

Sufi Literature: A Significant Source for Social History of Medieval India

Zafar Mohyuddin

Assistant Professor
Department of History & Pakistan Studies
University of Sargodha, Sargodha.

Sarfraz Hussain Ansari

Assistant Professor
Department of Government & Public Policy
National Defence University, Islamabad

Abstract

The primary sources on the history of medieval South Asia range from court chronicles to different genres of sufi literature. These works are mainly written in Persian language. To study medieval Indian history, researchers mostly rely on court chronicles which are mainly descriptive and focus on the ruling elite, military campaigns and state conduct. In recent scholarship however, reliance merely on these sources is criticized as these works lack the history of the common people and do not provide a complete picture of state and society in medieval India. While consulting primary sources on the history of medieval India, the focus is now shifting to study sufi texts other than court chronicles. Historians are now considering these texts as an alternative sources to study medieval Indian history. The sufi literature of medieval South Asia is comprised of various genres, which include malfuzat, tazkirahs, maktubat, diwan and sufi instructive literature. Details of extraordinary events in sufi texts are of a great historiographical significance. These sources are important to assess socio-cultural atmosphere of the period. Although sufi literature has historical significance, it also contains certain problems and issues. These issues range from the question of authenticity of these sufi texts to their focus and contents. As of court chronicles, sufi texts also need careful analysis, focusing their stylistic form, content and description. The present paper is an attempt to highlight the significance of sufi literature to study medieval South Asian history. While briefly discussing the various genres of this

literature, the present paper also looks into the various issues while studying these sources.

Keywords: Sufi Literature, Court Chronicles, South Asia, Alternative History, Historiographical Significance.

Introduction

The primary sources on the history of medieval South Asia range from court chronicles to different genres of sufi literature. These works are mainly written in Persian language. To study medieval Indian history, researchers mostly rely on court chronicles which are mainly descriptive and focus on the ruling elite, military campaigns and state conduct. Although some sources have sound analysis and comprehensive information, most of these are criticized on the grounds that their approach is not objective, and these works lack the history of the common people. Orientalists have mostly used selected sections of these works to study the history of medieval India.¹

While consulting primary sources on the history of medieval India, the focus is now shifting to study sufi texts other than court chronicles. Historians are now considering these sufi texts as an important source to study medieval Indian history. The sufi literature of medieval South Asia is comprised of various genres, which include *malfuzat*, *tazkirahs*, *maktubat*, *diwan* and sufi instructive literature. Details of extraordinary events in sufi texts are of a great historiographical significance. These sources are important to assess socio-cultural atmosphere of the period. The present paper is an attempt to highlight the significance of sufi literature to study medieval South Asian history. While briefly discussing the various genres of this literature, the present paper will also look into the various issues while studying these sources.

Malfuzat Literature

As already mentioned the sufi literature of medieval South Asia is comprised of various genres. An important genre of sufi literature in South Asia is *malfuzat* literature (conversations of sufi masters). There are many collections of this genre. To name some: *Fawaid al-Fuad*, the *malfuzat* of Hazrat Khwaja Nizam al-Din Awliya,² *Khulasat al-alfaz* Jami al-‘Ulum,³ *Siraj al-Hidaya*,⁴ *Manaqib al-Makhdum-i Jahaniyan*, *Khazana-i*

Jawahir-i Jalaliyya,⁵ and *Khazana-i Fawaid al-Jalaliyya*⁶ are *malfuzat* collections of Makhdum-i Jahaniyan.⁷

Malfuzat, literally meaning “the spoken words” were the contemporary records of the teachings and activities of a sufi shaykh. With the development of sufi traditions, the sufi master or shaykh became the central figure for the seekers to gain guidance and blessings. People were interested to know more about the life and teachings of the sufi shaykhs who served as a source of inspiration for them. As the sufi shrines provided physical connection with a deceased sufi shaykh, the sufi texts provided guidance for the followers.⁸ The Indian sufis of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries were involved directly or indirectly in the production of sufi literature. *Malfuzat* as the genre focuses on an individual sufi, and its compiler is usually a close disciple of the sufi shaykh. These *malfuzat* throw ample light on the sufi traditions in *khanqahs*. The style of *malfuzat* varied but generally these were compiled in a diary style or divided into chapters according to different topics. Steinfels is of the opinion that “In their preservation of a sufi master’s personality and instruction long after his death, the *malfuzat* can be compared with that other structure by which the power of saints is preserved after death: the tomb.”⁹ So the *malfuzat*, or the words of sufis were not mere texts but considered as a source of *barakah* for the followers of sufis.

