

# THE CHISHTIS

Sufi Masters of India



Muneera Haeri



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*To Sayyid Ikram Husayn Shah Saikir and Shaykh Fadhlalla Haeri, heirs of the great Chishti Masters, without whose inspiration and guidance this book would never have been written.*

*Elahi Ta Buwad Khurshid o Mahi*

*Chiragh-e-Chishtian Ra Roshnai*

Oh Allah till the time there is sun spreading light in the sky,  
Keep the lights spreading from the lamps of the Chishtis.

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## About the Book

The Chishtis are one of the most beloved and enduring of the Sufi Orders, which emerged in the Indian Subcontinent in medieval times. The widespread acceptance of the teachings of Islam in the region was largely due to brotherhoods, such as the Chishtis, rather than through military conquest. The Sufis lived the message of original Islam and by the example of their lives attracted many to their way of being.

The founder of the order in the Indian Subcontinent was Shaykh Mu`in ad-Din Chishti of Ajmer, commonly known as *Gharib Nawaz* (Helper of the Poor), whose shrine continues to this day to be a popular place of pilgrimage for Muslim and Hindu alike. Muneera Haeri narrates the lives and teachings of Shaykh Mu`in ad-Din Chishti and five of his key successors, Shaykh Qutb ad-Din Bakhtiyar Kaki, Shaykh Hamid ad-Din Sufi Nagauri, Shaykh Farid ad-Din Mas`ud Ganj-i-Shakar, Shaykh Nizam ad-Din Awliya and Shaykh Nasir ad-Din Mahmud Chiragh-i-Delhi. All Masters from what is fondly remembered as the Golden Age of the Chishtis.

The book places the teachings of the Chishtiya in its historical perspective, but also emphasises their timeless message of love, compassion and tolerance for all. Their Masters often had dialogues with Hindu and Buddhist men of knowledge. They emphasised the importance of service and charitable acts as a means for self-purification. They fed Muslim and non-Muslim alike. Living as ascetics, they avoided contact with the sultans and their courts. Above all their *qawwalis*, or spiritual songs, attracted people to Islam.

The story of Amir Khusrau, the father of *qawwali* and his devotion to Shaykh Nizam ad-Din Awliya is one of the many examples given of the impact the Chishti teachings had on celebrated historical personages. Through extracts from contemporary writings, the reader is transported to the gatherings of these medieval Masters and can imbibe the message of eternal Truth, through teachings that are as real and pertinent today as they were to the people of those times.

*‘The Chishtiya have at last found an articulate voice in English through the personal commitment and literary skill of Muneera Haeri.’*

Bruce B. Lawrence, Professor Emeritus, Duke University.

## About Muneera Haeri

MUNEERA HAERI is of Scottish origin. Born in Malaysia, educated in the U.K., she converted to Islam at the age of twenty-five. Muneera is married to Shaykh Fadhlalla Haeri, a teaching Sufi Shaykh.

Muneera's family has had a long connection with India, spanning two hundred years. She has visited India and Pakistan extensively, and has a great love of both countries, their peoples and history. This is her first book.

Her second book '*Sufi Encounters*', which she co-authored with Shaykh Fadhlalla Haeri, was published by Watkins in 2018.

## **List of Illustrations**

1. Devotees who seek peace and spiritual rejuvenation attend the shrine of Soofie Saheb in Durban, South Africa.
2. The shrine of Shaykh Nizam-ad-Din Awliya in Delhi reverberates with life, and is visited by people of diverse faiths and socio-economic groups.
3. The shrine of Shaykh Mu`in-ad-Din Chishti, better known as Gharib Nawaz, in Ajmer.
4. The Buland Darwaza, one of the doorways admitting supplicants to the shrine of Gharib Nawaz in Ajmer.
5. A bird's eye view of the shrine of Gharib Nawaz in Ajmer, and the areas surrounding it.



## Foreword

I first met Shaykh Fadhlalla Haeri in Karachi. On the occasion we spoke about many types of *Tasawwuf* (Sufism). He then returned to London and I returned to Hyderabad.

The next time Shaykh Fadhlalla came to Pakistan, he took me to Pakpattan. Shaykh Fadhlalla was accompanied by some of his pupils and his respected wife, Muneera Khanum. Once, during the course of one of our conversations, I asked her to write a book on the Masters of the Chishti *Silsilah*. Being a Westerner herself, she is well placed to put it across in such a way that would appeal to the West. Muneera Khanum was filled with a great desire to write this book. After leaving Pakpattan she began the work and this book came into existence as a result of several years of effort.

I congratulate Muneera Khanum on this book and have advised her to write more about the Shaykhs of other *Silsilahs*, and spread the teachings of these Masters. I visualize in the coming century the Sufi orders, especially the Chishtis, will be popular and greatly loved; for the teachings of *tasawwuf* have enduring relevance.

Many Sufi Shaykhs have worked in the subcontinent for the spread of the *Deen* (lit. life transaction – usually translated as religion, which does not transmit the full significance of the term.) The greatest of these is Khwaja Mu'in ad-Din Chishti. His name is the most superior in the history of *tasawwuf* in the subcontinent. After the death of Khwaja Mu'in ad-Din Chishti his *khalifahs* (deputies, appointed by the Shaykh) spread the teachings of the Chishti *Silsilah* with great effectiveness and brought countless people to the light of Islam. They were the soldiers of Islam, possessing high spiritual stations, and they are the true representatives of the Muslims of this region.

I strongly hope that this book will remain a great introduction to innumerable people for a long time to come, and will prove a source of light in the West. May you, the reader, derive joy and blessings from this worthy task!

Sayyid Ikram Husayn Shah Saikir  
Karachi, May 1992

## **Preface – New Edition**

When I wrote the Preface to the first version of the printed book in 1992 the Muslim world was very different from what it is today, while Western interest in Islam was limited. The rise of Muslim extremism, the events of 9/11 with the USA subsequently declaring a war on terrorism, fighting in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Libya and the Yemen have brought about increased media coverage on Islam. The emergence of Muslim terrorist groups and random acts of violence globally have ensured the Muslim world has never been absent from the international headlines.

The West has an ever-increasing Muslim population, many of whom have been born in North America and Europe and integrated into those societies. The majority of them are appalled by terrorist activities, which do not equate with their own understanding of Islam. Equally, rational westerners have tried to comprehend what Islamic teachings are about. Both these groups have had to question the grounds on which the terrorists have justified their actions. This has led to a renewal of interest in Sufism, which is often referred to as the mystic, or the inner path, of Islam, and has always attracted non-Muslims, due to its emphasis on love, compassion and tolerance.

The Chishtis of all the Sufi brotherhoods have exemplified this message. It is not an accident that they flourished in the Indian Sub-Continent, as their co-existence and co-operation with the Hindus was their main strength.

It is essential for anyone who follows Islam to look at its early history. This new edition is, therefore, timely in that it presents through the teachings of the great medieval Masters the message of Original Islam. This message emphasised the importance of ethical conduct, accountability, tolerance, support of the weak and needy and, most importantly, to live always with a commitment to the Divine, the Absolute Sovereign and Governor of the Universe. One important divinely revealed tradition says: ‘Creation is the family of God, and God loves most whoever is most useful to His family.’

Yet, despite the purity of the original teachings, Muslim leaders have often failed their people, with the added complication in more recent times of Western hegemony over many of their countries. Sufism had arisen in part during the early years of Islam as an alternative to official Islam which was often used by despots to control the masses, rather than as a tool for inner transformation and quality living. Serious seekers recognised the spiritual shortcomings of

those in authority and turned instead to the Sufi teachers, as examples of men and women following the Muhammadi model.

Certain features about the Chishti order made it particularly attractive to all. The popularity of their shrines with the Hindus is a testament to their adaption to the environment and the culture of the people around them. The Chishti teachings encouraged their followers to move from lower and conditioned consciousness to the higher self. Their Masters often had open dialogues with Hindu and Buddhist men of knowledge. They emphasised the importance of service and charitable acts as a means for self-purification. They fed Muslim and non-Muslim alike. Living as ascetics they avoided contact with the sultans and their courts. Above all their *qawwalis*, or spiritual songs, attracted people to Islam.

The Chishti tolerance and respect for other faiths is well illustrated in a popular *qawwali*, which was inspired by an observation of Hazrat Nizam ad-Din Awliya, as he watched Hindu worshippers bathing in the River Jumna: “Every people has its right path, its faith and its focus of worship.”

The great poet, Amir Khusrau, who was with his Master on this occasion, was inspired to write:

*“Let all the world worship God, let humanity praise the Divine.*

*One may seek Him in Mecca; one may seek Him in Kashi (Benares).*

*I have found my Beloved, should I not prostrate before Him?*

*Every people has its right path, its faith and its focus of worship.”*

A great lesson in times of sectarian violence, past and present!

The Chishtis lived in the world in an unworldly way. Their poetry and songs were a celebration of that Truth which permeates all. Once the heart opens up to inner light and delight, outer differences cease to be divisive. One acknowledges outer differences, but does not allow them to be a cause of war and enmity. This is what happened in the early years that followed the Qur’anic Revelation. The warring tribes of Arabia were able to transcend their petty enmities for a time because the Prophet Muhammad’s life and teachings opened up for them a state of inner awakening that renders worldly divisions insignificant.

While the Chishti teachings remain a timeless inspiration, their outer manifestation is changing. When this book was first written several Masters, who taught in the traditional manner, were still living, including Sayyed Ikram Husayn Shah Saikir. They have now all passed on. There will always be *qawwali* and feeding around the shrines, but what about the teachings appropriate for the present generation?

It is in human nature to seek durable well-beingness at physical, mental and spiritual levels; but the way in which we pursue these goals has to be appropriate for our times. People no longer live in closed communities where the Shaykh was a reference for all aspects of their lives and their behaviour was closely monitored by their peers. Yet, we are privileged today to be able to enquire and conclude what is suitable for our specific needs in a way that was not possible in the past. Technology has meant better dissemination of information and by offering instant contact has shrunk space. It has also changed the way our brains function and affect our attention span. The time pupils physically spend with their teachers may also be limited and contact is often on line. All this means that the contemporary seeker will be predisposed towards self-help and individual practice. They have to take responsibility for their own inner journey, whilst still acknowledging the need for guidance of a true Master and the mirroring he gives. There are a significant number of these seekers who have discovered the Qur'an for themselves and have fully imbibed its message. By returning fully to the original teachings they have been more than compensated for disappointment with the behaviour of Muslim in many parts of the globe and the lack of community life.

The experiences and challenges of today's Sufis may differ greatly from those of the past but the message is the same and the stories of the lives of the illumined men and women of the Chishtiyya remain a source of guidance for the journey towards the light in our own hearts.

Muneera Haeri

May 2019

## Preface

When we reflect upon our lives, most of us will recognize that there are meetings and signs, insignificant in themselves, but when seen as a whole clearly pointing to our destinies. This has been the case with my connection with the Chishti *silsilah*.

It is now nearly fourteen years since my first contact with the Chishtis took place. I was living in Tucson, Arizona, awaiting the birth of my first child. My husband had rented a house there so I could be near a Sufi community with whom we were connected, while he travelled abroad.

One day he phoned me from London and suggested that later that afternoon I should take a walk around the neighborhood. If I did this I would meet a person of interest. My friend, Zuleikha, an English Muslim, accompanied me. After we had been walking for about fifteen minutes we came to a garden where a man was swinging a little boy, under the shade of an overhanging tree. ‘My goodness,’ exclaimed Zuleikha, ‘that’s Hakim Mu`in ad-Din Chishti and his son. Let’s go and greet them.’

Hakim Mu`in ad-Din is an American, who had gone to Afghanistan some years before. He had been convinced of the efficacy of the traditional medicine practiced there and had studied to become a *hakim*. Since returning to the States he had written on the science of Islamic medicine. During his stay in the East he had become a Muslim and a follower of the Chishti. The Chishti *silsilah* are a Sufi brotherhood, who had reached the zenith of their influence in the subcontinent during the period of the Turkish Sultans and early Mughal emperors. The shrines of their early masters are still popular places of pilgrimage for Muslims and Hindus alike, and the modern day *qawwali* singers take their inspiration from the devotional music and poetry of those times. Yet, at that time, the name Chishti only registered with me as some hazy consciousness of a spiritual path. I had no premonition as to how my life was to become entwined with the propagation of their teachings.

