



Sufism Department and Homosexuality: A Study

Prof. (Dr.) Mamta Singh

Professor

Department of History Humanities and Arts

Maharishi University of Information Technology, Lucknow, India

Abstract

Gender Studies have paved new approaches to research in the field of Islamic Studies including the study of Sufism in Indian Context. The learning knowledge that is emerging makes the previous generation of works on Sufism—like those of Annemarie Schimmel or Sachiko Murata—seem stiff and Victorian. Gender and sexuality were once considered ‘obsolete’ and ‘immoral’, but now are legitimate and urgently important topics. Today there is a body of insightful studies of the experiences of Sufi women and the connection with God inwardly, the practice of masculinity in Sufi authority, and Sufi attitudes towards marriage, sex and the body. With the expected desires and investigations, Sufism will come out in the true sense reading of poetry of some writers and their ecclesiastical works on the concerned areas. Translating Sufi poetry doesn’t mean to avoid sexuality but narrating and also addressing it on a large scale.

Key Words: Sufism, Gender Behaviour, Culture, Homosexuality,

Present paper will move the investigative lens away from Sufi poetry and look at how Sufis engaged in more prosaic discourses about sexuality and homosexuality as these issues are considered vulgar in some discussions. These discourses are rooted in social mores and communal life will lead some aspects of hidden meaning of life. It focuses on Chishti Sufis because they are known for producing prose that clothed spiritual insights in the garb of quotidian questions-and-answers, parables and stories or moral advice. They created records of their spiritual masters’ oral discourses (malfuzat), left voluminous collections of letters of spiritual guidance (maktubat), composed epistles of moral exhortation (nasihat), and wrote spiritual biographies (tazkirat) as examples to be admired and imitated. This paper after examining some Sufi Poetry contains responses, parables, narratives and debates about male homosexuality that are rooted in social practices of medieval and early modern South Asia.

Chishti discussions on the topic of homosexuality appear as a contemporary discussion for readers indirectly. They neither address the phenomenon head-on nor do they use a technical term in Persian for ‘homosexuality’ or ‘homosexual’. In that sense, the subject of their discussions is more properly ‘homoeroticism’ rather than homosexuality. These two phenomena are closely correlated, for that, let us try to grasp the theoretical complexity of their convergence before moving to analyse Sufi discourses that will help in finding out the facts about Homosexuality even popular in Spiritual context.

Homosexuality is considered as a complex phenomenon in the present scenario on social platform. It includes the issues of identity, sexual orientation, gendered behaviour, social relationships and sex acts. Male as well as female homosexuality may manifest quite differently in patriarchal societies like Islamic societies, and the Chishti Sufi discussions that this paper analyses are limited to male homosexuality. The easiest element to label is sex acts, and Islamic law addresses primarily sex acts between males. Homosexual acts are sex acts between two males, simply stated (though which acts constitute ‘sex’ is ambiguous and legal discussions define this activity in contradictory ways). On the subjects of sex acts, there are attitudes and relationships; this is the realm of homoeroticism. Homoeroticism in simple meaning can be defined as cultivating love and affection between two males, with the term eros understood to mean love that includes emotional bonding, passionate feeling, and urgent longing which is simply known as *Ishq*. Regarding these issues, Persian and Christi authors are debatable and need a conclusion.

Homoerotic bonding in some sense can be casual or it may be causal to some extent. ‘Casual’ means that for some homoerotic bonding might be merely social—more alike to passionate friendship. ‘Causal’ means that for ‘bonding’ might become urgently important between the two people; it might forsake a person to marriage, question patriarchal norms or reject routine house-holding expectations. In some sense if a person acts upon such feelings or not depends upon personal courage, family constraints, social pressures, and fortuitous timing or their lack. In pre-modern times if we go deep into the matter, few

individuals rejected and opposed this social pressure and led autonomous lives for their happiness, though the history of Sufism does offer us some rare excerpts of people who did reject social conformity for the sake of homoerotic relationships openly. What might force a man to reject the routine gendered and sexual life of a privileged householder who is authorised in a patriarchal society for his actions? It could be misogyny—the perception that females are degraded and polluting—that pushes some men to create loving relationships with other males. It could be masculine asceticism—the perception that women symbolize worldly attachment and ambition—that causes some men to debase relationships with wives or women and to seek edifying relationships only with other males. It might also be Aesthetic perception which epitomizes masculine beauty and physique. Such acts lead some men to devalue women and raise other males as the objects of passionate love in patriarchal social set-up either neglecting women or giving value to self.