In *malfuzat*, anecdotes are present in abundance which greatly attract the general reader’s attention. However, the acceptance of these anecdotes as a historical fact is somewhat problematic. These anecdotes need more critical examination due to the presence of mythical elements as well as the issue of accuracy of the time and space of the events.¹⁰ One must not forget that the intent of citing the anecdotes was moralization, and not preservation of historical data. Although sufi instructive texts are translated in to the English language and used by the Western scholarship in study of Sufism, *malfuzat* have not received that much attention. Lawrence is of the opinion that extensive study of this kind of literature is needed to properly evaluate the life of Indian sufis and their contribution to Sufism.¹¹

As mentioned earlier, the *malfuz* literature is an important source for reconstructing the history of medieval India. These *malfuzat*

throw light on social, cultural and religious life of the period. Through it one can have glimpse of the medieval society and assess the issues, beliefs and traditions of the common people.¹²

Tadhkirah Literature

One of the most popular and widespread genres of sufi literature in India is *tadhkirah* (hagiographical literature). *Tadhkirahs* are the biographical accounts of the sufis of one or more than one *silsilahs*. Early *tadhkirahs* include Amir Khurd's *Siyar al-Awliya*,¹³ Hamid ibn Fazl-Allah Jamali's *Siyar al-Arifin*¹⁴ and Shaykh Abd al-Haqq's *Akhbar al-Akhyar*.¹⁵

Tadhkirah literature developed relatively in later period. *Tadhkirahs* basically studied the life of the personalities, who had already gained a status of eminent sufi.¹⁶ These are mostly in Persian and it is argued that "more Persian sufi hagiographical literature was produced in India than in all of Persia and Central Asia combined."¹⁷

Tadhkirah literature is criticized that it was produced by the writers who had an affiliation with certain sufi *silsilah* and included exaggerated accounts of the sufis. Ernst and Lawrence opine that "the spell of hagiography, with its powerful evocation of the virtuous and ideal life, is so strong that few writers have been able to escape its influence altogether."¹⁸ However, not all the hagiographical literature can be placed in the category of merely exaggerated accounts of the pious individuals. On the contrary, many authors of the hagiographical literature were well versed in methodological rules and they took care of the accuracy of the facts in their works. For example Shaykh Abd al-Haqq, the author of the famous hagiographical work *Akhbar al-Akhyar* wrote many books on *hadith* and *fiqh*, used to have in depth study of the sources and checked their authenticity.¹⁹

It is argued that the devotion to an individual and connecting him with specific place was the major feature of medieval Indian Sufism. *Tadhkirah* was the genre in which an individual sufi Shaykh's authority was glorified through connecting him with spiritual lineage and sacred geography. By carving sacred Muslim spaces in Islamicate South Asia, *tadhkirah* literature not only connected it to Islamicate world but also claimed the Muslim space in South Asia.²⁰ Hermansen and Lawrence are of the opinion that *tadhkirah* literature "gives an extended case illustration of one of the most powerful processes of cultural

production at any point in the history of Islamate South Asia.”²¹ Another opinion about *tadkirah* literature is that “despite their structural and temporal limits, they offer the best evidence that we are able to glean on how saints and descendants perceived their role as agents of Islamic religious culture from the 13th to the 19th centuries.”²² Jurgen Paul is of the opinion that hagiographical literature is an important source in historical research. It contributes in a variety of ways from the tracing of history of Sufism, biographies of important individuals and most importantly the religious and social history of the period.²³ *Tadhkirah* literature contributed in the biographical genre of medieval Indian historiography. Almost all *tadkirahs* noted down the death dates and burial places of the sufis which are otherwise missing in other sources.²⁴

Tadhkirah literature is based on the memory of the past and through remembering the legacy and contribution of major figures of Muslim social and religious elite. Although certain *tadhkirahs* have the element of legends in it, however these are important source of the information about the life and teachings of sufis, as well as popular perception about them. The anecdotes of *malfuzat* as well as oral traditions are part of these hagiographical works. This hagiographical literature has contributed in creating the sacred geography of certain cities or regions by venerating its sufis. It is argued that “while *malfuzat* texts display a single individual during a limited period of his life, *tadhkirahs* reveal a network of connections between holy figures, stretching back through time and ranging over space, but always leading towards the particular place and *silsilah* of interest to the author.”²⁵

