

Pre-Modern Islam: The Practice of *Tasawwuf* and its Influence in the Spiritual and Literary Cultures

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<p>Received: 11 Feb 2023; Received in revised form: 07 Mar 2023; Accepted: 16 Mar 2023; Available online: 24 Mar 2023</p> <p>©2023 The Author(s). Published by International Journal of English Language, Education and Literature Studies (IJEEL). This is an open access article under the CC BY license (https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).</p> <p>Keywords— <i>Tasawwuf, Modern Islam, Pre-colonial Islam, Mughals, Literature, Spirituality, Tawheed, Ihsan, Tahqiq.</i></p>	<p><i>The modern narrative of Islam is one which differs from the pre-colonial narrative. The practice of Tasawwuf is a sacred one and not many people are aware of the actual core and values of it. However, its concepts of Tawheed, Ihsan, and Tahqiq have been present since pre-colonial South Asian Islam. This paper focuses on pre-modern South Asian Islamic traditions along with the influence of Tasawwuf during the Mughal era and their evolution with time by comparing them to global Islamic traditions while outlining some similarities as well by exploring the literary culture. This paper argues how Islam now is a rigid system but that had not always been the case and also rebuttals the claims of western historians.</i></p>

1. Introduction

The modern narrative of Islam or rather the modernization of Islam believed that religion had been tainted by “Hindu” influences and that the Quran and Sunnah, (the acts performed or narrated by the Prophet P.B.U.H) – needed to be used as the main fundamental sources to reform Islam in the modern context without these influences. It has been made into a rigid and binary system where if you do not follow it exactly, then you are believed to be wrong. If you are found guilty of indulging in something *haram* (prohibited in Islam) then you are labeled as a “bad” Muslim. However, this was not always the case. Pre-modern South Asian Islamic traditions were not always this rigid and before colonization, these traditions and Islamic culture were considered to be a worldly and sophisticated blend of the religion’s core values of peace and humility.

In this paper, I will first discuss how Islam spread in pre-modern times and rebuttal the claims stated by western historians. I will also explain the pre-colonial narrative of the Indian Muslims regarding Islam and the role of Sufi thoughts and

concepts in pre-modern Islam by exploring the texts and lectures studied in this course. The second half of this paper will focus on comparing South Asian Islamic traditions with other global Islamic traditions and the differences and similarities found amongst them. While also relating the different cultures of the Islamic culture with the Mughal’s worldview. Finally, I will study the influence of poetry on Islamic values throughout history and to this day.

2. Truth behind the Spread of Islam

It is a popular misconception that Islam was spread through conquests and people were forced into conversion. This myth was spread by western writers in the 18th – 21st century along with the belief that the purpose of these conquests was the Islamization of these areas. This could not be further than the truth as the Caliphate circles wanted to keep Islam amongst the elites and only expanded their economic and political power through their swords. Moreover, in reality, Islam started to spread by Shi’a Isma’ili preachers known as *Da’is* who set out to share and promote the Islamic message. However, it was the Sufis who traveled extensively and it was

through their work and dedication that the current Muslim populations of Asia and Africa were brought towards the faith of Islam (Winter, 2017).

The term “Sufism” used by western historians is defined as viewing Islam from a mystical point of view. Hereby, in the paper, the word “*Tasawwuf*” will be used to denote “Sufism” and these practices. Unlike the modern narrative of Islam, *Tasawwuf* is not a rigid system. There are several Sufi orders or *silsilas* in which mystical knowledge that is acquired by the founders of that particular *silsila* is passed onto its followers. For example, the “*Chishtiyya*” *silsilah* is said to be founded by Khwaja Muinuddin Chishti. Unlike, the modern Islamic “*firqas*” or sects of Islam, these different *silsilas* existed in harmony and there was no hostility amongst them as the Sufis believed that a spiritual influence could be limited to a particular crowd or territory. The main goal of these *silsilas* was to promote the simple life of the Prophet P.B.U.H and his followers and to practice abstinence along with *Zikr*, the different ways to remember God than just the conventional prayers. The Sufis were able to spread Islam through their acts of kindness and by helping anyone regardless of their religion in times of need. Their *kanqahs*, a place they would use for spiritual reformation - was always open to everyone, and through their prayers and selfless actions, people were motivated and inspired to join them (Buehler, 2022).