Hakim Mu`in ad-Din was a pleasant faced man in his thirties. He greeted us warmly and we sat talking awhile in his garden about his work in the field of traditional medicine. Seeing my advanced state of pregnancy he gave me some remedies and advice on childbirth which were to prove helpful when the time came.

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Two years later when we were living in San Antonio, Texas, (where my husband had established a Sufi community) there was an unexpected phone call from Hakim Mu'in ad-Din. He wanted to introduce us to Dr. Muhammad Qasim, a homeopathic physician from Delhi, who had been a devotee of the Chishtis from boyhood. 'You will love Muhammad Qasim, he is a bubble of delight,' the Hakim told me. Sure enough when Dr. Qasim arrived to stay with us a few days later, he immediately formed a strong connection with our family and those dear to us. It was agreed that his next visit would be longer and he would teach a group of men and women, selected for their orientation towards the healing arts, the basics of homeopathic medicine. Some of this group were later to go to the Punjab, where they put their skills at the service of the local people. Dr. Qasim was, over the years, to treat many friends and family members. At times of need he was always available for phone consultations from his office, which is located by the shrine of Shaykh Nizam ad-Din Awliya in Delhi. Twice the Chishtis had sent me their followers to help with health matters; for skill in the healing arts has historically been a characteristic of their devotees. Yet I still did not make the connection.

In 1981, Shaykh Fadhlalla Haeri returned to San Antonio after a visit to the shrine of Baba Farid Ganj-i-Shakar, a famous Chishti Master, who lies buried in Pakpattan, Pakistan. He had a gift for me. It was the biography of Baba Farid by Professor Khaliq Ahmad Nizami. 'I want you to write a book on the life of Baba Farid,' Shaykh Fadhlalla said, as he handed me the book, 'it will be a good medicine for you.' 'How can I do this?' I replied, 'I know little about the Chishtis and, apart from this book, I have no material on their lives and teachings. Where will I find the necessary information here in Texas?' Despite my initial reservations, a seed had been planted.

My first visit to Pakpattan came in the winter of 1982. It had been eagerly awaited not only because it would be my first visit to a Chishti shrine, but also a reunion with a close friend, Aziza, who was living near the shrine with her husband and a group of Western Muslims. Aziza had imbibed much from the atmosphere around the shrine and I knew would give me valuable insight into that extraordinary *barakat* (blessing) which emanates from the tombs of spiritual masters and affects those who come into contact with these shrines. Events, however, took an unexpected turn with the arrival at Pakpattan of Sayyid Ikram Husayn Shah, a present-day Chishti *Shaykh*, who had already formed a friendship with Shaykh Fadhlalla. From my first meeting with Sayyid Ikram I was convinced of his deep knowledge and spirituality. He received me with much kindness and a strong connection was forged between us. Sayyid Ikram requested

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that I write a book, not just on Baba Farid, but on all the five great early Masters of the Chishti *silsilah*. As the other four are buried in India, it was decided that a visit to their shrines be planned.

This inspiring journey took place during the winter of 1985. During our time together Sayyid Ikram gave me guidelines for the book and emphasized his desire that the readers be told not only about the greatness of the past Chishtis but also about the present day activities of the *silsilah*. Sayyid Ikram took permission for this book, while in prayer at the tomb of Hazrat Mu'in ad-Din Chishti at Ajmer. While in *muraqaba* (meditative vigil practiced by Sufis) there, he had a vision of the Urdu translation of the book being presented to him, fresh from the printing press.

More than six years have passed since our visit to Ajmer. The birth of my two youngest children further delayed the book's completion. Yet Sayyid Ikram never wavered in his confidence in the usefulness of such a project and sent me many messages of encouragement. Finally, this May we met together in Karachi to put the finishing touches to the manuscript. During the years of research and writing, many people have come forward to give me inspiration and assistance. Without them it would not have been possible to write the book. Above all I have experienced the love and support of the Chishti masters, past and present, to whom these pages are dedicated with deepest love and gratitude. May any mistakes or misinterpretations due to my own shortcomings be forgiven.

Muneera Haeri  
Karachi, May 1992

## Acknowledgements

It has been my good fortune to receive so much assistance in the preparation of this book that it would be impossible to thank personally all those who have contributed to it. However, I would particularly like to thank Shaykh Asaf Durakovic for his encouragement, as well as Ali, Abbas and Muna Bilgrami, Sabnum Dharamsi, Mumtaz Khan, Saddiqa Lake, Naila Razaghzadeh, Dr. Xaigham and Jameela Xaigham.

Professor Bruce Lawrence has been generous with his time and encouragement. The publication of his English translation of *Fawa'id al-Fu'ad, the Majlises of Shaykh Nizam ad-Din Awliya*, was an invaluable contribution.

At the beginning of this project I benefited from the guidance of the late Professor Khaliq Ahmad Nizami, the doyen of the Chishti historians. His writings have been of great assistance. Dr. Z. H. Zaidi helped me with my initial reading list and introduced me to the SOAS Library.

Special thanks to my South African friends Hafiz Abu Bakr Mahomed and Mrs. Zuleikha Mayet for introducing me to the work of Hazrat Soofie Saheb and to those of his descendants, who took the time to tell me about his life and teachings, in particular Imam Sayyidi Ghulam Mahomed Soofi, Imam Abdul Aziz Soofi, Maulana Abdul Raouf Soofi, and Fuzail Soofi.

I would like to acknowledge the assistance I derived from the works of P.M. Currie, Professor S. A. A. Rizvi, and the late Professor Muhammad Habib.

Special thanks to Anjum Jaleel for preparing the eBook version of this book for publication.



## Introduction

If narratives live at the heart of genuine spirituality, then the book composed here by Muneera Haeri, about five Chishti Masters from pre-modern India, signals a new lodestone of insight for all serious seekers of Truth, non-Muslim as well as Muslim.

Spirituality is not easily mapped out and identified. Spirituality specifies religion as ‘stuff of the spirit, a wind, a rush, a non-containable, irreducible something inner.’ Diffuse in every age, spirituality becomes still more diffuse and polymorphous in the post-modern information age. It often becomes religion commodified, popularized, geared to micro-groups wherever they mushroom. Directed to the private, it can be harbored by the specially initiated as their treasure and theirs alone.

In America, but also elsewhere, spirituality may turn into a variant of ‘thin religion’; religion as self-help ‘getting ahead by getting in with God,’ producing in the mid-1990’s bestsellers like M. Scott Peck’s *The Road Less Travelled* and Thomas Moore’s *Care of the Soul*. This spirituality skirts the edge of banal self-indulgence; it evokes sniggers among academic scholars of religion.

But spirituality may also evoke deep commitment to arduous practices and daily disciplines which negate the self in search of the Ultimate. It may go beyond cultural difference and temporal change, tapping into the inescapable human need for value, for meaning and above all, for hope.

This book is about ‘thick’ not ‘thin’ spirituality; it draws on powerful mines of insight and hope for all humankind.

Its title, *The Chishtis, a Living Light*, refers to a Muslim brotherhood of spiritual seekers and so one might presume that the book itself is couched in a Muslim idiom, that it speaks to a Muslim audience, that it sets Muslims apart from other believers in the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, Moses, Elijah and Jesus.

But that first impression is a false register of the true spirit of this passionate volume. It does speak of Muslim Saints. Yes, they are steeped in Muslim piety, and they do make constant reference to scriptural sources, ritual observances that are distinctly Muslim. Yes, they did have

enormous appeal to Muslim audiences, to Muslim disciples and to Muslim rulers, both during their lifetime and for countless generations after.

And yet the true depth of this book is its disengagement from a local idiom of parochial interest to Muslims only; it opens out the lives of these masters as a spiritual treasure that beckons all engaged persons to examine their own lives in the light of these Saints, their discipline, their devotion and, above all, their stories.

Consider Hamid ad-din Suwali Nagauri, whose life story is adorned in the pages of this book. A second generation Chishti Master, he farmed and lived as a vegetarian in rural Rajasthan. His outlook more resembled that of his Hindu neighbors than the Turko-Afghan elites of Delhi. Yet he believed in the soul as the carrier of human destiny, and boldly expressed its significance when asked:

*After a man dies and his soul becomes separated from his body, does it return to its origin or not?*

To which Shaykh Hamid ad-din replied:

*Whoever in his natural life has recognized his origin will return to the origin of all life. He has learned about the veils and hindrances and attachments of this world and the love of that world has appeared in him. His desire for Allah abets his love of Allah, so that he is able to throw aside veils and cut through obstacles and break attachments. He turns his face from existing things and brings himself to the Source of existence. He fulfills the obligations of every station but leaves the appendages when he leaves the station. In short, he experiences real death before his natural death. Whoever lives like this he will return to his origin: He will return to experience union with Allah.*

No spiritual master before or after Shaykh Hamid ad-din, who himself died in the late thirteenth century AD, has expressed more graphically the meaning of a common Sufi axiom: ‘Die before you die.’

Each master among the five whose life-story and sagas on the path are recounted in the following pages reveal a ray of light from the brotherhood which they collectively represent and whose luster they uniquely project. The Chishtiya have at last found an articulate voice in English through the personal commitment and literary skill of Muneera Haeri. Since she herself

is so indebted to the legacy of the last great heir of the pre-Mughal Chishtiya, Shaykh Nasir ad-din, it is perhaps fitting to note his contribution. He was an ascetic, who balanced his state of inner ecstasy with strict outer conformity to *Shar'iah*. While he may have seemed less approachable than his spiritual predecessors to outsiders, he showed the disposition etched by Shaykh Hamid ad-din in the above passage. Having already died to his lower or carnal self, he was undaunted by the prospect of his physical death.

*About three years before his death (notes Muneera Haeri), the Shaykh was subjected to a violent attack by a qalandar (member of itinerant order of Sufis) called Turab, who inflicted eleven knife wounds on him. Some of his pupils firstly seeing blood streaming out of the water hole in their Master's room rushed in and saved Shaykh Nasir ad-din Chiragh-i-Dehli. The Shaykh not only insisted on them letting the man free but had them escort him out of the city to prevent his being savaged by the mob, who were angered by the news of an attack on the Shaykh.*

Not only Shaykh Nasir ad-din but all the Chishti Masters by their actions, as also by their words, exemplified the Source of their spiritual strength. It is a powerful witness. It is an enduring message. This is a book that honors them even as it instructs us. It is a mark of our good fortune that we now have their story as our guide and resource in English.

We are grateful to Muneera Haeri for her transmission of these enlightened teachings, which will touch all yearning hearts.

Bruce B. Lawrence, Professor Emeritus, Duke University<sup>1</sup>  
North Carolina, USA

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<sup>1</sup> Bruce B. Lawrence is a specialist on Indo-Muslim culture, who has studied both medieval Sufism and modern Islamic movements.

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## Chapter 1: Sufis – the Mystics of Islam

Since time immemorial there have been men and women who have sought spiritual knowledge. The knowledge they longed for was not that achieved through the study of physical sciences, nor was it the acquired mechanistic knowledge, which we use in our everyday life. It was, rather, that knowledge which allows us to reach the state of enlightenment to which everybody is drawn. These seekers transcended the fleeting distractions of the world and dedicated their lives to this objective. They strove for an inner awakening which would enable them to discover their own role in the divine program and walk in harmony with destiny.

This is a timeless path, followed by the elect of all faiths. Christianity has its Gnostics, Judaism the Kabbalists, while self-enlightenment is the ultimate goal of all devout Hindus and Buddhists. The mystics of Islam are called Sufis. The path of submission to God's will, that we call Islam, has always existed but it was only with the advent of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH<sup>1</sup>) and the revelation of the Qur'an that it was transmitted in the form that we know it today. The Qur'an, the eternal Book of Allah, contains within it all that is needed for man's spiritual enrichment. The *Shari'ah* of Islam comes from the Qur'an and the Prophetic model of behavior. Access to the *Shari'ah* and to the knowledge of the life and teachings of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) permits us to live with that understanding of the divine laws and courtesy towards creation that is essential for correct living. The ascetic in his cave may enjoy states of inner bliss but this is essentially a selfish path and one suited to few. Islam, on the contrary, teaches love and responsibility towards your fellow men; as the correct outer interaction will bring about the desired inner state. So with the advent of Islam there came into being these Sufis – seekers who followed with sobriety the outer laws of Islam, while their hearts sang the divine song.

