rabia who refrained from conversing with people who talked about worldliness or criticized it all the time.

Nizam al-Din did not instruct his audience, which also constituted common people, to refrain from owning any private property or practicing their vocations. Instead, he was against hoarding wealth for engaging in material pleasures in order to satisfy one's selfish wants. Awliya argued that accumulation of wealth for self-enjoyment leads people to become enemies of each other. Hence, real enjoyment was not in accumulating money but in spending it. One should be able to leave all worldly pursuits and possessions in the name of God. Not only should an individual distribute gold and silver but they should feel no attraction and attachment to it. (Sijzi/Lawrence, 1992: 137) And so, if one accumulates money the only purpose of doing so should be to help others who needed it. Nizam al-Din cited examples of both sufis as well as ordinary pious individuals to illustrate his point. For instance, he argued that there have been very pious people who felt uncomfortable and uneasy unless they were able to part with everything they had to some needy person. Also, Awliya stated that he never indulged in accumulation of wealth and when he attached himself to the service of Baba Farid he felt that material world was trifle. (Sijzi/Lawrence, 1992: 137) He further stated that that "Your stomach is your world, if you eat less you renounce worldliness". Related to this idea is the fact that fasting helped people in controlling desire and thus entrusting life in the name of God.

The examples of historical personages not just comprised of sufis as Nizam al-Din Awliya also identified saintly people among lay individual who could maintain high standards of piety even while leading a routine life in this material world. By citing the examples of Sultan Iltutmish and Qazi Kamal al-Din Jafri, Nizam al-Din demonstrated that these individuals were busy with legal and official commitments, yet did not neglect the task of reading the *Quran* and offering *namaz* on regular basis (Sijzi/Lawrence, 1992: 319, 332). Similarly, he cited other examples of individuals who held official positions such as Shaykh al-Islam, *qazi* and governorship yet associated with and was familiar with manners of sufis. This was evident in the case of Muhammad Nishapuri, a pious governor, whose firm commitment to saints ensured his safety from dacoits. Shams al-Mulk was a teacher of Islamic sciences but showed immense respect to Nizam al-Din Awliya and his sufi *tariqa* (Sijzi/Lawrence, 1992: 159). Therefore, for lay disciples of Nizam al-Din, *faqr* in its pragmatic sense did not mean becoming sufi, but not indulging and falling prey to temptations of worldliness. An individual may live and work in this material world but renounce materialism and feel contented in love for God, and thus experience *faqr* or ritual poverty. Nizam al-Din idolized the lives of dervishes and *faqirs* who derived immense pleasure in feeding people and not eating and even when they were eating they did it devoid of any pleasures and felt contented in remembering God.

Nizam al-Din's prescriptions for the mystically inclined disciples were more stringent as he cited didactic anecdotes about righteous conduct for dervishes and sufis. Begging was considered condemnable as it annoyed people and even earning money by business was considered better than begging. He considered it unacceptable for sufis to be attached to materialism. This is apparent in this anecdote:

Once I came upon a group dressed in the manner of sufis. One was saying to the other: "I saw such and such in a dream." The other explained: "That is an auspicious dream. You will earn more money, you will acquire goods and you will be abound in comforts of life." I [Nizam al-Din] wanted to intervene and protest, "O Khwaja, whose clothes are those that you wear? People in such clothes do not offer dream interpretations like this". (Sijzi/Lawrence, 1992: 147-48)