Contrary to what western historians believe Islamic traditions were not foreign to contemporary Indian elites. They did not specifically target the Muslims but instead considered them to be one of the many sophisticated ethnic groups found in South Asia. Pre-colonial Indian Muslims were continuously looking for ways to expand Islamic culture and this was not limited to just area but stretched towards incorporating new ideas as well. Different sorts of capital be it economic capital through the conquering of territories to the intellectual capital absorbed from these different areas led to the expansion of the pre-modern Islamic civilization. Modern religious thinkers look for authentic answers and want religion to be original and not move away from its “roots”. However, Islamic tradition developed and grew with time as they moved to new lands and saw new cultures. Before western colonization, Muslims were not keen on restricting religion and deeming actions as “Islamic” and “non-Islamic” as for them religion or *din* was universal. Pre-colonial Indian Muslims managed to not only set their ideas based on the

Quran and Sunnah but after much analysis and investigation, included the cultural ideas they got from other sources than the Prophet P.B.U.H. The openness and acceptance of these new ideas in the Islamic worldview helped evolve the Islamic traditions and cultures (Zayd, 2006). For them, religion could not be put in a box and it was not limited to one view as it was diverse. The Sufis believe that there is not a single correct way to reach God instead the number of roads you can take to reach God is as many as the number of people who seek God meaning everyone can have a unique and different way to reach God. This can be understood through the poem *Hadiqatu'l – Haqiqah* by Abu'l Majd Majdud Sana'I in which he narrated the tale of the elephant and blind men. When the blind men were asked to assess and guess what they were dealing with by touching them, all of them came up with different answers. As they all touched a different part of the elephant none of their answers matched. This showed how if we just accept reality as we are told and not look into the different and diverse views, then we choose to remain ignorant (Rizvi, 1921). Similarly, pre-modern Indian Muslims had various ways of viewing religion and although there were differences between these views, all of them were still accepted which is similar to the Sufi order of the different *silsilas*; they can be different from one another but the followers are not hostile with one another.

3. Concepts of *Tasawwuf*:

Just like the concept of *silsila* and the acceptance of new ideas within religion, there are other Sufi Islamic concepts that influence pre-modern Islam. The concept of *Tahqiq* can be understood through the story of the elephant and the blind men. *Tahqiq* is a term used to define all the diverse ways we can look at reality and when we do not just simply accept what we are told but do our exploration and research as well. These diverse truths that we find come together and form the bigger picture or Whole Reality which is known as “*Haqq*”. This also helps us achieve *ma'arifat* which means to learn through experience. We can observe the pre-modern South Asian Islamic view of embracing new ideas, cultures from different lands, new markets in the Islamic worldview making it universal, meaning including everyone and that Islam is for all times and not restricted to just one territory, time, or space (Vantanpour, 2020).

Although in conventional modern Islam the emphasis is mostly on God's anger or *Jalal*, this was not always the case. In pre-modern Islamic times, much importance was given to God's beauty or "*Husn*". Through different Sufi forms of *zikr*, such as *sama* (remembering God through music), *qawwali*, calligraphy, poetry, and other forms we not only learn to find our Creator's *husn* everywhere but to appreciate it as well. The way Sufis learned to appreciate and recognize beauty is known as "*Tariqah*". If one wants to be a student and learn the practice of recognizing this *husn* and producing and creating it in all aspects of life means you have to be a *Muhsin* and be aware of *Ihsan*. A *Muhsin* is one that lives with *Ihsan*, meaning a person who remembers that God is aware of all our actions, thoughts and feelings regardless of us showing them in front of others or hiding them, God always knows and as told by the Prophet P.B.U.H, "It is that you should serve Allah as though you could see Him, and even though you may not see Him yet He sees you." To not acknowledge and to be ignorant to the omnipresence of God is to be ignorant of our purpose in this life. To act and live accordingly knowing that God is watching us is to practice *Ihsan*. When one purifies one's actions and thoughts and lives with not the fear of God but the motivation to seek His beauty, then only is he a true *Muhsin*. This practice of *Tasawwuf* led the pre-colonial Indian Muslims to be so inclusive and welcoming to new cultures and traditions other than the ones taught through the Quran and Sunnah. Contrary to what is believed today the goal was not to dismiss the Quran and Sunnah but to determine where to apply it and its scope in this vast field of knowledge (Lumbard, 2004).