Some say the name Sufi was derived from *safa* (pure) because of the purity of their hearts; others from *suf* (wool) because of the coarse woolen garments they chose to wear; yet others traced the origin of the word to *suffa* from the low clay built verandah attached to the Prophet Muhammad's (PBUH) mosque in Medina where some of the poorest among his devoted followers used to sit. A derivation from the Arabic verb *safwe*, meaning those who are selected, is another possibility. Eventually the word came to be identified with seekers of spiritual enlightenment. An early Sufi master, Abu Bakr al-Kalabadhi, described them as:

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<sup>1</sup> PBUH: Peace Be Upon Him. Allah's salutations and peace be upon him.

*Sufis, illuminated, pure. These were deposited by Allah among His creation, and chosen out of those whom Allah made: they were His testaments to His Prophet, and His secrets entrusted to His Chosen One (The Prophet Muhammad). During his lifetime they were the people of his bench, and after his death they were the best of his community.*

There were always Sufis, but their emergence as a group of people with a set identity probably did not happen until about two hundred years after the death of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). This movement came as a reaction against the degeneration that had taken place amongst the Muslims. The years that followed the Prophet Muhammad's (PBUH) passing were to see a weakening of his teachings. Fired by the effulgent light of Islam, an empire was born but its leadership passed into the hands of worldly men, who sought temporal power rather than spiritual. Men of heart had the option either to rebel against leadership, which was corrupt and bereft of spiritual guidance – and there were many such rebellions – or to turn towards their own inner development. So it was that the more the world of Islam grew in power and wealth, the more the spiritually inclined embraced lives of asceticism and developed ways of enhancing their inner devotional state, as if to redress the imbalance in the world around them.

Qur'an and *Hadith* indicate that the degree of the capacity for self realization differs from man to man. There will always be an elite whose yearning for truth will lead them to go beyond the religious practices incumbent upon the Muslims. It is the promise of our Creator that so long as this world exists there will be men of knowledge who will guide this elite towards their goal.

The Sufis believe that there was a small circle of such men around the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH). The chief amongst these was Imam `Ali (RA<sup>2</sup>), the cousin and son-in-law of the Prophet (PBUH), to whom the Prophet (PBUH) transmitted the knowledge of the gnostic sciences. Imam `Ali (RA) was to communicate these to his sons, Imams Hasan and Husayn, and to a few close pupils, such as Hasan of Basra. They, in their turn passed the esoteric truths on to their pupils, and so the chains of enlightenment have continued up to our present time.

By the latter half of the ninth century AD the inheritors of these teachings had divided into different sects. The leaders of some of these sects were to leave writings which reflected a wide range of doctrines and methods of teaching. The Sufi Master, Shaykh `Ali Hujwiri (died about 1075 AD) wrote in *Kashf-ul-Mahjub* that there were twelve schools of Sufism, ten of which were

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<sup>2</sup> *Radi Allahu `Anhu*: May Allah Be Pleased with him.

approved and two condemned. These differences in approach allowed the seeker to follow whichever system was most conducive to his own inner enrichment. Originally pupils would gather around a spiritual master, either at his home or work place, and listen to him teach. Between the ninth and eleventh centuries AD, these gatherings became more formalized. They now took place in centers which were specifically used for this purpose. Each center would have a master and his followers would congregate there to hear him.

The same period saw the consolidation of the four *madhhabs*, (schools of law) which are considered by Sunni Muslims to this day to be the final points of reference on matters of *Shari`ah*. It is estimated that by the beginning of the ninth century AD (third century AH), approximately five hundred personal schools of law had disappeared. By 1300 AD (700 AH) only the Hanafi, Maliki, Shafi'i, and Hanbali schools had survived; for the Sunnis the doors of *ijtihad* had now closed. This development brought about a class of trained jurists or *`ulama*, who became the nearest Islam has to the ordained priesthood of Christianity. Indeed the majority of the mystics of this period were to start their spiritual education with the study of Qur'an, *Hadith*, and *Fiqh*. The ignorant Sufi was considered a danger to himself and the community.

Spiritual movements tend to emerge at times of difficulty, rising up to fulfill the specific needs appropriate to the period in question. We have seen how Islam, like all major faiths, had always had a strong contemplative tradition, and as the split between the code of conduct revealed by the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and the actual behavior of the so-called Muslim hierarchy grew, so too did the number of Sufi orders or brotherhoods to fill this spiritual vacuum. These orders initially sprang up around a recognized master. Its members would swear an oath of obedience to the master and commit themselves to follow faithfully his teachings. They also assumed certain responsibilities towards the other members of their order. When the founder of the order died his appointed successor would continue to teach in much the same vein as his predecessor had done. Sometimes two orders would merge to create a third one, which combined the best of both their teachings. There were apparent differences in the methods adopted by the various masters but their objectives were always the same – the opening of hearts. The orientation would have varied according to the time or place, as well as to allow for the needs of different types of seekers. Yet, whatever variances existed, there was always courtesy and mutual acknowledgement between sincere Sufis.

These Sufi orders were to perform a major role, not only in the spiritual development of individual seekers, but also in the regeneration of the Muslim world when it was devastated by the Mongols. They carried the message of Islam to distant lands where their powers of transmission enabled them to make the teachings accessible to the inhabitants, while at the same time retaining full fidelity to the Prophetic model.

The ultimate awakening of a Sufi was considered to be the gift of Allah, and thus beyond the wishes or efforts of either teacher or pupil. However, in order to reach a point where such an awakening was possible, it was considered essential to follow a recognized master. The latter had to have been in his younger days the pupil of a Shaykh of an accepted order and to have received from him the permission to teach others. Such realized beings are often referred to as a *wali*.

Ibn al-ʿArabi, the celebrated twelfth century AD Sufi master, wrote of this station of divine closeness, that it was enjoyed by the Prophets and Messengers of their time. The *wali* is in such harmony with the divine laws that the Qurʾan reveals ‘the friends of Allah, no fear shall be on them, nor shall they grieve.’ (10:62). It is also related in a *Hadith* that Allah will wage war against anyone who becomes an enemy of one of His *walis*. The *wali* is considered amongst the elite of the elite and all Sufis aspire to reach that station of gnosis.

This book is concerned with the lives of six acknowledged *walis*, who were all masters of the Chishti order. The first of these was Shaykh Muʿin ad-Din Chishti, who brought the teachings of the *silsilah* to India in the twelfth century AD. He and his successors, Shaykh Qutb ad-Din Bakhtiyar Kaki, Shaykh Hamid ad-Din Suwali Nagauri, Shaykh Farid ad-Din Ganj-i-Shakar, Shaykh Nizam ad-Din Awliya, and Shaykh Nasir ad-Din Chiragh-i-Delhi furthered the spread of Islam in the subcontinent and made an impact on its people that remains to this day. The sanctity of their lives and the enlightenment they spread were a living proof of the transformative powers of Islam.

Although they were noted historical figures, this work does not claim to give detailed biographical studies but rather glimpses of how different personalities, under different circumstances, journeyed towards their own spiritual discovery. In so doing they enriched not only their own lives but the lives of all who came into contact with them and their teachings, not only in their own times but throughout posterity. Their message is of as much benefit to us today as it was to those who were privileged to sit at their feet. It is a living message, not a past

phenomenon. Chishti teachers exist today, the heirs of our historical figures, to whom the sincere seeker can have access, and through them to self knowledge.



## Chapter 2: Shaykh Mu`in ad-Din Chishti

Shaykh Mu`in ad-Din Chishti is venerated as the foremost Sufi saint of Hindustan, yet we have access to little reliable information about his life and teachings. The tales of dramatic miracles and mass conversions to Islam that have been embellished with the passing of time, make charming stories. However, they do scant justice to a man of knowledge whose life is interesting to us not because he may have possessed some powers but rather as an example of what happens when a man achieves a station of inner fulfillment and enlightenment. This enabled him in his lifetime to influence positively the lives of those around him, to help and to guide them.

The picture presented in this book of the life of Shaykh Mu`in ad-Din Chishti is based on contemporary sources and on the conclusions reached by some eminent modern historians. Some stories whose historical authenticity is open to question have been quoted because they form an integral part of the legend of Shaykh Mu`in ad-Din Chishti. These have been related by masters to pupils in the Chishti *silsilah* for hundreds of years. Thus they are a valuable illustration of what the Shaykh came to symbolize for the people of India. (The writer has added some personal interpretations, both of events and of meaning.)<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> A lucid analysis of the various legends surrounding the life of Gharib Nawaz is given by P. M. Currie in *The Shrine and Cult of Mu`in ad-Din Chishti of Ajmer*, Delhi, OUP, 1989. The author makes the following comments on three of the four sources I have relied on for stories concerning the life of Gharib Nawaz. He considers the earliest commentary *Siyat al-Awliya* of Amir Khurd (1388 AD) a reliable source because the chronicler had known Shaykh Nizam ad-Din Awliya when he was a young man and his family had been connected with the Chishti *Silsilah* for three generations. However, the author incorporated material into the text from *Dalill al `Arifin* which is thought to be a fabricated *malfuzat*. The *Siyar al `Arifin* of Shaykh Jamali (1536 AD) expands on the material of Amir Khurd, although he is not always in agreement with the latter. One example of this is that Shaykh Jamali believed Gharib Nawaz only spent two and a half years with his spiritual master, Khwaja `Uthman Harwani, rather than the twenty years referred to by Amir Khurd. Shaykh Jamali was a Suhrwardi Shaykh, who travelled extensively in the Middle East and collected oral traditions concerning the early life of Gharib Nawaz. Contemporary historians tend to question the accuracy of some of Shaykh Jamali's statements as he relied heavily on oral traditions already two and a half to three centuries old. The latest of the three the *Siyar al-Aqtab* of Allah Diya Chishti (1647 AD) gives the most detailed description of Gharib Nawaz's life.

I have also extracted from the *Jawahir-i-Farid* of Ali Asghar Chishti (1623 AD) as quoted by Professor Sayyid Athar Abbas Rizvi in *A History of Sufism in India*, Volume I. This version of Gharib Nawaz's arrival in Ajmer is commonly referred to by members of the Chishti *Silsilah* up to the present time.

In summary we can conclude that Gharib Nawaz came from Sijistan, was the pupil of Khwaja `Uthman Harwani. He probably came to Ajmer just before the invasion of Sultan Shihab ad-Din Ghuri; although some sources suggest a later date. His main pupil was Shaykh Qutb ad-Din Bakhtiyar Kaki, while a close devotee was Shaykh Hamid ad-Din Sufi Nagauri. He married twice at the end of his life and fathered sons and a daughter. The authenticated *malfuzat* of Shaykh Nizam ad-Din Awliya and Shaykh Nasir ad-Din Mahmud Chiragh-i-Delhi make few references to him. This presumably was because they knew little of his life.

Mu`in ad-Din Hasan will be referred to throughout this work as *Gharib Nawaz* (Helper of the Poor), the name by which he is commonly known in the land of his adoption, Hindustan. He was born in the province of Sijistan in eastern Persia around 536 AH (1141 AD). He came from a family of Sayyids; his father Sayyid Ghiyas ad-Din Hasan was a descendant of Imam Husayn, his mother Sayyida Bibi Umu'l-wara descended from Imam Hasan. Many of the early descendants of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) had fled away from the then centers of power, and persecution, to more distant parts. The migration of Gharib Nawaz's family to Khorasan may well have been due to this.

Gharib Nawaz was born at a period of upheaval when the Turkic Seljuq empire was crumbling due both to the internal power struggles of its rival princes, and the outer ravages of the Qaraqitai and Ghuzz nomadic tribes. His parents moved while he was still a child, to the comparative safety of the city of Nishapur. This city had been given the name of 'Little Damascus' because of the quality of its fruit trees; while canals wound through its flourishing agricultural fields and blooming gardens. Nishapur was famous for its manufacture of silk and velvet, some of which was exported to Hindustan. Gharib Nawaz's first awareness of this exotic land may well have come from merchants' tales.

He is reported to have been a serious child who had memorized the Qur'an by the time he was nine years old. There is a story told how richly dressed in his new 'Id clothes, he met a blind beggar boy while on his way to the mosque. He gave his clothes to the beggar and dressed himself in the beggar's clothes and went hand in hand with him to the mosque to celebrate the 'Id festival together.