The most important pieces of information provided by these *tadhkirahs* which are not available in the *malfuzat* are the death dates of these sufis, the network of their discipleship and the spread and influence of the particular *silsilahs*. Most of the *tadhkirah* writers were affiliated with certain sufi *silsilahs* and they tried to project the sufis of their particular *silsilah*. The element of exaggeration is also present in this genre and it comes in manifold in later *tadkirahs*. For instance the exercise of miraculous abilities of the sufis against the rival religious and political authorities and the victories of the sufis over them is a

common theme of the later *tadhkirahs*.²⁶ However, in spite of all these shortcomings, hagiographical literature serves as an important source of medieval Indian history.

Maktubat, Diwan and Instructive Literature

There are also collections of letters (*maktubat*) and poetry (*diwan*) of sufi masters which throw ample light on the social conditions and various issues of the time. *Maktubat* are important sources to comprehend the esoteric teachings of sufis. The important *maktubat* include *Muqarrarnamh*,²⁷ *Maktubat-i do Sadi*²⁸ and *Maktubat-i Imam-i Rabbanai*.

Sufis also wrote poetry on different social, cultural and spiritual subjects. Poetry of Baba Farid, Shah Hussain, Baba Bulleh Shah, Shah Abdul Latif Bhitai, Rehman Baba, Mast Tawakli and Khawja Ghulam Farid is best example in case. The study of sufi poetry provides a deep insight to diverse social issues of the period.

Another genre of Sufi literature which contributed in the understanding of different debates as well the path of sufi tradition is sufi instructive literature. The first major sufi instructive text written in Persian was *Kashf al-Mahjub* by Shaykh ‘Ali ibn ‘Uthman al-Hujwiri during the eleventh century in Lahore.²⁹ *Tasayar al-Shaghilin* by Shaykh Musa Pak and *Sirrul-Habib* by Shah Habib Qadiri are other examples of sufi instructive literature in South Asia.

The Study of Sufi Literature: Significance and Issues

Although sufi literature has historical significance, it contains certain problems and issues as well. These problems range from the question of authenticity of these sufi texts to their focus and contents. It is argued that “as the Persian court chronicles are Sultan centric, these sufi texts are also *Shaykh* centric and narratives revolve around one individual.”³⁰ It is argued that as these works were authored by the people who themselves were either sufis or disciples of sufis, they could not take objective assessment of the issues of their contemporary times.

However, Shahzad Bashir in his work, *Sufi Bodies: Religion and Society in Medieval Islam* is of the opinion that details of extraordinary events in religious texts are of a great historiographical value. According to him, these historical writings, have been judged by using strict historiographical standards and, as a result, received criticism. But these sources

are important to assess socio-cultural atmosphere of the period. Bashir is of the opinion that “making the best use of materials of this nature requires that we analyse them carefully in multiple dimensions including inter-textual, intra-textual and socio-historical examination.”³¹

Nile Green is of the opinion that although sufi texts offer a clear picture of sufi life and give useful accounts of their activities but when examined in contexts or ‘territories’ in which these works became popular, the matter becomes complex. In such texts, sufis are generally presented simply as sufis. However, in reality they have played all kinds of other roles, pertaining to the social life of the people at large.³² In recent studies, the focus is shifting to more personal types of sufi writings like *maktubat* (collection of letters) which are an important source to look into their lives.³³ Certain issues in different genres of sufi literature have also impelled historians towards epigraphic and numismatic sources. Other aspects of sufi life in medieval India are also being traced through the study of material remains and architectural legacy of the sufi centers.³⁴

On the other hand, sufi texts, particularly *malfuzat* and *tadhkirahs*, are being analysed carefully focusing their stylistic form, content and narration to enhance the status of the sufi shaykhs.³⁵ As some writings are often an act of concealing as are of disclosure. Nile Green is of the opinion that recent studies on sufi traditions of South Asia are carefully selecting the textual genre and still reading these texts with great care which is a welcome addition in the sufi studies.³⁶ Scholars like Riazul Islam have also shifted their focus from the biographical studies of the sufis to discover the impact of sufi traditions on South Asian society during the fourteenth century.

Conclusion

To sum up, there is an emerging consensus that sufi texts have a historical significance, however; these sources must be analysed while looking into their contents, forms and roots. These sources must be analyzed while looking into their production, circulation and utilization. Their historiographical potential can be unearthed by pondering over the rhetorical purposes, uses and intended audience of these texts. The careful study of sufi texts can provide an important window to study the medieval Indian

Zafar Mohyuddin & Sarfraz Hussain Ansari

state and society. So, the sufi texts have a great historiographical potential to revisit the medieval Indian history.

