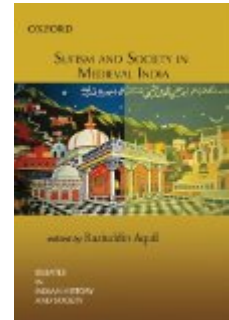




Raziuddin Aquil, ed.. *Sufism and Society in Medieval India*. Debates in Indian History and Society Series. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2010. xxiv + 184 pp. \$45.50, cloth, ISBN 978-0-19-806444-2.



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This is an interesting collection of essays on aspects of Sufism during the twelfth through eighteenth centuries by well-known scholars in the field, such as K. A. Nizami, J. M. S. Baljon, and Simon Digby, among others. All nine essays have been published previously. They are brought together here, along with an introductory essay by Raziuddin Aquil, the editor, as part of Oxford University Press's Debates in Indian History and Society series. Thematically, many of the essays are concerned with the role of Sufis in the subcontinent in Islamization and conversion of Hindus to Islam, with the authors taking different stands on the issue. Subsidiary sets of issues relate to Sufis and their relation to the state and to possession of wealth and property, as well as relations between different Sufi orders and between Sufis and scholars of Islamic law (the ulama), language, and social class. One essay, by Richard M. Eaton, deals with the role of women's songs in transmitting Sufi ideas to illiterate villagers in the seventeenth-century Deccan.

Aquil frames the primary concern of the book, namely, the roles that medieval Sufis played in the conversion of Hindus to Islam, in historiographic terms by focusing on the perspectives of the essay writers themselves. Broadly, Aquil sees three distinct scholarly positions: those whose "writings ... emphasize the pluralistic character of Indian society and the commendable role of Sufis in providing a practical framework for communal harmony" (essays by Nizami, S. A. A. Rizvi, and Carl W. Ernst, in Aquil's view, belong in this group); those who adopt "a more empirically sustainable approach even while remaining committed to the idea of secularism and such other virtues expected from historians in Indian academia" (in this group, he places the contributions by Eaton, Digby, and Muzaffar Alam); and those who take "a Muslim separatist position" (the only example in the volume is the piece by Aziz Ahmad) (p. x). On the one hand, Aquil expresses strong disagreement with Ahmad, writing that he "offers a somewhat cynical interpretation marred by his separatist outlook, which, in turn,

was influenced by the post-Partition Muslim predicament in the Indian subcontinent” (p. xv). On the other hand, Aquil feels that Nizami, for example, is prone to making broad generalizations, characterizing the ulama as “conservative and reactionary theologians,... [leaving] the Sufis to rise to the occasion, releasing ‘syncretic forces which liquidated social, ideological, and linguistic barriers’ between Hindus and Muslims for building a ‘common cultural outlook.’” In contrast, Aquil clearly esteems the work of those he terms “empiricist,” describing the essay by Alam, for example, as a “balanced and empirically dense argument on the question of community relations” (p. xvi). Seen in this light, the essays not only offer different perspectives on the roles of Sufis in medieval India, but also illustrate different academic approaches, over the past fifty years, to that history.

Four essays (by Nizami, Eaton, Ernst, and Digby) deal with Sufis of the Chishti order. Two others (by Ahmad and Rizvi) also do so, though more generally as part of an overview of Sufism in the medieval period. Why were the Chishtis so important? As Digby explains, the Chishtis rose to prominence during the Delhi Sultanate (1192-1398) in large part because they possessed the “historical advantage ... of ascendancy at a particular moment in the development of the capital city [Delhi] of a great kingdom” when “the ideologues and the writers”—namely, Amir Khusrau, Amir Hasan, and the historian Ziya al-Din Barani—expressed their allegiance to Nizam al-Din (d. 1325), and wrote about him in works that were widely disseminated and became very popular over time (p. 136). Without these panegyrists, Digby argues, the Chishtis would never have occupied center stage in Sultanate Delhi.