The University of Nishapur, with its rare collection of books, was a gathering place for the 'ulama and Sufis. Gharib Nawaz may even have studied at the famed Madrasa Nizamiyya, which had a mosque within its precincts where Qur'anic studies were taught. The civilized ambience of Nishapur gave a deceptive illusion of safety. The surrounding area had known many rulers since the advent of Islam. Each power struggle had brought change and sometimes bloodshed in its wake. As the young Gharib Nawaz wandered through the city's bazaars, he may have heard talk of its ruler, the brave Seljuq Sultan Sanjar. The Sultan was constantly at war to protect his lands from the onslaught of his enemies. He was not always successful in this objective. His subjects, huddled together in the comparative safety of Nishapur, would have been only too aware of the

danger and uncertainty that surrounded them. Such an environment must have left its mark on the thoughtful boy.

Gharib Nawaz was orphaned while still in his teens. However, he was far from destitute, as his father had left him an orchard and grinding mill in the suburb of Rewan, an area famous for its greenery. One day a *majzub* called Ibrahim Qanduzi visited him there. Gharib Nawaz brought his guest some grapes which he had grown in his own orchard. Ibrahim Qanduzi responded to this gesture by handing his host a piece of oil-cake, which he had himself previously chewed. Legend intimates that through this oil-cake the dervish transmitted to Gharib Nawaz the desire for enlightenment. Gharib Nawaz then sold his inheritance, distributed the proceeds to the poor, and set off towards the university towns of Balkh and then Samarkand. He was to study for years in both of these cities the sciences of knowledge of Qur'an, *Hadith*, and *Fiqh*. They were, at that time, the most famous centers of learning of the Muslim world. The young student will have emerged from his studies well steeped in the religious sciences. The education offered here may not have been enough for the young Gharib Nawaz. He may have yearned to go beyond book learning and seek the eternal truths.

In medieval times circles of mystics were an integral part of Muslim society. Balkh and Samarkand had many such men. There were those who did not find sufficient nourishment in the conventional religious studies, and looked for a deeper understanding of life. The growth and popularity of such circles during the tenth to twelfth centuries AD reflects both a reaction against corrupt rulers and the tendency amongst learned scholars to dissipate energy on endless theological disputes. The *`Ulama* were generally the employees of the state and as a consequence restrained by this connection. In contrast the Sufis adopted an ascetic path as a means of maintaining their integrity and increasing their level of perception by banishing all other than Allah from their hearts. In order to experience states of inner quietude Sufis would do *dhikr*, whereby for long periods of time they recited the divine name or some of the Attributes of Allah.

Some also used the medium of poetry or music to enhance their meditation. The latter practices often brought about the state of ecstasy. This is why the more orthodox frowned at some of the methods used by the Sufis. The permissibility of *sama`* or musical parties became a controversial issue throughout the Muslim world.

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*We can only guess at what fulfillment Gharib Nawaz may have experienced amidst the Sufis of Balkh and Samarkand. We do know, however, that while still in his early twenties he left these regions and journeyed towards Iraq. There he met the Chishti teacher who was to become his spiritual master, Khwaja `Uthman Harwani. A later Chishti Shaykh Nasir ad-Din Mahmud Chiragh-i-Delhi is reported as saying:*

*Harwan is a village and Khwaja `Uthman used to live in it. It has been said about him and about people like him: 'Men live in villages.' Many Shaykhs and men of Allah are to be found in villages.<sup>2</sup>*

Shaykh Nasir ad-Din reminds us how the real men of knowledge often live simply. Khwaja `Uthman Harwani inducted Gharib Nawaz into the Chishti Order. The founder of this particular order was a Syrian called Abu Ishaq Shami. He is believed to have been sent to Chisht, a town near Herat in modern day Afghanistan, by his own master, Khwaja Mimshad `Ali Dinawari of Baghdad during the latter part of the third century Hijri (ninth century AD). Shaykh Abu Ishaq came from a line of recognized spiritual masters, who traced their descent back to the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) through Imam `Ali. Thus the Chishtis, like almost all the Sufi orders, claimed Imam `Ali as their first great teacher after the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH).

The peripatetic life of Shaykh Abu Ishaq was characteristic of the early Sufi masters. Indeed constant travel was always recommended as a spiritual discipline because it jolts the individual out of the comforts of a sedentary life, and provides opportunity for exposure to new knowledge. The wandering Sufi was a common feature along the Muslim trading routes. They journeyed from town to town; sometimes staying for a few days, sometimes for a few months or a few years. They followed the dictates of their hearts rather than any pre-planned itinerary. Some of these dervishes were learned men. Wherever they halted in their travels, groups of pupils would gather around them to learn about the teachings of Islam. Such teachers would use moral stories, poetry and music to teach gnostic knowledge. This enhanced their popular appeal and enabled them to make an impact on a wide range of people.

At the time when Shaykh Abu Ishaq arrived in Chisht the spread of Islam in the area had brought about a burst of cultural and commercial activity which connected the whole region with the heartland of Islam – Baghdad. This wild mountainous region was host for a varied mix of

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<sup>2</sup> Habib, Mohammad, *Politics and Society during the Early Medieval Period*, Delhi, 1974, p. 402.

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visitors – soldiers, traders, and Sufis such as Shaykh Abu Ishaq converged to this town. Shaykh Abu Ishaq stayed some years in the region and appointed a successor there, one Khwaja Abu Ahmad `Abd al Chishti, before resuming his wanderings. The Khwaja in his turn passed on the teachings of Shaykh Abu Ishaq to his spiritual heir. The chain continued until the latter part of the twelfth century AD when it passed into the hands of Khwaja `Uthman Harwani. The area surrounding Chisht had enjoyed a temporary lull during the period of Shaykh Abu Ishaq's visit but was afterwards the scene of years of fighting between marauding Turkic tribes. Such violent upheavals were not conducive to spiritual teaching. It is little wonder that the Chishti masters chose to travel to other areas far from the Afghani mountains. However, through Khwaja `Uthman's pupil, Gharib Nawaz, the Chishti teachings came to neighboring Hindustan. The inspired teachings of Gharib Nawaz appealed to both Muslim and Hindu seekers of truth and acted as a bridge between these two peoples at a time when Hindu north India was facing an increasingly dominant Muslim presence.

The Chishtis had taken their name from a town under the suzerainty of the Shansabani Kings of Ghur. By some strange thread of destiny Gharib Nawaz was fated to start his work in Ajmer, Rajasthan, shortly before a Ghurid Prince, Shihab ad-Din (also known as Mu`izz ad-Din b. Sam) defeated the Hindu ruler Prithviraj of Ajmer in the Second Battle of Tarain. This was a key battle which accelerated the establishment of Muslim rule in the north of Hindustan.

Once Gharib Nawaz became the pupil of Khwaja `Uthman Harwani, he stayed with him for over twenty years. He is reported as having told his own pupils that during this period he did not give himself any rest from service of his master and even carried his night clothes during his journeys. Total obedience to the Shaykh is a part of Sufi discipline. The pupil is supposed to be like a dead body in the hands of the washer who prepares his corpse for burial. If he does not give total obedience, it is said that he is not a true pupil.

As travel is much recommended for the seeker, it was customary for Sufis to visit teachers in different towns and also to pray at the tombs of dead saints. A teacher, such as Khwaja `Uthman Harwani, must have been accompanied on his travels by his close pupils. He must have introduced them to other masters so their knowledge and understanding might be increased by exposure to other men of knowledge. All spiritual masters have the same goal but their methods of arriving at it may vary. Thus Gharib Nawaz may have travelled with his teachers for years throughout Baghdad, Oush, Tabriz, Mayhana, Kharqan, Astarabad, Herat, Sabzwar, to name but

a few cities, with nothing except the clothes on their backs, totally dependent on the charity of strangers.

Sometimes they must have slept by the roadside but often they may have found a Sufi *khanqah* in which to rest. The twelfth century was to see the rapid growth of many Sufi brotherhoods and the emergence of *khanqahs* in all the major towns. These *khanqahs* were spacious buildings where groups of Sufis would live together as a community of seekers. The newer pupils would sleep in a central hall or ‘*Jama`at Khanah*’. There were also small cells, where individuals could retreat for long periods of meditation. By living communally the inmates had access to tuition both from a known Shaykh, if there was one in the *khanqah*, and from the senior members of the community. There is a *Hadith* that relates that if a person remains forty days in the company of people he becomes like them. It is helpful for all travelers on the path of self-knowledge to have the company of like-minded individuals. The would-be seeker, battling with his own ego, needs the encouragement of pure hearts; otherwise, he will be constantly pulled back by the dictates of the lower self. These *khanqahs* were supported either through endowments or through begging by the inmates. There was always accommodation for visitors. A strict code of hospitality was adopted towards them by which they were offered the best rooms and refreshment that were available.

One place Gharib Nawaz must have visited with his master was Baghdad. This city was not only the seat of the `Abbasid Caliphs and hence the nominal capital of the Muslim world but also a vital cultural and commercial center. Amidst an ambiance of worldliness and decadence, Sufism flourished. The cure to any poison can always be found near its source! Baghdad was the home of the famous Sufi Shaykh `Abd al- Qadir Jilani, who founded the Qadari School of Sufism. Gharib Nawaz is thought to have visited him in Baghdad. Indeed, there is an apocryphal story that both were present at a gathering of *sama`*. During this gathering Shaykh `Abd al-Qadir remained seated while Gharib Nawaz was an active participant. An onlooker asked the former why he was not joining in. Shaykh `Abd al-Qadir, who had a withered leg, due to the excessive spiritual penances of his youth, and was thus physically unable to undertake such arduous activity replied that he was staying with both his feet firmly on the ground in order to prevent the world from exploding with Gharib Nawaz’s ecstasy.

Shaykh `Abd al-Qadir followed in the footsteps of the great Persian, Imam Abu Hamid Al-Ghazali, who earlier in that century, had in his celebrated text *Ihya` ulum ad-din* tried to

reconcile the Sufic path with orthodox Islam. He emphasized for would-be seekers of enlightenment the necessity for strict observation of the rituals. Al- Ghazzali had been a noted `alim, and a professor at the *Nizamiyya Madrassa* in Baghdad, before he abandoned his profession for years of wandering. During this time he was to discover that the years he had devoted to acquiring knowledge were just a preparation for his real awakening. His book reflected the depth of knowledge that he had finally achieved.

Shaykh `Abd al-Qadir, who came from the area around the Caspian Sea, had also, like Imam Al-Ghazali, emigrated to Baghdad and became the head of a religious college there. He was a follower of the Hanbali School of Law. He addressed himself, as did Imam Al-Ghazali, to all believers, in the hope that his teachings would elevate the level of awareness of the ordinary sincere Muslim, as well as the dedicated elite. Certainly exposure to such a balanced master tempered Gharib Nawaz's own temperament.

During the years he travelled with Khwaja `Uthman Harwani, Gharib Nawaz tasted a wide variety of experiences. After years of striving he must have reached such a point of spiritual certainty that he was able to move on his own. Khwaja `Uthman Harwani must have blessed this favored pupil, now a man in his mid-forties, and bidden him farewell. The separation of pupil from master after years of close companionship marks a crucial stage in the pupil's life. Gharib Nawaz had now parted from the man, who had been for him a spiritual teacher.

Khwaja `Uthman gave Gharib Nawaz the *idhn* to teach but he could not have known what specific direction his pupil's work was going to take. Thus we can imagine with what eagerness Gharib Nawaz must have awaited some sign or direction from his Lord as to how his work should commence. The gnostic's will may be obliterated in his Creator's, but he is still a man, with all man's questions and uncertainties. What is more likely at this crucial period in his life than that Gharib Nawaz would have made the pilgrimage to Makkah with this unanswered question in his heart.

For it is to Makkah that all Muslims bring their supplications. There the aged pilgrim makes his final peace with his Creator and dies a happy man, the barren woman prays for the longed-for child, the sick man begs for health, the merchant for increased prosperity. All pilgrims carry some hidden desire within their hearts and all are rewarded according to the depth and sincerity of their pleas.

We know that the later Chishti Shaykhs like Shaykh Farid, Shaykh Nizam-ad-din and Shaykh Nasir-ad-din never performed the *Hajj*, but it is improbable that Gharib Nawaz, who for more than twenty years roamed the lands of Islam, did not at least once visit Makkah and Medina. Indeed legend relates that during a visit to Medina the Blessed Prophet (PBUH) revealed to him that his life's mission lay in Hindustan.