In case of Delhi about discussing homosexuality, the attitudes of Chishti Sufi masters towards were subtle and complex. They provide a useful model for modern Muslims who tend to approach the subject bluntly and brutally both. In the fourteenth-century record of Nizam-ud-Din Auliya's conversations and discourses on these issues, we find that the subject came up occasionally. He did not shy away from addressing it and one of his oldest disciples and later successor in the Deccan, Burhan-ud-Din Gharib (1344 at Daulatabad), was an avid conversation partner on this topic. Their basic position of related to sexual acts were not only sinful but also sinful attitudes, like possessiveness, craving, lust, selfishness and domination of the other person without her consent.

To some extent of understanding, sexuality was an obstacle toward spiritual growth, progress and refinement. It may not be considered as an obstacle of the physical acts involved but because of the psychic attitudes behind them. Nizam-ud-Din Auliya and Burhan-ud-Din Gharib both renounced sexual acts and took upon themselves chastity as a spiritual practice, but they did not make a condition for all as a required one for others in their order. Of course, one could rise to high levels in the Chishti order without renouncing sexual acts or marriage through the practices of Sufism. But the example of Nizam-ud-Din Auliya certainly did mean that Chishti Sufis had an alternative discourse on what constituted 'masculinity'. Nizam al-Din brought up the danger of criticizing others' negative personality traits, with reference to 'Ayn al-Quzat's writings in the following quotes such as:

[Khwaja Nizam-ud-Din] told us that 'Ayn al-Quzat had written that his father was a qazi [judge], accepted bribes and lived on forbidden earnings. He had written a number of things like that. I [Amir Hasan] submitted as to what was his purpose in giving such details about his father. The Khwaja said that he had also written that his father was an inspired person. Once in a gathering of sama' where darwishes and their friends had assembled, 'Ayn al-Quzat's father, who was also there, claimed that he had seen Shaykh Ahmad Ghazali (God's mercy be upon him) in the assembly. People could not believe him as the place where he lived was at a great distance from the place of the sama'. But on investigation his statement turned out to be correct. The purpose of 'Ayn al-Quzat narrating the anecdote was, according to the Khwaja, to let it be known that divine blessings were not contingent upon prayers, litanies and good deeds. Whomever God willed to favour, he could be inspired and perform miraculous deeds. (487-523)

This story discloses about how Nizam-ud-Din Auliya taught that even a flawed person could become the channel through which God's mercy flowed. The judge ('Ayn al-Quzat's father) may have been caught up in worldly affairs like misleading people for personal benefits and earning a big amount from bribe and other sources. But to criticize him is to assert that 'I am better than him' which is Satan's pronouncement against Adam's creation which led to his expulsion and Adam's fall from grace (from Paradise Lost).

Rather, Nizam-ud-Din pointed out that, despite these flaws the judge could still be the conduit for miracles, such as his experience of seeing Ahmad Ghazali participate in a sama' gathering which he could not attend. Withhold judgement, teaches Nizam-ud-Din, rein in your own ego also acknowledge your own faults rather than seeking faults in others. This is the moral and spiritual framework through which he will address questions of homosexuality and propriety along with Sufism, which were raised in his company upon the mention of Ahmad Ghazali. Again, from *Morals for the Heart* these lines refer to the core meaning of the homosexuality in Sufism:

This was followed by the Khwaja's remark that Shaykh Ahmad [Ghazali] was arraigned (for his liking for young boys); and this was why 'Ayn al-Quzat's parents had kept him hidden [when Shaykh Ahmad once came to his house asking to see the boy, and the parents insisted that he had died, which the Shaykh protested was untrue]. Maulana Burhan-ud-Din Gharib who was present, submitted that Shaykh Ahmad was known as one affected (with an unnatural propensity). (195)

Typical through his teachings restrain, Nizam-ud-Din Auliya refrained from giving an admonition. His intention was to distract his listeners from their egoistic preoccupations and prejudices and to draw them into the story. Through analysing the story, his devotees can interact with the moral question and queries in a fresh and refined way and realize its relevance for them at a deeper level. In the narratives of Shaykh Ahmad Ghazali, Nizam-ud-Din tells Ghazali's playing of disjunction between the observed and the being observed into the inner intension/soul. He was perceived keeping the company of the young boys also admiring their beauty and cherishing their company. This was a doubtful and suspicious about his engagement with youngsters and engaging in sexual acts full of lust and passion. But later on, it was revealed that all these perceptions about him were based on false facts while his connection with the inner spiritual self and purity to the actions and norms. Nizam-ud-Din Auliya concluded through his teachings that, 'The powerful spirituality as possessed by Shaykh Ahmad was not a common thing and could be the characteristic of only a pious man of perfect abstinence'.

