

The Origin and Evolution of Sufism

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Sufism (*tasawwuf*) is the name given to mysticism in Islam. The term is taken from the root word in Arabic ‘suf’ which means ‘wool’.¹ It basically denoted the ones who denounced the world, chose a mystic way of life and wore coarse woollen clothes. The explanation for this is also found in the oldest extant Arabic treatise on Sufism by Abu Nasr al-Saraj, who declared that “the woollen raiment is the habit of the prophets and the batch of the saints and elect”.² This act of devoting oneself to a mystic life is called ‘sufism’ in Islam. Sufis themselves prefer to say that their name is derived from ‘safa’ which meant ‘purity’.³ The term Sufism embraces the philosophy and practices which aim at direct communion between God and man, and those who practice these are called Sufis.

According to Khaliq Ahmad Nizami⁴, those who devoted their lives to religious studies and religious devotion after the times of the *tabii* were called *zahid* – ‘the pious’ - and *abid* – ‘the servant (of Allah)’. It is only in relation to the succeeding generations that one comes across the term Sufi. According to Abdur Rahman Jami⁵, who quotes earlier sources, the first spiritualist to be given the title of Sufi was Shaykh Abu Hashim Kufi (d. 776).⁶

Let us examine the etymological meaning and origin of the term *Sufi*. It is made up of three Arabic letters: *s- w- f*, but there is much scholarly dispute surrounding it. One view is that the word Sufi is derived from the Arabic word *saf*, which means *line* or *row*, referring here to those early Muslim contemporaries of the Prophet who stood in the first row during prayer, having reached the mosque well in time. Others contend that the word is derived from the word *suffa*, the *verandah* or *porch* of the Prophet’s mosque in

¹ The Awarif-ul-Ma’arif by Shaikh Sahahabuddin Umar B. Muhammad Suhrawardi. Trans. By Lait Col. H. Wilberforce Clark, Lahore, 1973. Pg. 8.

² Ibn Arabi. *Fusus al Hakim*. Trans. By Hamzah Farsuri 1980. (101, p. 29-21).

³ [82, p. 10] Ibid.

⁴ K. Nizami.

⁵ see Abdur Rahman Jami, *Nafahatu’l Uns*, Teheran, 1337/1918-19, pp. 31-32. Abdur Rahman Jami was a prominent Sufi of the Naqshbandi order (see the chapter on the Naqshbandi order in his book).

⁶ see Rizvi, S.A.A., *A History of Sufism in India*, Vol. I, Delhi, 1975, p.31; and Dar, B.A., *Early Sufis*, in Sharif, M.M., *A History of Muslim Philosophy*, Delhi, 1961, p.336.

Madinah. The traditions say that a number of the companions of the Prophet who had no home stayed in this verandah. They spent their time in worship, in learning by heart the verses of the Qur'an and memorizing the words of the Prophet. They disengaged themselves from worldly activities. The Prophet and his companions looked after their needs. Since the porch of the mosque had virtually become their home, they came to be called *Ashaab-i Suffa* or 'People of the Porch'.

The Beginnings of Sufism

The Sufis trace the origin of Sufism or *tasawwuf* to the Prophet of Islam. They believe that there were two dimensions to the revelations received by the Prophet: one took the form of the words of the Qur'an, the other that of the divine inspiration within his heart. The religious scholars or *ulama* (sing. *alim*) were experts in the knowledge of the Qur'an and *hadith*, but it was claimed that 'the knowledge of the heart' remained with those called the Sufis.

The claim of the Sufis that *tasawwuf* had its source in the life of the Prophet and his companions based on certain facts. The Prophet led an extremely simple life. He avoided all luxuries. Any valuable presents received by him were immediately disposed of in charity. His personal possessions, even at the time when the whole of Arabia acknowledged his supremacy, comprised of no more than an ordinary mattress to sleep on and a pitcher to keep water in. He fasted for months on end and slept little preferring to spend the major portion of the night in prayers⁷. His very life was the proof and the example of his knowledge and commitment to both the theoretical concepts of Islam as well as its everyday practice.

The faith and practice of Islam is made up of three elements, which together form the basis of Islamic religion. These are: *iman*, or belief in the revealed word of God; *itaah*, or compliance with the *shahaadah* (Islamic creed); and *ihsan*, or the practice of virtue and sincerity.

⁷ 73:20

Umar, a companion of the Prophet and the second Caliph, narrates a tradition, which elucidates these elements: “One day, when we were with the Prophet of God, there came to him a man whose clothes were of an exceeding whiteness, and his hair was of an exceeding blackness, nor were there any signs of travel upon him. Although none of us had seen him before, he sat down opposite the Prophet. He asked the Prophet to tell him what is meant by surrender to God (*Islam*). The Prophet answered: ‘The surrender is that you should say prayers five times, fast during Ramadan, pay zakat and, if you can, go on the pilgrimage to the Sacred house (the Kabah).’ He said: ‘You have spoken truly.’ We were amazed that, having questioned the Prophet, he should corroborate what he said.