It is incumbent upon every Muslim, who is physically and financially able, to undertake, at least once in his lifetime, the pilgrimage to Makkah. There he renews at the time of the *Hajj* the primal covenant between God and man which has been since time began. There is an *ayah* that reveals that the *Ka`ba* in Makkah was the first structural house appointed for man on earth.

*Most surely, the first house appointed for mankind is the one at Makkah, blessed and a guidance for created beings. (3:96)*

Some early chronicles relate that the Prophet Adam, assisted by the Angel Jibril built the *Ka`ba*; others that he made *tawwaf* (circling the *Ka`bah*) around a tent and when he died his sons constructed the house from clay and stones. This house remained until the flood of Nuh (Noah) when it was swept away. After the flood there was a red heap upon the spot on which the *Ka`ba* had stood. The people, who re-populated the area, used to worship there until the Prophet Ibrahim rebuilt the ancient house on the same site. Over the years Makkah continued to remain a place of pilgrimage. However, the people fell into decadence and began to worship a mass of deities, forgetting the reality of the One God. These deities were originally symbols for the different attributes of Allah. Over a period of time they were worshipped on a par with Allah. The Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) was commanded by Allah to restore the ancient rites of pilgrimage to their former purity. So it was from the dawn of Islam that Muslims came from all corners of the globe to this ancient and sacred city.

Performing the *Hajj* marks a time of spiritual renewal and purification in the pilgrim's life. It would, thus, have been appropriate for Gharib Nawaz at this transition period in his life, to have joined the annual pilgrimage to Makkah. It is also customary for all pilgrims, once they have performed their *Hajj* to move on towards Medina where the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) lies buried and pay their respects to him there.

We can imagine how Gharib Nawaz would have journeyed with a caravan through the stark and arid scrubland that separates Makkah and Medina. The ground's scorching heat would not



have permitted the convoy to travel after midday. At that time they would be forced to pitch their tents by the shade of whatever scanty palms they could find by the wayside. After the sunset prayer they would take advantage of the cool of the desert nights to continue their relentless march. This pattern would continue for days, punctuated only by stops at the various oases en route. Finally they would have reached the corn fields and date gardens that herald the approach to the blessed city of Medina. With what joy must they have welcomed its towered walls. How pleasant to the eye the orchards and vegetable gardens after the harsh terrain through which they had travelled. There would have been not only the dates for which Medina is famous, but an abundance of other delights – oranges, lemons, pomegranates, peaches, apricots, and grapes.

If Gharib Nawaz had reached the city after sunset he would have been able to make the *maghrib* (sunset) prayer at the Mosque of the Prophet (PBUH). This mosque has the form of an open courtyard and is surrounded on all four sides by rows of pillars. After dusk he would have seen circles of people assembling in the courtyard and lighting large numbers of candles before they passed through the hall to visit the sanctuaries of the Mosque. The chanting of Qur'an would have echoed through the night air. The Prophet Muhammad's (PBUH) tomb lies to one side of the courtyard. It is there that Gharib Nawaz would have gone to make his prayer of salutation. In those days it was possible to go to the west of the actual tomb to an area called al-Rawda (the garden) along whose southern borders ran a barrier; the remains of a tree trunk on which the prophet Muhammad (PBUH) used to lean. Perhaps it was by this sacred spot, and Allah knows best, that Gharib Nawaz received the inspiration of the Prophet that guided him towards Hindustan.

Hindustan was an area that had attracted increased Muslim migration in those times of unrest in Central Asia that preceded the Mongol holocaust. From the early days of Islam there had been a steady flow of Muslim settlers and transient traders landing on the shores of Hindustan. The Persian Sassanid empire of pre-Islamic times had been in contact with the Hindu kingdoms and was familiar with their culture. Hindustan had contributed to the Persian knowledge of medicine and mathematics; knowledges which were absorbed by the Muslim conquerors of Persia. In the years that followed the death of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), Muslim traders visited the Malabar coast and established small settlements there. The local rulers had encouraged the merchants to settle in their lands. They were allowed to practice their religion freely and marry local girls. The expansionist policy of Hajjaj, the Umayyad Caliph

Walid I's governor in Iraq, led to Muhammad bin Qasim's conquest of Sind between 711-712 AD. The Arab soldiers brought their families with them and some settled in Hindustan. The town of Multan in particular became a center for Muslim rule. There were some conversions to Islam, particularly among the Buddhist population, who may have resented their former Hindu masters. However, Multan later passed into Isma`ili hands and the Muslims did not at this time progress further into Hindustan.

The next onslaught on Hindu lands came from Mahmud, Sultan of Ghazna. His father, Sebuktigin, was a former slave, who had become the governor of Samanid controlled Ghazna. Ghazna is situated in what is now Afghanistan. The Hindu Jayapala of Waihind, ruler of the Shahiya kingdom of Kabul, feared the growth of Muslim power. He twice attacked Ghazna and was twice defeated. Mahmud continued his father's victories by himself defeating Jayapala in 1001 AD (391 AH). The latter, shamed by the disgrace of defeat, burnt himself alive. The pride of the Hindu rulers and their rigid code of honor was to prove of assistance to the more flexible Muslims. Jayapala's son Anandapala organized a combined force from the Hindu rulers of Ajmer, Delhi, Gwalior, Kannawj, Kalinjar, and Ujjayn. Mahmud defeated their armies at Peshawar in 1008 AD (300 AH). He was then able to seize all the Hindu Shahi possessions. These included Lahore. Under Mahmud's descendants Lahore was to become an important Muslim political and cultural center. The Ghaznavids' first forays against Hindu rulers sprang more from self-defense than from expansionist policies. However, Mahmud was soon to discover the wealth that adorned the Hindu temples, and to raise the flag of *jihad* when convenient. Certainly, the Sultan's concerns were more temporal than spiritual. He was to employ many Hindus in his administration and when the Muslim governor of Lahore, Ahmad Niyaltigin, rose up against him, he sent his Hindu general, Tilak, against the governor. Such flexibility characterized the behavior of the early Muslim invaders. It contrasted strongly with the immobilizing concern with honor and ritual purity that influenced the decisions of their Hindu counterparts.

From the beginning of the Turkish annexation of Northern Hindustan it was never a simple question of Muslim against Hindu. Relations between the two groups were often cordial. The Muslims, who had settled in the coastal towns and in the Punjab, probably lived apart from their Hindu neighbors but enjoyed good relations with them for the most part. They were not prevented from practicing their faith. Hindustan had accepted many different peoples and religions in her midst over the centuries and the indigenous population would not have had any

difficulty in absorbing yet another strain. Besides, the Hindus were not given to religious wars. As al-Biruni, the tenth century Christian era philosopher, mathematician, and writer of *Kitab al-Hind* was to observe:

*There is little disputing about theological topics among the Hindus; at the utmost they fight with words, but they never stake their life or their body or their property on religious controversy.*<sup>3</sup>

They were concerned with maintaining their caste system and Hindu way of life for their own people but quite prepared to accept as their neighbors those of differing racial origins and beliefs, provided, that is, that suitable social segregation was observed.

Inevitably, the migrant traders and soldiers will have been followed by a steady stream of wandering Sufis. It would be erroneous, however, to think of Gharib Nawaz and others like him simply as proselytizers of Islam or missionaries in the Christian sense, although they are often referred to as such in history books. The Sufis were first and foremost concerned with their own spiritual existence. They had undergone years of arduous self discipline and training under an acknowledged master before they were qualified to teach others. This period of apprenticeship, as we have seen, often involved travel to remote places; firstly because separation from familiar places, family and friends is helpful, and secondly because travel expands the horizons and brings about greater understanding of mankind in all its diversity. At certain periods in the Sufi's journey towards awakening, solitude and meditative retreat are essential. The hustle and bustle of the cities is not conducive for such retreats. Sufi masters often dispatched their pupils to distant parts as part of their apprenticeship, telling them to wander in the lands of Allah and wonder at His creation.

When Gharib Nawaz decided to go to Hindustan, he had served this apprenticeship and had reached a point in his spiritual development when he must have been ready to serve others. He was now able to assist them on their spiritual journey as he himself had been assisted by Khwaja `Uthman Harwani. When Gharib Nawaz's quest for inner knowledge started he was a restless young man who fled creation in search of its Creator.

The Sufis say that when the seeker has reached the next stage in his journey, which they call 'going back to creation by permission of the Creator,' he is fit to return to help and serve his

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid., p. 32. Source: Al Biruni *Kitab al-Hind* translated by E.C. Sachau London, 1910.

fellow men. He is no longer confused in this world of duality but can balance the opposites by his intuitive vision. This enables him to recognize the root behind the conflicting emotions and situations that beset mankind. How could a man, who had reached a point whereby his sole desire was to move harmoniously in accordance with Allah's pleasure, be regarded as a mere missionary? His role was far more profound than that. A being who has reached this level of cognition functions at a very subtle level. He does not launch a recruiting drive for potential pupils but rather lays himself open to serve whosoever crosses his path. He is like a leaf upon the wind of destiny. He goes where his heart directs him, open to whatever experiences Allah sends to him.

The Sufi Shaykh is a practicing Muslim. Islam is his outer robe. Its teachings have brought him to the level of inner understanding and delight he now enjoys. He has followed in the footsteps of the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) and been gifted with the Muhammadi light which illuminates his every action. He will naturally attract those to him who have the same orientation. The majority of his students will already be Muslim but there will always be some who are so dazzled by the example of the teacher's life that they will be moved to embrace Islam. There will be still others who will recognize his spiritual station and may in some way be influenced by his teachings, but will choose to adhere to their own religious background. The latter group is not likely to be close to him but there will still be some benefits and openings for them through their contact with the master.

We can be certain that Gharib Nawaz would not have regarded himself as one specifically destined to bring the Hindu into the Muslim fold nor indeed to go to the backwaters of Islam and educate the ignorant among the Muslims in a finer awareness of their faith. He was to achieve all this in Hindustan, but it was a by-product of his own journey. His mission in life, like all sages before and after him, was to discover the purpose for which he had been created, and submit to the One Essence of all creation – Allah. Many writers, both those who have achieved this and those who have not, have tried to explain the different stages through which the supplicant journeys on the road to submission. Al-Ghazali wrote that:

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*He who has attained the mystic state need do no more than say: of the things I do not remember; what was, was. Think it good; do not ask an account of it.*<sup>4</sup>

In truth the search for knowledge has no end. There can never be anything static about the man of Allah. He will, in spite of whatever spiritual heights he reaches, continue to seek knowledge so long as there is breath in his body. It must have been some aspect of his continued quest for knowledge that directed Gharib Nawaz towards Hindustan.

Historical events were to prove him to be, as the *wali* always is, the right man in the right place at the right time. Yet, when he set out towards Lahore he could hardly have foreseen the shape events would take. When he reached his ultimate destiny of Ajmer, it transpired that he was living in an area that would see crucial events in the Muslim takeover of parts of north Hindustan – events that were linked to the beginning of the Turkish Sultanate of Delhi. The Chishti traditions say that Gharib Nawaz studied for six years among the Sanskrit scholars of Multan and familiarized himself with their beliefs and language. If the earlier Muslim writer al-Biruni had free access to the Brahman scholars of his time and to their religious writings, it is very likely that Gharib Nawaz would equally have been able to explore their philosophies.

The Muslim believes the Qur’anic revelations to be the final revelation that supersedes all others but at the same time he acknowledges unity amid diversity. Hence he is willing to examine and, where possible, adapt what is permissible from the spiritual disciplines that have been used by other cultures.

The desire for spiritual enlightenment is not exclusive to Islam. The Hindu yogis too had great knowledge. We do not know much about the specific influence of the Chishti teachers before Gharib Nawaz or what methods they used to help their pupils. We do know, however, that under the direction of Gharib Nawaz and his spiritual heirs there developed a distinctive school of Sufism. It retained its fidelity to the teachings of Islam but also incorporated some Hindu practices. This enabled the Chishtis not only to attract Hindus to their gatherings but also to form a spiritual bridge between the two groups. For instance, according to an oral tradition, ‘Gharib Nawaz was advised by a yogi admirer to introduce music into his public meetings in Ajmer to attract Hindus to Islam. This practice led to many conversions.’\*

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<sup>4</sup> Al Ghazali, *Al Munqiz min as-zalal* (Deliverance from Error) translated by W.M. Watt, *The Faith and Practice of Al Ghazali*, London, 1963.