Nizam-ud-Din Auliya drew this story from the varieties of anecdotes about Ahmad Ghazali and his practices of playing as the witness. In the present era, we can address this very term as a 'homoerotic devotional practice' and in the perception of the ideology sensual and aesthetic pleasures of human's physical beauty is short-timed and short-lived also transmuted into the spirituality of contemplating God's presence in as well as through created things. No wonder, spiritual insights can also be perceived in the erotic and attractive faces as well as physique.

Nasrollah Pourjavady who was the scholar of Persian literature has analysed these narratives about Ahmad Ghazali in his texts. He has given so many excerpts about Ahmaz Ghazali's gaze in contemplation on spiritual insights. The story of the Turkish Atabeg is no wonder similar to that of as narrated as Fawa'id-ul-fu'ad about suspicious father spying on Ahmad Ghazali. From the sources like folk tales and oral narratives, we can prove the two versions of the same story. The structure of the narrative and moral both underlie the same as the earlier one. Nizam-ud-Din Auliya's intension was to teach and preach morals and not to convey only textual or written details of the devotional works. Shams-i Tabrizi was active to mention that the gazing of Ahmad Ghazali upon the beautiful physique was not lustful. He says that, 'If you opened up his heart you could not find any trace of lust inside him.' This special kind of gazing the early Sufis called *nazar-i 'ibrat*, or 'a gaze of transcendental contemplation' as did Ahmad Ghazali himself.

We can conclude from the discussion of sexuality in the conversations of early Chishti masters of Sufism? The teachings of Nizam-ud-Din Auliya are subtle: he perceived sexuality as intimately related to spiritual conscience, for both flow from the wellsprings of human life and are expressions of its power. His concern was to direct this power from crude physical dimensions, away from socially ventureous dimensions and toward spiritually refined dimensions. When issues of sexuality arose in his conversations and discussions, Nizam-ud-Din Auliya did not denounce sexual activity in legalistic ways but galvanized considering what attitudes gave rise to it and how it affected human relationships. He resisted the longing, so common in his patriarchal society, to use the sexuality of others as an opportunity to reprobate them. Rather, he taught that one should always refrain one's egoistic urge to criticize others and see negative qualities in them, especially with issues as unintentional as sex.

Nizam-ud-Din Auliya never justified that homosexuality is legal or illegal for that is not his concern. His concern is spiritual consciousness and awakening and he leaves it to judges and politicians to argue about legal rules. He was neither in favour nor against whether homosexuality is natural or unnatural. These are the issues raised by the translator of his discourses, though we can infer from Nizam-ud-Din's language that he perceived nothing unnatural about erotic attraction between men. As we can see through the readings that as it was a common theme in the stories and poetry of many esteemed Muslim literati, scholars and Sufis. Nizam-ud-Din's concern was not homosexual orientation which he viewed with no more alarm than he viewed heterosexual orientation. His concern was of about any kind sexual activity, which he saw as leading force to obsessive attachment to worldly ambitions and sensual pleasures as being a social creature entangled in worldly affairs. His personal example is that sexual desire should be refined—not denied through bodily austerities but redirected toward spiritual gain and disciplines as for it the connection of soul to eternally power.

The text here, is translated and it is a rare manuscript which gives a glimpse into the debate as stirred and examined by homoerotic contemplation. No issue, the unique copy of this manuscript is fragile and unsafe which were eaten by insects and later on repaired in ways that obscure the writings. Proving the quote as above mentioned these lines refer in the following ways:

This sinful man, Shaykh Muhammad ibn Fazlullah, who is in dire need of the intercession of the Prophet Muhammad—may peace and blessings be upon him—says the following. This is just a short discourse I composed merely by the grace of God. I dedicate any spiritual reward that might accrue to me because of it to the spirit of the Prophet—may peace and blessings be upon him. I have entitled it 'Warning to Spiritual Seekers against Gazing at Young Men as a Way to Reach God' for some pretenders have claimed that the surest way to reach intimate union with God is to gaze lovingly upon young men. I ask God to increase any merit for this to the account of the Prophet—may peace and blessings be upon him—for indeed God is capable of all things and is quick to answer all requests. (Manuscript)

