The Delicate Balance: *Adab* and Mystical States in the Musical Assemblies of Sufis in Medieval India

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**Introduction**

Mystical states\(^1\) are the most visible aspect of passages that describe musical assemblies (*samāʿ*) of the influential Chishti Sufi master Khwāja Niẓām al-Dīn Awliyāʾ (d. 725/1324–5) and his followers living in the Delhi Sultanate. The authors write about the manifestations of these states such as jumping, dancing, crying and howling in eloquent detail. However, equal attention is given to *adab*, a rigorous code of conduct that the participants are expected to follow. Restricting the bodily comportment and movements of the participants, the requirements of *adab* seem to clash with the standard behaviour of a person who has been overwhelmed by a mystical state. But why apply a restrictive code of conduct to this practice in the first place if mystical states that breach it are the desired outcome? Why not move and dance unrestrictedly from the very beginning of an assembly instead of sitting absolutely still?

This paper seeks to answer the question by studying the discourses on *samāʿ* found in the works produced by the followers of Niẓām al-Dīn in fourteenth and fifteenth century India. In this discussion, I use the term *adab* in the most rudimentary sense of the code of conduct, behavioural code or etiquette applicable in given circumstances.\(^2\) Opting for the most concrete meaning not only serves the purpose of this paper, which is to analyse the function of *adab* in training Sufi disciples, but it also resonates with the usages of the word found in the early Chishti texts in which it denotes a set of rules to be followed in specific situations.

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\(^1\) For the purposes of this article, I use "mystical state" to denote various experiences described by Sufis without differentiating whether the experience in question is ecstatic loss of consciousness or meditative clarity or whether it manifests as dramatic outward behaviours or as complete stillness of the body. The most common terms for these experiences found in the early Chishti texts include *wjād* (finding), *ḥāl* (state), *dhawq* (tasting) and *tahayyur* (bewilderment). Despite the various connotations of each word, they are often applied as general terms to a wide range of mystical experiences.

\(^2\) For discussions on the multiple dimensions of *adab* in South Asian Islam, see Metcalf, *Moral conduct*.
The early Chishti texts were written during the centuries when different Sufi orders became firmly consolidated into the religious landscape of India. Among the most influential Sufi masters of this period was Niẓām al-Dīn whose career as the virtual head of the Chishti order lasted over six decades. He had all the attributes required of a medieval Sufi shaykh to become successful not only during his life but also after his passing. Carl W. Ernst and Bruce B. Lawrence have pointed out that Niẓām al-Dīn fulfilled superbly the expectations of this role, which were often mutually contradictory. He combined personal charisma with the authority stemming from formal religious learning. He followed a strict religious regime of praying, fasting and keeping vigil but also had a keen aesthetic sensitivity that made him susceptible to mystical states induced by poetry and music. He acknowledged the existence of miracles performed by Sufis but shunned them himself. He also managed to successfully keep aloof from the affairs of the world and those who governed them while living in the proximity of the court. He avoided the reigning sultan and whenever the sultan tried to meet him, he would leave his jamāʿat-khāna and absent himself by, for example, taking up the pilgrimage to Ajodhan, to the tomb of his own master Bābā Farid al-Dīn Ganj-Shakar (d. 664/1265–6). However, he lived all his adult life in the outskirts of the imperial capital and listed many courtiers as his disciples. After his death, he was entombed in the courtyard of his jamāʿat-khāna. Having a shrine in the city that has served as the capital with only minor intervals since the early thirteenth century has guarded Niẓām al-Dīn from the oblivion that shrouds many Sufis buried in more isolated locations.

As important as the physical site has been for the lasting fame of Niẓām al-Dīn, his name was also immortalized by the literary tradition unfolding around him. Although neither he himself nor his predecessors wrote books, he became an epicentre of a flourishing literary activities. His disciples successfully preserved his ethos, immortalized his fame, and set important literary examples for later generations of Indian Sufis. Among the disciples was Amīr Khusraw (d. 725/1324–5), a court poet and musician, who wrote about his master and his mystical insights in his poems. Another court poet, Amīr Ḥasan

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3 Subsequently, both literary and oral traditions connected with Niẓām al-Dīn would amply embellish his Sufi career with miraculous feats.
4 Ernst and Lawrence, *Sufi Martyrs*, 73–77.
5 The early Chishtis referred to their places of gathering as jamāʿat-khānas (community houses). The word khānqāh has subsequently replaced this expression.
6 Kirmānī, *Siyar*, 135. Ajodhan has since became known as Pakpatan and is situated in the Pakistani Punjab.