While the Hindus had access to great knowledge their rigid caste structure was lacking in love. The Chishtis had love. They brought to Hindustan an incredible explosion of love and joy. This explosion often expressed itself through the use of music and dance. The Chishtis opened the doors of ecstasy, and hungry hearts swarmed to taste its delights. In the case of Gharib Nawaz it was one of love and compassion for all. His shrine, like many others in modern India, is not exclusive to Muslims. The Hindus venerate the memory of these great beings and regard them as their own. They pray alongside the Muslims to the Saints for intercession with their problems and aspirations.

Legend relates that before Gharib Nawaz embarked on his work in Hindustan he took permission at the tomb of Khwaja `Ali Hujwiri in Lahore. This has also been the custom of latter day Sufi travelers, who regard this *wali* as the key to all spiritual work in the subcontinent. `Ali Mukhdum Hujwiri of Ghazna had followed the army of Mas`ud of Ghazna, Sultan Mahmud's son, to Lahore. He lived there for thirty years among, as he admitted in his writings, difficult and ignorant people. He died in Lahore around 1072 AD. He was one of the first great Muslim saints to die in Hindustan and his mausoleum in Lahore has remained throughout the ages the scene of constant visits from Hindu and Muslim alike. Close by the tomb a beautiful marble screen commemorates the place where he had his *Chilla*. A powerful energy still emanates from this spot.

Shaykh `Ali was the author of *Kashf-al-Mahjub*, probably the first significant book on Sufism to be written in Hindustan. Gharib Nawaz must have recognized him as his forerunner in this land. Hence it is understandable that in the place beside Shaykh `Ali's tomb Gharib Nawaz would have sought the inspiration as to how he should set about his work. For the Sufi, the atmosphere around the tomb of a saint may seem more alive than the mindless chatter of the living. Those who were truly alive in their earthly state seem to radiate from beyond the tomb a light that bears witness to the immortality of their souls.

Gharib Nawaz's visit to Lahore must have been at a period of general unrest. In 1186 AD Sultan Shihab ad-Din Ghuri was to defeat Khusrau Malik, the last of the Ghaznavid Kings of Lahore, and Lahore was to pass under Ghurid rule. Chronologically it makes sense that he would have embarked on his years of study in or around Multan after his visit to Lahore. The familiarity he would have acquired there with the language and the customs of the indigenous people would

have enabled him to have proceeded with confidence towards Ajmer in Rajasthan. This was a move towards an arena of intense activity.

Ajmer, set in the arid deserts of Rajasthan, was then the capital of Chauhan India. This made it a key religious and political center for the Hindu north. Delhi was still a comparatively unimportant fort. Gharib Nawaz was not positioning himself in a remote back post but right into the hot seat. The ruler, Prithviraj, belonged to one of the most powerful among the Rajput ruling families. Prithviraj himself is reported to have been an active as a warrior.

A later Chishti master, Shaykh Nizam ad-Din Awliya, believed that Prithviraj and his counselors were concerned by Gharib Nawaz's arrival in their city. However, his apparent ability to perform miracles made them reluctant to move against him. A follower of Gharib Nawaz, who was in the service of Prithviraj, was not being treated well. Gharib Nawaz sent a message to the Raja asking him to treat the man better. This was not done. Gharib Nawaz is then supposed to have predicted, 'We have seized Prithviraj alive and handed him over to the army of Islam.' Shortly afterwards Sultan Shihab ad-Din Ghuri's army attacked and defeated the forces of Prithviraj at the Second Battle of Tarain (1192 AD). Prithviraj was taken prisoner and later killed, thus fulfilling Gharib Nawaz's prediction.

It is noticeable that while contemporary accounts of Sufis' lives tend to be relatively sober, the passing of time adds luster to the tales. By the time the *Wali* has been buried for two or three hundred years stories of his miracles abound and he has become a cult figure. The following anecdotes about Gharib Nawaz's adventures in Ajmer are widely quoted and stem from a seventeenth century AD source.<sup>†</sup> It is a mixture of facts and legends. Prithviraj's mother was skilled in magic and twelve years before Gharib Nawaz's arrival in Ajmer she is supposed to have predicted his coming and the adverse effect this would have on her son's rule. According to legends, she had even drawn pictures of him. These had been distributed throughout the kingdom to prevent him ever gaining entry.

Gharib Nawaz is reported to have stopped in Delhi en route for Ajmer. There, it is said, he converted seven hundred people to Islam. At Samamna he was recognized by some of the Raja's followers and they requested he stay in the palace. However, while meditating there he received a warning from the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH), and quickly proceeded towards Ajmer. When he reached his destination he rested under a tree but the Raja's camel keepers would not allow him to stay there. He and his followers then proceeded to Ansagar Lake just outside the city. The

local Brahmans tried to prevent him from performing his *wudu* before prayer from the water of the Ansagar and the neighboring Pansela Lake. When his followers complained to him about this Gharib Nawaz asked them to bring water for his ewer. As soon as his ewer touched the waters of the lake, all the lakes and wells around dried up; even the milk in the breast of nursing mothers ceased to flow. Prithviraj instructed his first minister Jaipal, who was a skilled magician, to undo Gharib Nawaz's work. They engaged in a battle of magic and Allah brought victory to Gharib Nawaz in this encounter. He then restored the flow of water and many people accepted Islam. Jaipal was thus forced to acknowledge the superiority of the Khwaja and accepted Islam. The Raja, however, did not and shortly afterwards lost his throne to the Ghurid conqueror.

Whatever his reasons, Gharib Nawaz chose to settle himself in a key place at a key time in the history of northern Hindustan. In order to understand the historical significance of the events that took place at this time, both in general terms, and with specific relevance to the development of the Sufi orders in Hindustan, we have to look beyond the convenient black and white stereotypes with which latter day chroniclers have sometimes endeavored to cloak the events. More specifically we have to examine the beliefs and behavior of both Hindus and Muslims, and the interaction that was to develop between the two groups.

It has been suggested that the military successes of the Turkish warriors and their mercenaries were largely due to the general Hindu population's failure to support their Rajput rulers. The latter's indifference had resulted supposedly from an oppressive caste system which had sapped their vitality and commitment to support their co-religionists. Certainly the healthy economic development of cities, which was to follow the Muslim conquests, required free interaction between different castes and would not have been possible under the segregated Hindu model.<sup>‡</sup> This, however, does not in itself give the reason for the speed with which the Turks were able to gain a foothold in the north. A more important factor was probably that the Rajput rulers of the area were themselves exhausted by constant internecine warfare.

Ironically, there was a certain similarity between the Rajputs and the Turkish tribes. The Rajputs were, if anything, more concerned about the game of war for war's sake, and had a more clearly defined code of honor. This is charmingly illustrated by a letter that has been preserved from Anandapala of the Hindu Shahiya dynasty to Mahmud of Ghazna:



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*I have learnt that the Turks have rebelled against you and are spreading in Khurassan. If you wish, I shall come to you with five thousand horsemen, ten thousand soldiers and one hundred elephants, or if you wish I shall send you my son with double the number. I have been conquered by you and therefore I do not wish that another man should conquer you....*

The writer, al-Biruni adds:

*...the same prince cherished the bitterest hatred against the Muslims (and the letter was written) when the relations between them were already strained to the utmost.<sup>5</sup>*

Vidyadhar (or Ganda), the Chandela prince of Bundelkhand, who had formed a confederacy to oppose Sultan Mahmud, ended up by composing a poem in his praise which so pleased Mahmud that he rewarded him with the government of fifteen fortresses.

The Rajputs were unable to live with the taint of defeat and tended either to fight to the death or kill themselves and their families once defeated. This is where the question of caste contamination came into play, for once taken prisoner and forced to live and eat with those from another caste, the Hindus were unable to re-integrate with their own people. The Muslim soldier had no such fears.

Socially, any feelings of animosity that existed between the two groups would not have been based on purely religious or social differences. The Hindus would have avoided close social as opposed to commercial interaction with the Muslims but were quite prepared to have foreigners settle in their towns and left them to practice their faith undisturbed. In this they made an interesting contrast to the Muslims, who tended to be socially liberal, but religiously inflexible. The Hindu's faith is based on his racial identity. He is a Hindu by birth; a non-Hindu may admire and follow the teachings of the Hindu savants but he cannot change his ancestry. The Muslim, on the other hand, believes his teachings as being ordained for all mankind. Hence, if he is sincere in his beliefs, he cannot but help wish that others embrace Islam.

For hundreds of years prior to this period the Hindus had dealt with Arab traders and by the end of the twelfth century AD there were small Muslim communities scattered through the urban centers of Hindustan. The Hindus had benefited from the Arab knowledge of armaments such as

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<sup>5</sup> Lal, K.S., *Early Muslims in India*. New Delhi: Books and Books, p. 109.

catapults, the art of paper-making, which the Arabs had learnt from the Chinese, and of course Arab horses. They had grown to depend on the Arab merchants for their export trade. The latter was hence familiar to the urban Hindu for they had utilized his help with the export of their textiles, precious metals and stones, and food commodities, particularly sugar. Although the desecration and looting of Hindu temples by the Ghaznavid forces would have identified the Turks as a potentially dangerous and destructive element, equal damage was done to the people by the constant warfare between the Rajput warriors. The ordinary citizen wanted strong and stable government. More than anything else the Turkish Sultans' ability to provide this stability and their encouragement of trade and commerce must have swayed the Hindu town dweller in their favor. The menace of the Mongols was later to prove another factor. The Muslims were at least a known quantity and there were tangible benefits from their rule. They were needed as a bulwark against possible annihilation by Mongol forces. No Hindu who had heard of the total destruction by the Mongols of all cities in their wake would have hesitated in supporting the Turks as overlords as an option to the Mongols.

The battles fought by the Turks and their mercenaries in Hindustan could not be regarded as religious wars. They rather marked the natural territorial expansion of ambitious and warlike tribes. Indeed the first battle Shihab ad-Din Ghuri fought on the soil of Hindustan, was waged against a fellow Muslim rather than a Hindu ruler. Every Hindu prince had some Muslim mercenaries among his soldiers; equally Muslim commanders used Hindu troops. Central Asian history bears witness not only to the continuous warring between the different Turkish tribes but also to the inter-family feuds that divided brother from brother, uncle from nephew and invariably led to the eventual weakening of the tribe in question. Their code of behavior bore no resemblance to that laid down by the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) which enjoins Muslims to help fellow Muslims. Instead, expedient alliances were often made with non-Muslim rulers against fellow Muslims.

The Muslim conquest of North India was instigated by Shihab ad-Din of Ghur. His family, the Shansahani, originated from an area between Ghazna and Herat. His constant onslaughts on Hindustan were to continue unabated from 1175 AD to his death in 1206 AD.

After each foray, Shihab ad-Din would return to Ghazna to reassemble his forces and prepare for the next onslaught. He often resorted to trickery to obtain his objectives, and always sought alliances of expediency. Once he had control of the Punjab he was able to consider

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annexing the Rajput kingdoms of Delhi and Ajmer. Mahmud of Ghazna's wars had been concentrated against the Brahman Hindu Shahiyas, while Shihab ad-Din was to battle with the Rajputs. At the first Battle of Tarain in 1191 AD (587 AH) the Chauhan ruler Prithviraj inflicted a heavy defeat on him. Wounded, Shihab ad-Din retired to Ghazna but the shame of defeat hung heavily on him. He vowed to fight again. On the return march he sent a message to Prithviraj from Lahore demanding his submission and acceptance of Islam. The Raja replied that if Shihab ad-Din chose to retreat now he would not be pursued but if he persisted with his offensive his army would again be crushed. Shihab ad-Din replied that he had to consult his brother Ghiyas ad-Din in Ghur before concluding a treaty with Prithviraj. This reply put his enemy off guard. Shihab ad-Din immediately moved to attack the numerically far superior Rajput army in the early hours of the morning when they were unprepared for battle. After a long fight he won the day, Prithviraj was captured and later put to death. Prithviraj's son Rainsi was installed as governor of Ajmer on condition that he paid regular tribute to Shihab ad-Din. The towns of Sirsui, Smana, Kuhram, and Hansi were speedily occupied by Ghurid forces. Shihab ad-Din appointed his slave general, Qutb ad-Din Aybak as his viceroy for Hindustan and returned to Ghazna.