“Then he said: ‘Tell me what faith (*iman*) is.’ Then the Prophet said: ‘It is that you should believe in God, in angels and the books, the prophets and the Last Day, and you should believe that no good or evil comes but by His providence.’ ‘You have spoken truly,’ he said. Then he said, ‘Tell me what excellence, *ihsan*, is.’ The Prophet answered, ‘It is that you should worship God as if you saw Him, or if you do not see Him, truly, He sees you.’ Then the stranger went away. Umar Farooq, the Prophet’s companion, says that he stayed there long after that person had gone, until the Prophet said to him, ‘O Umar, do you know who the questioner was?’ He said, ‘God and His Prophet know best, but I do not know at all.’ ‘It was Gabriel,’ said the Prophet. ‘He came to teach you your religion.’”⁸

The Sufis lay most emphasis on *ihsan*. Put most simply, *ihsan* can be described as that level of devotion at which the devotee is completely absorbed in the worship of God. The Sufis strongly believe that there are many levels of excellence in the actual practice of *ihsan*, and the objective of the Sufi practice is to raise this level of excellence. That is why they define true *ihsan* as the attainment of that level of devotion at which one begins to experience the presence of God.

The Qur’an indeed lays down that the path of virtue lies between hope and fear. It is very clear on this point when it says: “And pray to Him with fear and hope; His mercy is within reach of the righteous.”⁹ However, according to the Sufi definition, consciousness

⁸.Muslim, 8.

⁹.Qur’an 7:55

of the fact that the Lord is watching our every movement and knows the innermost recesses of our hearts corresponds only to the lower level of devotion and prayer. When one is conscious of God's ever-watchful eye, one cannot but desist from evil actions. It is in this sense that prayer keeps us from indecency and evil, as stated in the Qur'an.¹⁰

However, only a prayer inspired by true intention (*niyat*) can yield the desired result. Some merely wish to lead a pious life aimed at salvation in the next life. This is the first level of piety: God is watching us and, as a result, we desist from sin. Some aim at experiencing Him face to face in this life. This is the second level of piety according to the Sufis. Thus, when one whose heart is filled with love of God prostrates himself before Him and at that moment has the experience of seeing God face to face, this state of total absorption results in ecstasy.

The Sufis strive for and attest to having the experience of seeing God, Whom they call their Beloved One, face to face. There are instances of Sufis falling senseless when possessed by the ecstasy of extreme love. The Sufis say that the Prophet and some of his companions were totally absorbed in their prayers every time they prayed and that this complete absorption in prayer is the foundation of *tasawwuf*.

According to the Sufis this higher level of excellence in worship, which might lead to ecstasy, may be achieved through *dhikr*. The Qur'an says "Remember God always so that you may prosper."¹¹ At yet another place, it says: "Believers, be ever mindful of God: praise Him morning and evening."¹² The Sufis gave *dhikr* a formal, well-defined shape by attaching greater importance to its popular rather than the Qur'anic meaning. They invented a number of ways for calling out the name of God—silently, loudly, and even accompanied by music or the beating of drums—as a means of achieving their goal.

The Ulama, representing the orthodox point of view, objected to the Sufis giving such great importance to the mere recitation or chanting of the words of the Qur'an. They held that for the understanding of the message of Islam, it is not the recitation of the words which is important, but rather the spirit of prayer, the attachment to God, and the willingness to surrender one's will to His will by pursuing and reflecting upon the

¹⁰ .Qur'an 29:45.

¹¹ 62:10

¹² . 33:41-42

meaning of the divine words. And that, when the spirit is fully observed, the desired spiritual benefit can be achieved from the words of the Qur'an.

Sufi links with Orthodoxy

The Sufis, like all other followers of Islam, consider the Prophet Muhammad to be the most perfect embodiment of their ideas and beliefs, and trace the roots of Sufism back to his life. Indeed, the life of the Prophet of Islam does provide a Sufi with a perfect example to follow. The traditions narrate a life of poverty, sincerity, submission to God's will, deep devotion, contemplation, nightlong vigils and prayers, nearness to God, divine inspiration and other-worldly visions. Though there are also traditions that tell us that the Prophet discouraged people from spending all their time in ritual worship and admonished them for not taking any interest in worldly activities, the Sufis do not consider these *hadith* very relevant. They rather link themselves to those companions of the Prophet who lived in the porch of the mosque of Madinah, more bent on total devotion than the pursuit of worldly affairs, and prefer to remember the fact that both the Prophet and his companions supported them and saw to it that they did not lack the necessities of life. This shows that the Prophet did not disapprove of their full-time engagement in acts of worship.