References

- ¹ For example Elliot and Dowson's translations of selected sections of medieval Indian sources present a distorted picture of medieval Indian history. For details see: H. M. Elliot and J. Dowson ed., *The History of India as told by its Own Historians (The Muhammadan Period)*, vol. II (Lahore: Islamic Book Service, 1976 rpt., first published 1869).
- ² For details see: Amir Hasan Ala Sijzi, *Fawaid al-Fuad: Malfuzat Hazrat Khwaja Nizam al-Din*. Urdu trans. Khawja Hassan Nizami (Lahore: Al-Faisal, 2011).
- ³ See: Saiyyid Ala al-Din, *Khulasat al-alfaz-i Jami 'al-'Ulum*. ed. Ghulam Sarwar. (Islamabad: Markaz-iTahqiqat-i Farsi Iran-o-Pakistan, 1412/1992).
- ⁴ See: Ahmed Barani, *Siraj al-Hidayah (Malfuzat of Saiyyid Jalal al-Din Bukhari Makhdum-i Jahaniyan)*.ed. Qazi Sajjad Hussain (Delhi: Indian Council of Historical Research, 1983).
- ⁵ See: Fazal-Allah bin Ziya Al-Abbasi, *Khazana-i' Jawahir-i Jalaliyya. (Jawahir-i Jalali)*. Malfuzat Hazrat Makhdum-i Jahaniyan Jahangasht). MS. Kutabhana Ganj Bakhsh Markaz-i Tahqiqat-i Farsi-yi Iran o Pakistan, Islamabad. No. 2463.
- ⁶ For details see Ahmad Baha al-Din Bhatti, *Khazana-i' Fawa'id al-Jalaliyya (Khazana-i Jalali)*. *Malfuzat Hazrat Makhdum-i Jahaniyan Jahangasht*. MS. (Ibn-i Karam Library, Mangani Sharif).
- ⁷ Bruce B. Lawrence, *An Overview of Sufi Literature in the Sultanate Period, 1206-1526 A. D.* (New Delhi: V.S. Johri, 1992), 46.
- ⁸ Amina Steinfels, "His Master's Voice: The Genre of *Malfuzat* in South Asian Sufism", *History of Religions* (Chicago) vol. 44, no.1 (August, 2004): 56-57.
- ⁹ Steinfels, "His Master's Voice", 69.
- ¹⁰ Riazul Islam, *Sufism in South Asia: Impact on Fourteenth Century Muslim Society* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2002),18-19.
- ¹¹ Lawrence, *An Overview of Sufi Literature in the Sultanate Period*, 62.
- ¹² Tanvir Anjum, *Chishti Sufis in the Sultanate of Delhi, 1190-1400: From Restrained Indifference to Calculated Defiance* (Karachi: Oxford University Press, 2011), 25. See also Steinfels, "His Master's Voice," 59.
- ¹³ For details see: Saiyyid Muhammad Mubarak Alvi Kirmani Amir Khurd, *Siyar al-Awliya dar ahwal va malfuzat-i mashayikh-i-Chisht* ed.Chiranji Lal (Delhi: Mohibb-i Hind Press, 1884).
- ¹⁴ The author of *Siyar al-Arifin*, Shaykh Hamid bin Fadl Allah Jamali was a hagiographer and a poet. He traced his spiritual lineage from Saiyyid Jalal al-Din Makhdum-i Jahaniyan through Shaykh Sama al-Din. He was a widely travelled person and developed association with the leading scholars and sufis of the time. *Siyar al-Arifin* is one of the earliest *tadhkirahs* on Indian sufis in which he included the biographies of major Chishti and Suhrawardi sufis. He has given detailed accounts of thirteen major Chishti and Suhrawardi sufis. For details see: Hamid ibn Fadl