While Awliya scorned dervishes who were attracted to materialism, he recounted episodes from the lives of sufi shaykhs from the bygone era to illustrate what their conduct taught about piety, especially *faqr*. Nizam al-Din did not classify sufis on the basis of *silsilah* but largely identified sufis on the basis of their spiritual master or pedigree. While usually people longed for grants from political sovereigns, Nizam al-Din argued that sufis such as his *pir*, Baba Farid refrained from it. When a Delhi Sultan offered land grant to Baba Farid he refused to accept it; and in the same vein, Nizam al-Din also refused to accept land grants. Though both of them required money for meeting the expenses of the *khanqah*, as sufis who had renounced materialism, they did not accept land grants as land was regarded as a worldly possession (Sijzi/Lawrence, 1992: 195). Consequently, Nizam al-Din also cited instances from the lives of the sufis to demonstrate that sufis should not seek any governmental position. As a young scholar Nizam al-Din wanted to become a *qazi* and requested Shaykh Najib al-Din Mutawakkil to read *Surat al-Fatiha* but Mutawakkil showed his aversion to this profession and scorned Nizam al-Din for having such worldly ambitions (Sijzi/Lawrence, 1992: 111). While *faqr* was an ideal virtue for dervishes, land grants were not to be accepted, Nizam al-Din Awliya's attitude towards *futuh* was more flexible. He did not condemn it outright but laid down specific conditions for accepting unasked charity in monetary form. He argued that sufis should never seek donation or have a desire for accumulating money. They should derive immense pleasure in impoverishment and be unmindful of worldly possessions and if any *futuh* or unasked charitable grant in monetary form was received, it must be disbursed immediately. He cited the example of his Shaykh, Baba Farid who did not accept land grants, but if he received *futuh*, it was distributed amongst people who needed it (Sijzi/Lawrence, 1992: 196). Once Nizam al-Din decided to keep one *tanka* with him and expend it later, but it brought immense hardship to him while praying till he decided to expend it. Similarly, he narrated the case of Shaykh Shihab al-Din Suhrawardi who used to receive immense *futuh* and disburse it amongst people. Once Jalal al-Din Tabrizi was asked by his *Pir*, Shaykh Shihab al-Din Suhrawardi to pick up a gift for himself amongst various gifts he had received from his disciples, Tabrizi chose to pick up a coin that an indigent woman had gifted him as he regarded it as a true gift from a spiritually inclined poor woman that encapsulated her otherworldly attitude (Sijzi/Lawrence, 1992: 284). Through this anecdote Nizam al-Din not only demonstrated the need to distribute *futuh* to people but also presented Tabrizi as *summa* of righteous morals and sufi virtues. In short, for a mystically inclined individual the concept of *faqr* can be summed-up in renouncing materialism, especially refraining from any attachment or desire to acquire material benefits, serving poor and needy and without worrying about wealth and engaging in remembrance of God.

4. Conclusion

The discourses of Nizam al-Din Awliya provide a summation of his dicta regarding sufi tenets. As evident from the foregoing pages, Nizam al-Din did not prescribe a uniform code of conduct for the masses as the audience comprised of diverse body of people: scholars, lay individuals, mystically inclined people, disciples, sufis, women and several others. In order to address the differential needs and capacities of these people, Nizam al-Din cited various anecdotes that prescribed certain codex for people. While emphasizing the need to make one's life oriented towards piety, he did not ask every individual to renounce worldly possessions. Instead, he argued that people should forego the pleasures and desires attached to accumulation of wealth. He cited examples to clarify that one may lead a pious life even if he is professing a trade or engaged in governmental profession. Though most of the anecdotes are didactic in nature, Nizam al-Din did not scorn any individual or his conduct directly in his discourses. By narrating the merits and demerits associated with a virtue, he encouraged his disciples to discern the key precepts of Sufism. He cited instances from the lives of both sufis as well as laity but while prescribing codex for sufis, he was careful to bring out the issues that he supported and things that he despised. The usage of anecdotes from the lives of historical personages played a key role in illustrating the sufi tenets and made it easily comprehensible for the lay audience. While all the early sufi texts focussed on the theoretical aspect of *faqr*, but by citing illustrations from the lives of people Nizam al-Din could demonstrate its pragmatic usage. This ensured that any individual could adopt some aspect of Nizam al-Din's codex in his life without formally treading the path of Sufism.

In this essay I have primarily focussed on the *mal'fuzat* of Nizam al-Din Awliya to highlight the pedagogic aspect and its orality. Most historians tend to focus on the *tazkirat* that were commemorative discourses to elucidate the tenets of the Chishti *silsilah*; however, the *mal'fuzat* is equally informative about sufi virtues especially because it carries the oral discourses of the sufi Shaykh and was transcribed with an intention to retain some elements of its oral component and often read aloud to the audience after they were 'published'. In a way it engages the readers with the actual discussions of the hospice, the kind of questions and clarifications that the audience sought and the material milieu of the times when the discussions were held in Nizam al-Din's hospice. By placing the discussion in the context in which the sufi *pir* narrated the anecdotes and how he transposed themes and people across time to impress people about historical anecdotes about achievements and virtues of Muslims, we get a sense of the formative stage and early history of the sufi ideology---a period before the tenets of the Chishti order had crystallized. The *mal'fuzat* helps the readers to identify multiple heroes from the past from diverse backgrounds and multi-layered understanding of sufi tenets that addressed an equally diverse audience.

5. References

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