We have little reliable information about Gharib Nawaz's life in Ajmer but based on the general historical background it is conceivable that some of Prithviraj's animosity towards him may have arisen from the mistaken belief that he was a Ghurid spy. Shihab ad-Din's track record would have made Prithviraj fear that despite his first victory over him there was a strong possibility he would seek a second battle. Hence any Muslim foreigners would have been regarded with suspicion.

Certainly Gharib Nawaz's early years in Ajmer will have been spent in an unsettled atmosphere. Ajmer remained very much a Hindu center. Hari Raj, Prithviraj's brother, was twice to revolt against his nephew Rainsi, now Shihab ad-Din's vassal. Twice the viceroy Qutb ad-Din Aybak marched against him. The second time Hari Raj and his followers were besieged in Ajmer itself and chose to burn themselves alive rather than capitulate to Aybak. The Viceroy then entered Ajmer and decided to install a Muslim as ruler there. He compensated Rainsi with Ranthambhor. This happened in 1195 AD. Aybak had to face in 1196 AD another threat from the Mher tribe, who lived in the regions near Ajmer, and who allied themselves with the Chauhans in order to free Rajasthan of the invaders. This time it was Aybak who found himself besieged in

Ajmer but a relieving contingent arrived from Ghazna, and the Rajput army withdrew. Warfare between the Turkish and Rajput troops continued for some years. During this period Ajmer fell once again into Rajput hands. Indeed we learn of Sultan Iltutmish in the twelve twenties AD reclaiming Ajmer for the Muslims, along with some other towns in Rajasthan.

This clearly indicates that Hindustan did not succumb to Turkish domination overnight. Indeed the countryside was to remain throughout the ages predominantly Hindu with Muslim dominance in the urban areas. Towns and forts of strategic significance were controlled by a Muslim army headed by a Muslim governor. Aybak, and later Sultans extracted from the Hindu rulers and landowners taxes, but left the actual collection of revenue and administration of lands largely in Hindu hands. Some lands were indeed distributed to Muslims as part of their booty but this was only a small proportion of the overall territory. It was never a straightforward situation of conqueror and conquered. The numerical superiority of the indigenous peoples ensured that the Turks and those Muslims that followed after them would not have been able to maintain control and power without the support of certain sectors of the Hindu population. It must, therefore, be surmised that the reaction of much of the Hindu urban populace to their invaders was not an overtly hostile one. The benefits that came from the new developments in trade and commerce further encouraged them to co-operate with the newcomers. Strict sectarian militancy belonged to later generations. The Hindu traders and craftsmen were practical men; the spiritual beliefs of potential customers or commercial backers would have been of little concern provided their own way of living was not disrupted.

Gharib Nawaz's understanding of human nature would have enabled him to move with ease amongst the people of Ajmer. Hindu segregation appears to contrast strongly with the concept of equal spiritual opportunity for all that exists within the brotherhood of Islam. In reality, the penetrating eye of the gnostic would have enabled Gharib Nawaz to pierce the veils perpetrated by gross interpretations of Hinduism and Islam to discover some similarities between the mystics of both faiths.

The medieval Muslim philosopher al-Biruni in his celebrated *Kitab al-Hind* left us a perceptive and objective analysis of Hindu beliefs and practices. This aspect of his book was based on his observations and discussions with Brahman scholars. According to Al-Biruni, Muslims, then and now, have often tended to dismiss the Hindus as idol worshippers because of the proliferation of so-called gods and their liking for statues as devotional images. Yet the

beliefs of the elite would have been purely unitarian. They recognized the use of various names by different sects, such as Krishna and Siva, as means of realizing the unity of God. Al-Biruni acknowledged this in his following description of the Hindu belief in the unity of God. He describes idols as being made,

*only for the uneducated, low-caste people of little understanding, the Hindus (i.e. the educated Hindus) never made an idol of any supernatural being, much less of God. The crowd is kept in thralldom by all sorts of priestly tricks and deceits.*<sup>6</sup>

The original Vedic gods had been poetical representations of the attributes of the one God, but the teachings had deteriorated so that many of the Brahman caste exploited the masses, who were banned under threat of death from reading the sacred scriptures.

Al-Biruni was particularly intrigued by *Pantajali*, a Hindu text on the soul's search for liberation, which described the experiencing of that liberation as 'the return of the soul as a knowing being into its own nature.'<sup>7</sup> Al-Biruni commented on this that:

*the doctrine of Pantajali is akin to that of the Sufis regarding being occupied in meditation on the Truth (i.e. God) for they say: 'as long as you point to something you are not a monist; but when the Truth seizes upon the object of your pointing and annihilates it, then there is no longer an indicating person nor an object indicated'.*

The great Sufi master, Abu-Bakr al-Shibli said:

*Cast off all, and you will attain to Us completely, then you will exist; but you will not report about Us to others as long as your doing is like Ours.*

Abu Yazid al-Bistami once being asked how he had attained his level in Sufism answered:

*I cast off my own self as a serpent casts off its skin. Then I considered myself and found that I was He (God).*<sup>8</sup>

The Hindu seeker of knowledge had to follow a guru or teacher as the Sufi did his Shaykh. The Hindu disciple served his master with the same dedication and obedience as his Muslim

<sup>6</sup> Habib, Mohammad, *Politics and Society during the Early Medieval Period*, Delhi, 1974, p. 176, Source: Al Biruni *Kitab al-Hind* translated by E.C. Sachau, London, 1910.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 148.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

counterpart. The Hindus also had a long, liberal tradition of recognizing and revering holy men who were not of their faith. According to oral Chishti traditions, by the time he reached Ajmer Gharib Nawaz was well versed both in Sanskrit and in Hindu culture, thus we can understand how he would have been able to communicate with the spiritually oriented among the Hindus with sensitivity.

Gharib Nawaz's concern would have been to help any seeker that came to him achieve his full potential. Thus he was open to using whatever methods he believed appropriate for the people and the environment he found himself in. When he first came to Ajmer he found that the Hindus used many musical instruments. They sang *bhajans* in which verses glorifying God are set to music. Indeed the sound of their instruments was so loud that anything else was suppressed under the noise.

Whenever Gharib Nawaz tried to give a discourse in the streets his voice would be drowned by the instruments used for *bhajan*. Chishti legend claims that he prayed to the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) for permission to use musical instruments and verses in his teachings. He then composed verses of praise to Allah and His Prophet in Hindavi and set them to music. The local Hindus were attracted to this form of devotion. When an inspired being such as Gharib Nawaz uses such a tool, it leaves a lasting impact. Chishti oral tradition says that several Hindu families embraced Islam due to Gharib Nawaz and that many of these people came from the higher strata of Hindu society.

The Hindus' cultural familiarity with the use of music for devotional purposes had moved Gharib Nawaz to incorporate it into his teachings with the objective of bringing Hindus to Islam. However, he was not the first Sufi shaykh to use music. Many learned and spiritually enlightened people before him had attended *sama`*, as these musical assemblies were called. In the early period one person in the group used to recite from the Qur'an and the audience would listen to the repetition of the verses. The listeners then would connect with the meaning of the Qur'anic *ayaat* in such a way that they experienced intense joy. However, by the later periods, Sufi verses were often sung to music in place of Qur'anic recitations. This poetry had its own beauty.

Gharib Nawaz not only used the medium of music in his work, he also adapted certain yogic meditative practices, in particular the art of controlling breathing. His intuitive heart must have assessed the vacuum that existed in the devotional life of the Hindus, and moved to fill it. There were, at this period, some Hindu saints who taught that all-embracing love is the path to

enlightenment, as did the Chishtis. Indeed, a strong *Bhakti* movement had existed in the south long before Gharib Nawaz came to Hindustan. However, the south had a far more developed devotional tradition and there is no evidence that there was at that time in the north any widespread teaching in this vein. Nor do the Hindus appear to have striven towards spirituality through total love and service of humanity. This concept of submission through service was to form the core of Chishti teachings in Hindustan. It was a powerful ideal that attracted many to the Chishti fold.

Gharib Nawaz is reported as defining the highest form of *ta`at* to Allah as nothing but ‘to redress the misery of those in distress; to fulfill the needs of the helpless and to feed the hungry.’ He believed that the qualities that endear a man to Allah are, ‘first river-like generosity, secondly sun-like affection, and thirdly earth-like hospitality.’ He is also recorded as saying, ‘When we transcended the externals and looked around, we found the lover; the beloved and the love (itself) to be one, i.e., in the sphere of Oneness all is one.’<sup>9</sup>

Legend attributes many miracles to him. There is no doubt that there are those among the *walis* who possess certain powers which might be considered miraculous. The unseen world continually impinges on the seen and physical but most of us do not have access to these realms. It is said that when the men of Allah have had to deal with people who were skilled in the science of magic Allah bestowed on them powers greater than those they came to teach. This was the case of the Prophet Musa (Moses) who confronted the Pharaoh of Egypt and his enchanters who were skilled in the magical arts. When the Pharaoh asked Musa to give him a sign to prove that he was really a Messenger of Allah, Musa responded thus:

*So he threw his rod, then lo! It was a clear serpent. And he drew forth his hand, and lo! It was white to the beholders. The chiefs of Firon's (Pharaoh's) people said: Most surely this is an enchanter possessed of knowledge. (Qur'an: 7:107-109).*

When Musa threw the rod it was no longer Musa, the man, throwing an object. He became instead a manifestation of the divine will. Allah did this to a people who were so bemused by the magic of their sorcerers that they had become jaded and would not listen to the deeper message until Musa had first shown his credentials.

<sup>9</sup> K.A. Nizami, *Some Aspects of Religion and Politics in India during the Thirteenth Century*. Delhi, 1974, p. 185. Source: Amir Khwurd, *Sayyid Muhammad bin Mubarak Siyar-u'l-Auliya*, Delhi 1302 AH/1885 AD.

However, the Sufis believe the use of such powers should be restricted, and frown on unnecessary, as opposed to inspired, manifestations from the unseen. Shaykh Nizam ad-Din Awliya taught that ‘to perform miracles is not a commendable work for saints. Rather a Muslim should be a helpless beggar seeking only Truth.’<sup>10</sup>

The Sufi master, Ibn al-`Arabi was said to refer to miracles as the ‘menstruation of men’. He meant that just as women are not able to pray, enter mosques, or touch the Qur’an during their monthly periods, as they are in a state of impurity, so man has to descend from his pure contemplation of Allah in order to perform a miracle because to do this he has to act within a dimension lower than his preferred state of contemplation. When one such dervish visited Shaykh Hamid ad-Din Sufi Nagauri, a close pupil of Gharib Nawaz’s, the Shaykh also informed him that miracles were to be considered as the menstrual discharge of men.<sup>11</sup> In this context the Shaykh was inferring that Sufis should maintain a veil of secrecy over their abilities in this respect as women conceal their menstruation.

It is not surprising that two great teachers, albeit contemporary but living at considerable geographical distance from each other, should have used the same example. Whatever apparent differences may have existed between these two masters, the teachings of the Sufis were understood from one end of the Islamic world to the other. The level of itinerancy among the Sufis was such that teachings spread with great speed. Distractions were less and the tales of travelers made welcome entertainment. The simplicity of most people then and the greater ignorance that existed about the natural laws encouraged a curiosity about the miraculous and attracted the general population towards these stories.

It is related that a dervish visited Gharib Nawaz one day in Ajmer and asked him what was required of the serious seeker. He was told that if you live according to the *Shari`ah* of Islam and abstain from all that has been forbidden you have renounced the world. However, the Chishti brotherhood had nine conditions which had to be followed if you wanted to be a real dervish. Gharib Nawaz then asked Shaykh Hamid ad-Din Sufi Nagauri to take down the following points for the benefit of interested Muslims:

*1. One should not seek to earn money.*

<sup>10</sup> Awliya, Nizam ad-Din, *Morals for the Heart* translated by Lawrence, Bruce B., New York, 1992, p. 278.

<sup>11</sup> Rizvi, S.A.A., *A History of Sufism in India*, Volume I. Delhi, 1978, p. 128. Source: Shaykh Faridu`ud-Din Mahmud *Sururu's-Sudur*, Habibganj, Aligarh University MS.