In this context, geography was key, given that Nizam al-Din’s Sufi hospice (*khanqah*) was located in Delhi, the capital city. Each Sufi shaikh claimed *wilaya* or spiritual authority over a specific territory. Claims to such authority, Digby writes, were

“vigorously and actively pursued by shaikhs in Khurasan in the eleventh and twelfth centuries.... In the Delhi Sultanate this notion of the territorial *wilayat* of a Shaikh led, at the beginning of the fourteenth century, to the common identification of Shaikh Nizam-al-Din of the Chishti *silsila* [Sufi order] with the well-being and fortunes of the capital city of Delhi and the realm over which it held sway” (p. 126). Although these spiritual claims were contested by other Sufi orders, the ulama, and the sultans themselves, over time Nizam al-Din’s tomb-shrine in Delhi “permanently ... affected the historical consciousness of Muslims in the subcontinent and ... furthered the notion of a special position of the Chishti *silsila* in the establishment of the enduring Muslim presence in India” (p. 127). The status and significance of the other “great” Chishti masters—particularly that of Mu`in al-Din (d. 1230) of Ajmer, the founder of the order, but others as well—were magnified in order to support the legend of Nizam al-Din. Here again, geography was significant, for Ajmer was an outpost, a frontier, which, once associated with the Chishti founder, became central to the story of India’s Islamization.

As Aquil points out, many of the authors disagree about the Sufis’ role in converting the local population to Islam. Nizami argues that the Chishti sheikhs attracted low-caste Hindu converts in rural India, away from the centers of political power, by the force of their spirituality and egalitarianism. Focusing on the Chishti ideals of social service, nonpossession of material goods, pacifism and nonviolence, disassociation from the state, and refusal to accept grants of land, Nizami argues that “the early Chishti saints of India did not form a part of the Delhi Empire. They formed a world of their own. The contamination of court life could not touch their spiritual serenity and classless atmosphere” (p. 24).

Ahmad posits a series of transformations in the different orders’ attitudes toward Hinduism, “which begins with hostility, passes through a

phase of co-existence and culminates in tolerance and understanding” (p. 47). However, the essay itself does not do a good job of illustrating this series of phases. While Ahmad does discuss differences between the attitudes of early Chishti Sufis and those who came after Nizam al-Din, his discussion of the Naqshbandi, Shattari, and Qadiri orders is rather static.

Rizvi’s essay is a brief overview of different historical epochs. Peaceful proselytization by Arab traders in Gujarat and Malabar, who married Hindu women and brought up their children as Muslims, was followed by political conquest by Muhammad bin Qasim in the eighth century and further conquests by subsequent sultanates. In general, the sultans concentrated on the tribal chieftains and Brahmins, hoping that converting them would lead to large-scale conversions at the local level. However, in Rizvi’s view, this “policy was not very successful because most of [the] converts apostatized” (p. 57). Only war captives, who had no choice in the matter, converted.

Rizvi includes an interesting discussion of Ismaili resistance to the raids and killings by Mahmud of Ghazni. He disagrees with historian Muhammad Habib that there was a “landslide in favour of the new faith” during Nizam al-Din’s era (p. 59). He also disagrees with Sir Thomas Arnold that Sufis were responsible for the “wholesale conversion” of Hindus, though Mu`in al-Din “converted a large number of Hindus, presumably low-caste ones” (pp. 59-60). But he continues: “The Chishti interest in the betterment of Hindus and of the untouchables among them as is claimed by modern Muslims, is a figment of their imagination” (p. 62). Indeed, apart from the mother of Farid al-Din (d. 1265) and Gisu Daraz (d. 1422), who engaged in conversion, Rizvi believes, none of the Chishti Sufis was interested in doing so. The state policy of conversion was terminated by Akbar in the sixteenth century.