Let us stay for a while in presenting the body of this text. The author, Muhammad ibn Fazlullah, has considered arguments which were related to his personal spiritual experience and might also be on rational logic. He turned to formal teachings as found in Persian and Arabic books much esteemed by Sufis in South Asia, and quoted their authors explaining the harms and evils of gazing at young men. He quotes Ibn 'Arabi, 'As for him who witnesses phenomenal things, that is among the worst humiliations and the most intense kinds of corruption'.³⁰ He also quotes al-Qushayri, 'Among the hardest afflictions in this path is keeping company with young men. All the Sufi masters agree that if God has tried anyone with this in some form, then he has been brought low by God and has been disgraced, or rather that God has distracted him with his own self'.³¹ He also extracts such warnings from the writings of Abu Hamid al-Ghazali and also from 'Ayn al-'Ilm, the South Asian abridgment of al-Ghazali's masterwork on Sufism, *Ihya*, 'Ulum al-Din.

Muhammad ibn Fazlullah also cites South Asia's authorities which were very close to it. He quotes the classic handbook on Sufi ethics, 'Awarif al-Ma'arif' by Shihab-ud-Din 'Umar Suhrawardi (d. 1234 in Baghdad) which was used by Chishti Sufis as a training book guide. Then he quotes Chishti authors like Muhammad Husayni Gisudaraz (d. 1422 at Gulbarga), the Sufi Deccan scholar who points out that there is no proof and facts of the earliest generations of Muslims engaging in this practice of Sufism and claims that witnessing the presence of God in a phenomenon is shirk or associating something or someone with God.³² The author also quotes Mas'ud Bakk (d. c. 1380 at Delhi), an ecstatic Chishti author through whom Shah Bajan and many Chishtis of Burhanpur traced their spiritual lineage.³³ To close 48 Scott Kugle this list of quotes, he recites a couplet by 'Abd al-Rahman Jami (d. c. 1492 at Herat) whose Persian love poems were a favourite in Chishti sessions of sama': 'From every side, the absolute beauty of the divine is beaming // Oh fool, to catch a human beauty why're you scheming?'³⁴

After mobilizing these quotations from the holy books of Sufi learning, Muhammad ibn Fazlullah addresses the rudimentary point about elucidating them. His text continues in these lines:

All of this is related in traditional learning and Sufi books. Now one might make objections that some Sufis teach that 'The metaphorical is a bridge to the real (al-majaz qantara li'l-haqqa)', and that contradicts what you have related above. I would answer this saying, 'I accept that it might be that some scholars say this proverb. If they say it, it might be that they might have meant looking with love at young men, and if it were love pure of outward lust and free of hidden desire, then this might be beneficial to the one looking. [...] but it separates his heart from [...] upon his spiritual guide. If it makes his heart separate from his spiritual guide [...] in this one single place, then it distracts him with God such that it lets him achieve connection with God, then it is true that the metaphorical is a bridge to the real, in this context alone. This does not in fact contradict what I have related above. Since the metaphorical love is devoid of any damage from lustful desire [...] benefit, if it was before he set foot on this Sufi path of spiritual training. But after entering this path of God, it has no benefit at all. Rather, it harms him with terrible damage, such that he will never reach the desired goal except by one of two means. Either God will shelter him in divine mercy, or God will take him out of it and make him repent to the divine essence. (99-113)

Examining some other biographies for example, Shattari Sufis of this era helps in clarifying the doubt on the practices of male gaze to the same sex or physical beauty in patriarchal society. Very lesser idea about Shaykh Makhu (d. 1601-2 ah in Burhanpur) was slightly older than 'Issa Jundullah. He belonged to Gujarat and took inspiration of teachings from Muhammad Ghaus (d. 1563 in Gwalior), more akin to his father and uncle of 'Issa Jundullah did; and like 'Issa Jundullah. Of course, he was an ardent in his practice of musical meditation ('sama'). Shaykh Makhu sponsored so many qawwali sessions that he earned the title Daya-yi Darweshan or 'Wet-nurse of the Renunciants'. He used to 'nourish' the Sufis with music (known in Chishti and Shattari circles as 'food for the soul' or ghaza-yi ruh) enriched by his own spiritual state, just as a wet-nurse breastfeeds newly born infants.