2. *One should not borrow money from anyone.*
3. *One should not reveal to anyone nor seek help from anyone if one has eaten nothing, even for seven days.*
4. *If one gains plenty of food, money, grain or clothing, one should not keep anything until the following day.*
5. *One should not curse anyone; if one is hurt, one should pray to Allah to guide one's enemy towards the right path.*
6. *If one performs a virtuous deed, one should consider that the source of the virtue is due either to one's Pir's (Master's) kindness or to Divine Mercy.*
7. *If one performs an evil deed one should consider one's evil self responsible for the action, and try to protect oneself from such deeds. Fearing Allah, one should be careful to avoid action which may involve him again in evil.*
8. *Having fulfilled all the above conditions, one should regularly fast during the day and spend the night in prayer.*
9. *One should remain quiet and speak only when it is imperative to do so. The Shari`ah makes it unlawful both to talk incessantly and keep totally silent. One should utter only such words as those which please Allah.<sup>12</sup>*

Gharib Nawaz is also reported as saying that the distinguishing mark of one who had recognized Allah was his escape from crowds of people: 'The Hajjis walked around the *Ka`ba*, but the *`arifs* circumambulated the heart.'<sup>13</sup>

We do not know how many followers Gharib Nawaz brought with him to Ajmer nor how rapidly the circle around him grew. It is, however, recorded that he was supported in his work by Sayyid Husayn Mashadi, whom the viceroy Qutb ad-Din Aybak had appointed as the military governor for the area. According to seventeenth century AD sources the Sayyid was a pious man

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<sup>12</sup> Ibid., p. 124.

<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

who was instrumental in bringing many Hindus under his protection to the fold of Islam. He was later killed by tribesmen and buried in Tulambli.

If this connection with the military governor is accurate, it would seem that Gharib Nawaz did not maintain the same rigid separation from the rulers as did his spiritual successors. The embryonic state of Muslim rule in the area may have caused him to adopt a more active role in advising the authorities in dealing with the local population, than would have been necessary for later Chishti teachers.

The soldiers of the Turkish army were not motivated by spiritual considerations; although there were among the administrative officers, traders and seekers of fortune, who always arrived once a new town had been captured, men of faith. These men may have wished to share their beliefs with the people amongst whom they had come to live. There must also have been some bigoted zealots who believed in conversion to Islam for all non-Muslims by force. In Muslim countries the Christian and Jewish populations, who were peoples with revealed scriptures, were known as *Zimmis* and were obliged to pay a set tax which guaranteed them the protection of the state. During the first conquests in Hindustan by Muslim forces it was debated as to whether Hindus and Buddhists could be afforded the same status as the Christians and Jews, who had their Scriptures of the Bible and the Torah. The Hanafi *madhhab* allowed for their inclusion while some of the other *madhhabs* did not. The Turkish rulers were Hanafis and any other conclusion would anyway have been impractical with regard to Hindustan, where the Hindu population was always to maintain an overwhelming numerical superiority to the Muslim.

The initial Muslim population of Ajmer was small. As was customary after a victory, the Viceroy's first act was building a mosque. This was mainly constructed with materials obtained from demolished temples and was called *Arhai din-ka-jhanpra* or 'hut constructed in two and a half days.' However; by the time of his successor Sultan Iltutmish an extension had to be built to the mosque. This indicates that by that time the Muslim population had increased considerably. They must still have been a minority.

Gharib Nawaz married some years after his arrival in Ajmer. His bride was the daughter of Sayyid Wajih ad-Din, a brother of the military governor, Sayyid Husayn. It was not uncommon for Sufis to remain celibate until their fifties or sixties. They would then marry and have children. Islam recommends marriage as being a natural and desirable state. The Muslim marries, has children, and interacts with the world. There are no monks in Islam. Separation from the

world is seen as illusory and artificial. However, many spiritual seekers were afraid of the distractions of marriage and family with its accompanying dissipation of energy. A man travelling on the road in search of knowledge is hardly in a position to support a wife and fulfill his obligations as a husband and father. When he has attained a level of spiritual maturity he is able to take on these responsibilities joyously and correctly. Gharib Nawaz only considered marriage when he was firmly settled in Ajmer. His second marriage to the daughter of a Hindu chief, who had been captured in the war, was to follow shortly after his first. Just as his first marriage connected him to the Muslim establishment, his second made him a bridge between the two peoples. Gharib Nawaz had three sons, Shaykh Abu Sa'id, Shaykh Fakhr ad-Din, and Shaykh Husam ad-Din and one daughter, Bibi Hafiza Jamal. It appears that Bibi Hafiza Jamal inherited her father's spiritual orientation and was close to him. She was married to one of the sons of his pupil, Shaykh Hamid ad-Din Sufi Nagauri. It was quite common for a favored pupil to either himself or have one of his sons marry the master's daughter. Bibi Hafiza Jamal is buried near her father's tomb. Gharib Nawaz died in Ajmer on 6 Rajab 633 AH, 16 March 1236 AD, when in his nineties. His two favored pupils were Shaykh Qutb ad-Din Bakhtiyar Kaki, who chose to settle in Delhi, and Shaykh Hamid ad-Din Sufi Nagauri who preferred to live as a peasant farmer in rural Rajasthan.

### **The Shrine of Gharib Nawaz**

The death of Gharib Nawaz marked not the end of his work in Hindustan but rather a new beginning with his emergence as the country's premier Muslim saint. Even in the early years after his death the tomb was an object of veneration and pilgrimage. Both the great and humble journeyed to ask for blessings and for intercession in times of difficulty. This pattern has continued unbroken to the present time.

Gharib Nawaz dedicated his life to the development and nourishment of higher values in the people amongst whom he lived. He was a beacon of light and the Hindus, who came into contact with him, recognized that. They were naturally a devout people and they responded to the message of divine reality. However, with the advent of the conquering Muslim armies, they began to associate Islam with oppression and loss of land and wealth. The seeds of the sectarian problems, which are prevalent today, were sown in those times.

It has always been the right of Muslims to pray to the Prophet Muhammad (PBUH) for his assistance. Many people, however, feel that the majesty of his being is so far beyond their reach that they prefer to pray to lesser intermediaries, who are somehow more accessible and familiar. Shi`a Muslims approach the Imams of the *Ahl al-Bayt*, while some Sunnis find the saints of Allah fulfill the same function. *Shirk* is considered a grave sin in Islam and pilgrimage to the *Awliya's* tombs is often criticized for this reason by those who strictly follow the *Shari`ah*. Certainly it is a practice that can lend itself to abuse, and ridiculous claims are often made for the dead saints; claims which they themselves would have been the first to repudiate.

Misinterpretation of this practice is particularly prevalent in Hindustan, where there is a long history of cult worship and deification of dead saints. Yet while such a cultural orientation in some part explains the proliferation of shrines throughout the land and their universal popularity, it cannot account for the powerful energy that radiates from many of the tombs. This strange phenomenon, too often dismissed as mere imagination, defies the intellect and challenges the heart.

Gharib Nawaz is only one among many great beings who are buried in Hindustan, some in unknown graves. Why did he come to be held in such esteem? It has been suggested that the answer for this lies in Ajmer's position as a strategic center for the North. It is situated in the very heart of Rajputana and Rajput resistance was to continue for generations after the death of Gharib Nawaz. Could the Muslim rulers' enthusiastic patronage of the shrine be regarded in the light of political expediency? Was it useful to maintain a Muslim saint as their representative amidst enemy territory and as a reminder of the greatness of Islam? This theory does not explain the fascination the tomb has always held for Hindus as much as Muslims. From about 1400 AD there was a period of some one hundred and forty years when Ajmer was to pass on several occasions into Hindu hands. One of these rulers, Raja Maldev of Jodhpur held the memory of Gharib Nawaz in such esteem that he added some new buildings to the surroundings of the shrine and treated the Shaykh's descendants with much respect. Indeed Gharib Nawaz's popularity with the Mughal rulers more probably springs from his position as a bridge between two peoples. The Mughal period was one of conciliation and attempts to integrate their Hindu subjects, and Gharib Nawaz was a popular saint with all.

It is said that one of his first acts once he settled in Ajmer was the establishment of a *langarkhana* from which both Hindu and Muslim poor were fed daily. This is a practice that has

continued up until now. The Mughal Emperors, as well as donating lavishly to embellishing the tomb and the surrounding areas, also gave two cauldrons to hold the food cooked for the poor. The Emperor Akbar's Shaykh was a Chishti master, Shaykh Salim of Fatehpur Sikri. He advised the Emperor to journey on foot to the shrine of Gharib Nawaz to pray for a son. When the future Emperor Jahangir was born generous gifts were bestowed on the shrine and its keepers. It also marked the beginning of Akbar's family's attachment to Gharib Nawaz. Jahangir was a frequent visitor during his reign and spent lavishly on the shrine. Jahan Ara Begum, the daughter of the Emperor Shah Jahan, wrote a book about the Chishti masters and so revered the memory of Gharib Nawaz that she used her hair to sweep the floor of his shrine. Even proud Aurangzeb, whose rigid puritanical bent made him wary of shrine worship, visited the tomb of Gharib Nawaz on several occasions. The tendency to bring visiting dignitaries to the shrine has continued. When George V was entertained with a tiger shoot on his visit to India, a visit to Ajmer was considered a more appropriate activity for his wife, Queen Mary. The shrine apparently made a great impression on her. She had the *Houz* used for ablutions repaired and roofed after her visit to the Shrine in 1911.

Those people who have an interest in or connection with the Chishti order believe they benefit by visiting Gharib Nawaz. It is as if by contact with the earthly source of their order's teachings they align themselves more closely with the divine source, whose representative they believe Gharib Nawaz was. The biographer of Hazrat Inayat Khan, one distinguished modern Chishti master, recalls in his book the impact his first pilgrimage to Ajmer made on him. Hazrat Inayat Khan was responsible during the early part of this century for introducing many westerners to Sufism. During his years in Europe and the States he apparently spoke often about the peace that surrounded the Shrine at Ajmer. He would describe the contrast between the sense of serenity that came from the tomb and the constant activity around it that seemed in no way to impinge upon its silent strength. It is this magnetism that continues year after year to attract a wide variety of visitors.

The shrine lies at the center of the town and is surrounded by buildings that house both permanent residents and the transient pilgrims. There is a mosque, several other tombs and the inevitable abundance of stalls selling stones and other trinkets that exist in most shrine complexes. The activity of everyday life continues all around, and outside the intricately carved doors, which are the gateway to the tomb, *qawwals* chant. The attendants of the shrine seem to

be forever tossing sweetly scented rose petals on top of the tomb itself, while the visiting supplicants encircle it. Many Muslim shrines do not permit women to enter the tomb area but there are no such rules at Ajmer. Accessible to all during his lifetime, the pattern has continued after his death.

It is said that the perceptive can pick up something of the human personality the *wali* had from the serenity around his tomb. In the case of Gharib Nawaz the feeling is that of all-encompassing generosity. He answers the call of all in need; no barriers between faiths are drawn. He is in truth a universal saint. In this aspect of his *barakat* perhaps lies the real reason for his widespread popularity and power of attraction. It is believed by many that wishes made at his tomb-side are granted. The strength of the supplicant's belief helps bring about the desired result, but Gharib Nawaz's reputation of accommodating himself to his visitors' needs rests on more than that. For hundreds of years people have presented themselves before him and their prayers have been answered. Awareness of these fulfilled desires has been encoded into the consciousness of the people of Hindustan and of others who are devotees of the Chishtis.

Gharib Nawaz lit a candle of hope amid the Rajasthan desert to guide the slaves of Allah. It has been a candle that has never died. He lit the candle with his overflowing love of humanity. The Chishti masters preach the doctrine of *muhabbat* or the search for divine love. The word in Arabic comes from *habb*, a seed. In nature the seed perishes in love of perpetuity; equally the Sufi teachers perish in linking the eternal knowledge with them to those they serve in the same manner that the seed perishes in linking its species to its offspring.

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\* Bruce B. Lawrence, 'Early Indo-Muslim Saints and Conversion' in *Islam in Asia* (Vol. I), Magnes Press, Hebrew University, Jerusalem, 1984.

† *Jawahir-i-Farid* by `Ali Asghar Chishti – work completed in 1623 AD (1033 AH).

‡ Habib, Mohammad, *Politics and Society during the Early Medieval Period*, Delhi, 1974.

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