Eaton’s essay maintains that part of the problem with understanding how conversion occurred

in medieval India arises from the fact that historians have been looking at elite, esoteric forms of Sufi discourse, which were never meant to be widely disseminated in society at large. What sense could ordinary village folk, such as cotton carders and barbers, possibly make of “an abstract system of mystical stages and states requiring an immense degree of intellectual and spiritual discipline” (p. 70)? To understand how knowledge of Islamic precepts spread beyond the limited circle of Sufi initiates, Eaton looks at folk literature in the medieval Deccan. Short poems sung by women while doing household chores—spinning thread, grinding food grains, rocking a child to sleep—touch on elements of Sufi doctrine in simple terms, in the vernacular Dakkani spoken by everyone. “Devotion to God and respect for one’s *pir*” [spiritual guide] are constant themes of this literature (p. 73). Eaton also shows how the process of Islamization was furthered by women’s visits to *dargahs* (Sufi tomb complexes) and by their concern with childbirth and fertility more generally.

Ernst deals with the question of conversion with reference to the Chishtis of Khuldabad, in Maharashtra (not far from Aurangabad). Like Eaton, he too emphasizes the elite nature of Sufi discourse in *malfuzat* [anecdote collection] texts, among others. He notes that apart from the occasional mention of yogis, these texts make no mention of Hindus whatsoever. Hindus are only mentioned in a political context, which had no religious significance as far as Sufis were concerned. Ernst therefore concludes that although the medieval Sufis of Khuldabad lived in an Indian environment and adopted certain features of Indian culture, such as Indian poetry and the practice of eating *pan*, they lived in a world apart, one that was closed to most of the people around them. This argument is reminiscent of Nizami when he writes that the Sufis lived “in a world of their own,” though Ernst’s discussion is historically grounded in a way not found in Nizami (p. 24).

Three essays address other Sufi orders and periods: Yohannan Friedmann's is excerpted from his larger study of Shaikh Ahmad Sirhindi (d. 1624), and argues that Sirhindi seldom talked about Hindus in his correspondence, indicating that he was indifferent to them. However, he was hostile to their participation in the Mughal government, and expressed these views forcefully in letters he wrote to Mughal officials. Baljon's essay discusses Shah Wali Allah's (d. 1762) views on the visitation of Sufi tomb-shrines, showing how these views changed over time. Because Shah Wali Allah had been brought up in a home where such visitation was common practice, he saw no objection to it initially. But in his middle years--influenced, Baljon writes, by the writings of Ibn Taimiyya (d. 1328)--he became more critical of the practice, and by the end of his life, he was sharply critical of it and of belief in the miraculous powers of dead Sufi *pirs*. But unlike Ibn Taimiyya, he never condemned the practice of visiting the Prophet's grave in Medina.

Alam's essay, the last in the book, deals with the complex relations between Muslims and Hindus in Awadh in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, exploring the economic and political relations between Rajputs, local zamindars, and Muslim gentry in the countryside. He highlights the importance of the Sufi concept of *wahdat al-wujud* (unity of being) in Awadh, particularly as seen through the life of a Qadiri soldier-Sufi, Sayyid Shah Abd al-Razzaq Bansawi, who founded a Qadiri hospice in Bansa, near Lucknow, in the eighteenth century. Bansawi had cordial relations with Hindus and *malamatis* (Sufis who flouted the sharia), among others, though he himself, Alam believes, adhered strictly to the limits of the sharia. In my view, the essay would have been stronger if the author had included direct source material to illustrate his many-sided arguments, and refrained from the use of such labels as "liberal," "reconciliatory," "syncretism," and "resilient Islam" (pp. 163, 171). These characteri-

zations often marred for me an otherwise fascinating topic.

Although this slim volume does a good job of illuminating academic discussion of the role of Indian Sufis in conversion during the twelfth through eighteenth centuries and particularly illustrates the importance of the Chishti order during the Sultanate period, I would critique the title *Sufism and Society in Medieval India*. The book's overarching concern is to explore Hindu-Muslim relations, in particular efforts at the conversion of Hindus by Sufis after the Muslim conquest of India in the twelfth century. This is a much narrower lens than is implied by "Sufism and Society," and one grounded in the contemporary, post-Partition politics of India and Pakistan. In a sense, then, it engages in the very dynamics that Aquil sees animating the work of some of the historians presented in the book.

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