-
- Allah Jamali, *Siyar al-Arifin*, 2nd ed. Urdu trans. Muhammad Ayub Qadiri (Lahore: Urdu Science Board, 1989).
- ¹⁵ *Akhbar al-Akhyar* is written by Shaykh Abd al-Haqq Muhaddith Dihlawi. He has given short biographies of over two hundred and sixty sufis from different *silsilahs*. The sufis of Chishti, Suhrawardi, Firdawsi, Shattari, Qalandari and most importantly Qadiri *silsilahs* are included. One of the important aspects of this hagiographical account is the entries of fourteen pious women. Shaykh Abd al-Haqq has given a very lengthy biography of Shaykh Abd al-Qadir Jilani as a preface of the work. Shaykh Abd al-Haqq himself as a scholar of *hadith* tried to follow the methodological principles and avoided exaggerations. For details see: Abd al-Haqq Muhaddith Dehlavi, *Akhbar al-Akhyar fi Asrar al-Abrar*. ed. Aleem Ashraf Khan. (Tehran: Anjuman-i Asarwa Mafakhir-i Farhangi, 1383 AH).
- ¹⁶ Steinfels, "His Master's Voice," 57.
- ¹⁷ Carl W. Ernst, and Bruce B. Lawrence, *Sufi Martyrs of Love: Chishti Sufism in South Asia and Beyond* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002), 48.
- ¹⁸ Ernst, and Lawrence, *Sufi Martyrs of Love*, 48.
- ¹⁹ Nizami, *Hayat Shaykh Abd al-Haq*, 293.
- ²⁰ David Gilmartin and Bruce B. Lawrence eds. (In Introduction) *Beyond Turk and Hindu: Rethinking Religious Identities in Islamicate South Asia* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 2000), 11.
- ²¹ Hermansen and Lawrence, "Indo-Persian Tazkiras as Memorative Communications" in Gilmartin and Lawrence eds. *Beyond Turk and Hindu*, 160.
- ²² Lawrence, "Biography and the 17th century Qadiriya" in Dallapicolla, Zingle and Lallemand. *Islam and Indian Regions*. Vol.I. (Stuttgart: Franz Steiner Verlag, 1993), 400.
- ²³ Jurgen Paul, "Constructing the Friends of God. Sadid al-Din Gaznawi's Maqamat-i Zinda-pir (with some remarks on Ibn Munawwar's Asrar al-tawhid)" in Connermann, Stephen and Jim Rheingans eds. *Narrative Pattern and Genre in Hagiographic Life Writing: Comparative Perspective from Asia to Europe*. Vol. VII. (Berlin: EB-Verlag, 2014), 205.
- ²⁴ Hermansen and Lawrence, "Indo-Persian Tazkiras as Memorative Communications" in Gilmartin and Lawrence eds. *Beyond Turk and Hindu*, 168.
- ²⁵ Steinfels, *Knowledge before Action*, 173.
- ²⁶ Mostly these *tadhkirahs* are produced during the twentieth century. These repeat the contents of earlier *tadhkirahs*, but also add certain exaggerated accounts of their own.
- ²⁷ See: Saiyyid Jalal al-Din Bukhari Makhdam-i Jahaniyan, *Muqarrar-nama*. (*Maktubaat Saiyyid Makhdam-i Jahaniyan*). MS. Hyderabad State Library, No. 7821.
- ²⁸ See: Ahmad Yahya Muneyari, *Maktobat-i Do Sadi*. Urdu Trans. Syed Shah Qaseem al-Din. (Lahore: Seerat Foundation, 2003).

- ²⁹ See: Ali ibnUthman Al-Hujwiri, *The Kashf al-Mahjub*. Eng trans. R.A. Nicholoso. (London: Luzac& Co,1911).
- ³⁰ Lawrence, *An Overview of Sufi Literature in the Sultanate Period*, 27.
- ³¹ Shahzad Bashir, *Sufi Bodies: Religion and Society in Medieval Islam* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2011), 3-4.
- ³² Green, “Emerging Approaches to the Sufi Traditions of South Asia”, 137.
- ³³ Green, “Emerging Approaches to the Sufi Traditions of South Asia”, 137.
- ³⁴ Ahmed Nabi Khan, Hussain Ahmad Khan, Hassan Ali Khan and Manan Ahmed Asif have recently explored the history of the different sufi centers through studying architecture and the material remains. See. Khan, *Uchchh: History and Architecture*, Hussain Ahmad Khan, *Artisans, Sufis, Shrines: Colonial Architecture in Nineteenth Century Punjab*. (London: I.B. Tauris, 2015), Khan, *Constructing Islam on the Indus*, and Asif, *A Book of Conquest*.
- ³⁵ Kumar, *The Emergence of the Delhi Sultanate*, 28.
- ³⁶ Green, “Emerging Approaches to the Sufi Traditions of South Asia”, 140-41.