The Sufis always laid emphasis on *safa*,¹³ that is, purification. The Qur'an has this to say: "He indeed shall be successful who purifies himself"¹⁴ and 'He will indeed be successful who purifies his soul, and he will indeed fail who corrupts his soul.'¹⁵

We learn from the Qur'an that God made the human soul perfect and endowed it with an understanding of what is right and wrong¹⁶ But, unfortunately, human life being a trial, it is beset with pitfalls and the soul is corrupted during its sojourn on earth. To bring it back to its pristine state requires purification. This action is most pleasing to God, for it shows a desire to return to and follow the path laid down by Him. Thus the purification of the soul is essential to attain divine approval.

¹³ Indeed, some scholars tried mistakenly to link the term *Sufi* with the word *safa*, or purity..

¹⁴. Qur'an 87:14

¹⁵.91:9-10

¹⁶. 91:7-8

The only way to win divine approval and become one with the divine will is to sacrifice one's life for God: the rite of purification is a necessary step for one who wants to follow this way. The Sufis call this way a spiritual path, the path of those "others who would give away their lives in order to find favour with God. God is compassionate to His servants."¹⁷

The Sufi way (Tariqa)

In Sufism, therefore, there is the road (sing. *tariqa*, pl. *turuq*;¹⁸ this term went on to refer a Sufi order) and mystic travel, or *suluk*.¹⁹ One who undertakes a journey along this road is called a *salik*, or traveller. The mystical path is, in principle, open to every one. According to the Sufis anybody can attain the higher forms of religious knowledge, but if one is to do it the Sufi way, it must be done under the guidance of a *shaykh*, also called a *murshid* or *pir*. The *salik* receives the rite of initiation from his *shaykh* or *murshid*, who in turn has received it from his *shaykh* and so on, with the chain of transmission of spiritual influence (*barakah*) going back to the Prophet himself. The Sufis believe that the Prophet conferred this right on only some of his companions, in particular the caliphs Abu Bakr and Ali, who in turn passed it on to their followers. In this way, this right has been passed on in unbroken succession up to the present day. This chain of succession is known in Arabic as *silsila*,²⁰ and it is a living tradition transmitted personally from master to disciple. A disciple is thus above all a seeker, or *talib*,²¹ then a traveller, or *salik*, and finally, if God so pleases, a gnostic, or *arif*. But the spiritual realization cannot be achieved without the initiation, counsel, and guidance of the *shaykh*, or spiritual master.

Those aspiring to follow the Sufi path approach a *shaykh* to be initiated into a spiritual lineage or, *silsila*. As every lineage goes back to the Prophet, all the orders (*silsilas*) are necessarily traced to one or the other of the companions whom the Prophet initiated himself. In the early phase of Sufism there were many great Sufi masters and they had their followers, but the movement was not institutionalized. The regular orders began to be established only in the 11th and 12th century AD and the first great Sufi order was the

¹⁷.Qur'an 2:207

¹⁸ Concise Encyclopaedia of Islam: Cyril Glasse, London, 1989, p. 397.

¹⁹ Ibid p. 381.

²⁰ Ibid p. 371.

²¹ From the Arabic root, t-l-b, to seek.

Qadri order, or *tariqa*, founded by Shaykh Abdul Qadir Jilani (1071-1166). This was followed by the Suhrawardi order of Abu'l Najib Suhrawardi (1098-1168) and the Naqshbandi order of Khwaja Baha' ud din Naqshbandi (1318-1389). Another great order, the Chishti order, traces its origin to Chisht near Herat, where the spiritual founder of the order, Khwaja Abu Ishaq Shami (d. 940) dwelled. However it was Muinuddin Chishti (d.1236) who brought the *silsila* to India and laid its foundations by establishing a flourishing centre in Ajmer.

Both the physical and the spiritual life of a Sufi revolves around his *shaykh* and the *shaykh* dispenses any guidance his disciple might require, starting from the exigencies of everyday life and ending with the spiritual guidance that aims at losing oneself in God. Such guidance is personalized and tailored to the individual capacities and needs of the disciple, gradually introducing him to techniques that would effectively enable him to attain the spiritual goal. Of these techniques the most numerous are those pertaining to *dhikr* – remembrance of God.