This title points out some gender ambiguity in the personality of Shaykh Makhu. Being married throughout his life, as were not acceptable on social conditions, even not so unusual for Sufi masters. However, Shaykh Makhu a bachelor one, fell in love with a man. Here, the concept of physical attraction is meant to disclose the meaning the the concerned topic if the research. For the confirmation, here, these lines can suit to the purpose as:

At age 40, he was seduced by a handsome man named Hansu and fell in love. But this man, because of the blessing of the attention of the Shaykh and his spiritual striving, was transformed from within. He joined the group of Sufis and began to serve his lover with heart and soul. Eventually, because of the Shaykh's guidance and advice, this beloved chose the path of spiritual purity. (Oral Teachings, 86)

In this narrative, the gender of the beloved is not ambiguous but a Hindu. The narrative suggests that he joined the circle of Shattari Sufis (who were apparently open to engagement by Hindus. He used Hindi poetry openly and made insinuations to Hindu mythology without hesitation).⁴¹ Then later, he converted to Muslim after spending time in this community and enjoying a love relationship with Shaykh Makhu. The narrative sustains anxiety about the beloved being Hindu but displays no tension about his being male.

To conclude this, it becomes very clear that this text of Muhammad ibn Fazlullah is exceptional rather than typical. It speaks skepticism about homoerotic contemplation that was a common practice in the patriarchal society. It is uncommon for a Chishti Sufi to write down such a critique in philosophical terms as it is compared to the spirituality. Muhammad ibn Fazlullah was apparently provoked by the rise of the Shattari Sufis in Burhanpur who contended with the Chishtis with much success and progress. The fact that Muhammad ibn Fazlullah wrote a text called *Mi'raj-Nama*, an account of the Prophet Muhammad's ascension into heaven, suggests that he felt threatened by the Shattari followers of Muhammad Ghaus Gwaliori. Later on, he claimed to have experienced a similar ascension and wrote a popular account of it which energized the rapid popularity of his order. Muhammad ibn Fazlullah's contemporary, 'Ali Muttaqi (who was also his teacher in hadis studies in Mecca), took Muhammad Ghaus to task for this, writing tracts against him and sparking a persecution campaign. Muhammad ibn Fazlullah might have gotten caught up in this controversy if he, too, began to write hadis-based accounts of the mi'raj in order to counter Shattari claims.⁴⁴

References

- Ali, Kecia. *Sexual Ethics and Islam: Feminist Reflections on Qur'an, Hadith and Jurisprudence*. Oneworld Publications, 2006.
- Andrews, Walter and Mehmet Kalpakli. *The Age of Beloveds: Love and the Beloved in Early-Modern Ottoman and European Culture and Society*. Duke University Press, 2005.
- Bashir, Shahzad. *Sufi Bodies*. Columbia University Press, 2011.
- Bawa, Oudesh Rani and Scott Kugle. Forthcoming. 'Shah Bajan's Contribution to Sufism in the Deccan', in Proceedings from the National Seminar on Religion and Society in Peninsular India, Pondicherry University on 24-26 February. Pondicherry University Press, 2011.
- Faruqi, Munis D., 'The forgotten Prince: Mirza Hakim and the formation of the Mughal Empire in India' in Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient, Vol. 48, No. 4 (2005), pp. 487–523 [CrossRef](#) [Google scholar](#)
- Faruqi, Ziya-ul-Hasan (tr.). *Fawa'id al-Fu'ad: Spiritual and Literary Discourses*. New Delhi: D.K. Printworld, 1996.

Siddiqi, Muhammad Suleman. *The Junaydi Order in the Deccan*. Midpoint Trade Books, 2014.

Tourage, Mahdi. *Rumi and the Hermeneutics of Eroticism*. E.J. Brill, 2007.

Muhammad ibn Fazlullah Burhanpuri. *Tahzir al-Talibin ‘an Ru’iyat al-Amrad li’l-Wusul ila Allah*, manuscript edited by Raziuddin Aquil and David L. Curley, Routledge, 2016.

Manjhan, Shaykh. *Madhumalati: An Indian Sufi Romance*. Tr. Aditya Behl and Simon Weightman with Shyam Manohar Pandey. Oxford University Press, 2000.

Nizam ad-din Awliya: *Morals for the Heart*. Paulist Press International, 1991 Siddiqi, Muhammad Suleman. 2014. *The Junaydi Order in the Deccan*. Delhi: Midpoint Trade Books.

Siddiqi, Muhammad Suleman. *The Junaydi Order in the Deccan*. Midpoint Trade Books, 2014.