Finally, a very important concept that Muslims of all time can agree to is that of *Tawhid*. The pre-modern universal worldview of Islam included believing that there is one God, one truth, one reality, one universe, one world, and one humanity. The importance of *Tawhid* reflects itself as it is the first testimony of faith. To not only recite but to believe in your heart and soul that "There is no god but God" (*la ilaha illa Llah*). Despite having different traditions, thoughts, and views, one thing that united all Muslims was that one day we all will return to our one God. God Himself has sent this revelation through different prophets with the specific purpose to maintain this one truth (Lumbard, 2004). The modern Islamic concept of *Tawhid* just refers to the belief that there is only one God and one must living according to the Quran and Sunnah meaning that if

one practices *Tawhid* that means he does not believe in any other God. A common ground for pre-modern Indian Muslims and the Sufis is the thought that there is only one God who created this universe and is responsible for all of us and that His communication did not stop with the Prophet P.B.U.H instead that God at some point in our lives does communicate with us be it through His creations, His rewards or punishments in this world. Not just the Sufis but some of the pre-modern Muslim thinkers also believe that anyone who is sincere at heart and through his actions is capable of finding the Whole Reality or *Haqq* (ElSenossi, 2021).

The first half of this paper is now complete and the focus will shift from defining the key features of *Tasawwuf* and finding their place in the pre-colonial South Asian Islam and will now focus on South Asian Islamic Culture and the role of its literary and spiritual cultures not only throughout history but the effect it has even today.

4. *Practicing Islam in Pre-Modern Islam:*

From understanding *Tasawwuf* and the differences between pre-colonial and modern Islam, one thing that we know for sure is that Islam is not a monolithic religion. Even in South Asia, we observe a contrast of Islamic traditions that are present not only due to differences in social status and class but also traditions change according to the place and time we live in (Eaton, 2006). South Asian Islam is home to practices that have been thought of as controversial and are not generally accepted in other global Islamic traditions. An example of such practice can be of *Tasawwuf*.

The reason behind this can be is that *Tasawwuf* consists of an inclusive and flexible system that is not so harsh. The belief in Saints and the different rituals and forms of *Zikr* the Sufis choose to perform is what makes them different from the other global traditions. *Rabi'a al-Basri*, believed to be the first true Saint to the Sufis demonstrated what it means to worship God out of love for Him and not due to the fear of His wrath. This notion was very popular in pre-modern South Asian Islam and the stories and biographies of these Saints are what helped preserve their lessons. Along with the faith in Saints, practices such as *Sama*, which is a popular form of *Zikr* that is often met with criticism due to the use of music to remember God but is one that has been highly influential. People all over the world, whether they are Muslims or not enjoy listening to soulful *Qawwalis* and lose themselves in this

devotional form of music which helps purify not only their thoughts but their minds as well (Bhutia, 2018). Moreover, Sufis not only perform the obligatory prayers but just like the Prophet P.B.U.H and *Ahl-al Suffa*, they perform other rituals and free prayers. For them, religion is not just what was dictated in the Quran and Sunnah but the different ways one can appreciate and remember God and His beauty (Rizvi, 1921). Even though, there are differences present between South Asian and global Islamic culture some similarities can be found as well. The South Asian central Perso-Islamic culture which is found not only in Lahore but has found its way to Delhi and Deccan, we can observe several similar Persian traditions and styles (Eaton, 2006).