Dhikr

Dhikr literally means ‘remembering’²² God. The Qur’an attaches the utmost importance to remembering God by invoking His name. ‘Remember your Lord and dedicate yourself to Him utterly.’ (73:8).²³ ‘Truly, in the remembrance of God, hearts find rest.’ (13:28)²⁴ ‘Remember Me and I shall remember you.’ (2:152).²⁵ The Qur’an further explains: ‘Remember God always, so that you may prosper.’ (62:10),²⁶ admonishes: “Believers, be ever mindful of God: praise Him morning and evening,” (33:41)²⁷ and instructs: ‘Prayer fends off lewdness and evil. But your foremost duty is to remember God.’ (29:45)²⁸

The Sufis hold that at the time of the Prophet and his companions, the obligatory prayers were performed with full concentration and in complete remembrance of God, and thus constituted the true *dhikr*. The practices of succeeding generations were but a

²². Concise Encyclopedia of Islam. Page 97.

²³. Qur’an 73:8

²⁴. 13:24

²⁵. 2:152

²⁶. 62:10

²⁷. 33:41

²⁸. 29:45

pale reflection of this earlier practice. In a bid to reproduce that earlier spirituality and devotion, the Sufis attached great importance to the practice of *dhikr*, to the extent that it was given even more importance than the canonical prayers. They turned *dhikr* into an effective tool for honing the excellence of their worship, of making their *ihsan* better, and enabling them to see God face to face. Thus *dhikr* found itself at the centre of Sufi practice. It is embarked upon and perfected under the guidance of a spiritual master and is performed both in gatherings and in the privacy of a spiritual retreat (*khalwah*).²⁹

Besides the above-mentioned organized occasions, *dhikr* is to be done silently at all times of the day, even when one is engaged in other activities. A rosary, or *tasbeeh*, may be used to facilitate *dhikr*.

A shift in emphasis

The Qur'an mentions 99 names of God. Each name points to a particular attribute of God. All the names can be used while performing *dhikr*, for, as the Qur'an observes: 'You may call on God or you may call on the Merciful: by whatever name you call on Him, His are the most gracious names.'³⁰

The Prophet's companions and the Companions of the Companions regarded all forms of prayers other than compulsory prayers as *nawafil* (sing. *nafl*), or works of supererogation. In early Islam this term was used in the general sense of doing 'good' in addition to the performance of one's obligatory duties and did not refer specifically to prayer. Islam enjoins a certain amount of minimum obligatory duties to be discharged by the believers and these are called *faraiẓ*³¹ (sing. *farz* – duty). Anyone who enters the fold of Islam has to discharge these minimal duties, but if he does more than that then, by his additional acts, he earns the double favour of God. This is known as *nafl* (extra). The Prophet himself used to perform supererogatory prayers, such as for example the midnight prayers. But both he and his companions interpreted *nafl* in a very general sense and understood it to mean *all* good actions (and not only prayer) performed over and above one's duties. So did the early ascetics. The later Sufis restricted the word *nafl* to the narrow sense of saying prayers over and above the obligatory prayers.

²⁹ Pg. 221 (Concise Encyclopaedia of Islam).

³⁰ Quran 17:11

³¹ Obligatory duties in Islam.

The Sufis did the same with ‘remembrance of God’ by limiting the meaning of the word *dhikr* to mean only the act of repeating the names of God and not every act, which, by its righteousness and adherence to God’s commands, came earlier under the rubric of the remembrance of God. This change took place imperceptibly and soon these new notions came to be accepted as the norm by the general public.

The early Sufis, first and foremost, laid stress on the renunciation of worldly pleasures. They also emphasized the fear of God and Judgement Day, and the need to centre one’s thoughts on the fact that on the Day of Judgement one would be judged according to his good and bad deeds. Thus there are the famous early Sufis like Abu Darda (a companion of the Prophet), Hasan al-Basri (642-728) and others, who used to remember God most of the time, pray to Him and cry to seek His pardon. When asked why they did so, they would reply that even if they had not made any intentional mistake that required repentance, they might have made an unintentional mistake. For this they sought God’s forgiveness by resorting to *nafl* prayer, remembering God, reciting the verses of the Qur’an and living in fear of Him.

The most characteristic aspect of the life of the early Sufis was their desire for non-involvement in the matters of the world. This was the point of departure from the spirituality of the Companions of the Prophet, for we find that the Prophet and his companions, as well as their companions, performed all their worldly duties and, in doing so, they remembered God. They believed that if they continued to remember God in the midst of performing all the necessary mundane activities, their reward would be doubled – they would receive one reward for discharging the obligatory duties and another for remembering God at times other than those of formal worship.

The early Sufis were known for their asceticism. Poverty was their ideal. They thought that it was the world that distracted their attention from God. So, if they desisted from accumulating worldly things, they would be spared distraction, be able to achieve a high level of concentration and, as a result, their prayers would attain an exceptional quality.

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