5. Sufi Culture through the Literary and Mughal Lenses:

Similarly, the influence of the Sufi culture can also be seen in literature. It was because of the Sufi influence on Persian poetry that *Ghazals* were given a proper form. Ghazal in Islamic cultures and languages is very popular and is a term used for romantic poetry which is written with a proper set of rules. The first Persian *ghazal* where the influence of *Tasawwuf* can be seen is *Sanā'ī's ghazals*. Sufi beliefs and vocabulary became embedded in the Persian cultural climate and were embraced widely by the people including literals (poets) of the Ottoman Empire and Turkic Central Asia (Yarashater, 2006).

Along with poets, even the Mughal emperors were also influenced by the Sufis and they too incorporated some Sufi traditions or practices. Humayun, the second Mughal emperor was a dreamer and believed in the cosmological sciences. Not only did he consult the planets to determine the color of his clothing but he also consulted them to arrange his court's schedule (Levrier-Jones, 2021). Both Humayun's father and son were Murids – disciples of the Sufi order. Akbar who was the latter is said to have experienced a spiritual moment while hunting. It is narrated that when the time of hunting was near, Akbar suddenly was overwhelmed by a strong emotion and saw a divine flash of eyes which he believed was the Ultimate Truth or *Haqq* that was shown to him by God. Moreover, Akbar at his *Ibadat Khana* (place of worship) at Fatehpur Sikri would invite Sufi scholars and scholars from different cultures and traditions to understand the signs of *Tawheed*, the meaning and nature of the signs of Oneness (*fahm o fitrat-e nishaan-e*

yaktayi). Western historians have often shown Akbar as a proud and greedy emperor who rejected Islam and formed his own religion, "*Din-i-Ilahi*". However, that was certainly not the case as based on a translation of *Ain-i-Akbari*, document on the administration of the Mughal Empire under Akbar, he simply stated that he had distanced from the traditional and world Islam and had become closer to the Divine-Faith which was the spiritual faith. Since the Sufi religious authority was established before the arrival of the Mughals, they simply incorporated them within their lifestyle and coexist within the Mughal rule and it was not until Aurangzeb that this was no longer the case as he instilled a very traditional Islam (Nanavati, 2021).

Not just the spiritual influence but it important to study the influence of literary culture in the Islamic tradition. It was believed that literal verbal expression is never enough to express our love for God and to praise His Beauty. The Sufis saw how the poets expressed their love for their beloved through *ghazals* and wanted to do the same to express their love for the Divine and to praise Him. Through this form of poetry, they wanted to feel what it was like to become one with Him as for them God was their ultimate Beloved. Rumi, a Sufi master used *ghazals* to not only preach the teachings of God but for mystical expression as well (Yarashater, 2006). It is no doubt that in pre-modern times one was not identified by their religion and this is also seen through Bulleh Shah's, "*Holi Kheloo'ngi Keh kar Bismillah*." In modern times playing Holi is considered a sin without any evidence but in pre-modern South Asian Islam, it was considered a celebration everyone could take part in. Just like Bulleh Shah another famous Sufi poet, Amir Khusrau wrote a qawwali about the celebration of Holi, "*Aaj Rang Hai Re Maa*" where he also talks about celebrating Holi while simultaneously remembering God (Safvi, 2021). As we have learned throughout this paper, Islamic values have changed from pre-modern times to what they are today and this is reflected in the art of poetry as well. Whereas at first we had poets writing about being lost in the love for God, now we find poets writing about worldly matters and problems. Although this is not always the case as poetry describing love is still written but this theme of writing about loss is present in a lot of writings. Naseer Turabi's famous *ghazal*, "*Wo Hamsafar Tha*" (Rekhta, 2020) is an example of a modern era poem where he expresses his sorrow over the loss of Bangladesh and wrote it quite beautifully as a farewell piece after the 1971 East Pakistan partition.

6. Conclusion

Through these examples, we notice how Islamic traditions have changed with time and how in pre-modern times even when there were differences between the religious groups within Islam, they were all still respected and had the same purpose which was to serve God and to help His people, regardless of what religion they belonged to. However, the same cannot be said for today where if we have different opinions we keep them to ourselves rather than expressing them and practicing them openly due to the fear and hatred that has been spread amongst the different *firqas*.

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