
This is an edited volume looking at the development of Sufism in South Asia. Sufism, the mystical tradition of Islam, and Sufi shaikhs have played an enormous role in the Indian subcontinent. They acted as ‘frontiersmen’ in spreading Islam to many regions. They were the ‘local face’ of Islam and of Muslim rulers from the twelfth century onwards. As landholders they were involved in settling and converting a number of nomadic tribes. As ‘connectors’ between Islam and local religious traditions, largely Hindu, they integrated their Sufi practices into already existing and evolving local customs. Sufis were, of course, also sources of spiritual comfort, training and insight.

There were Sufi shaikhs who sought the company of rulers and those who eschewed it. There were Sufis who accepted land grants and endowments from the wealthy and those who did not. There were Sufis who followed the shari‘a in their everyday activities and those who thought themselves free from these external constraints. There were Sufis who participated in sama‘ and those who did not. There were Sufis who belonged to largely ‘Indian’ Sufi tariqa and those whose allegiance was to one of West or Central Asian or African origin. There were Sufis who lived in khanqahs, had disciples and looked after the graves of their blood and spiritual relatives. And there were those who saw themselves as lone mendicants not concerned with the further spreading of a particular way of being Sufi. There were Sufis who belonged to only one Sufi tariqa, and there were those, particularly in the later periods, who had been initiated into many Sufi orders. There were thus multiple ways of being a Sufi.

Sufism began to cover the Indian subcontinent like a net which through the tying of new knots was constantly extended. Sufi shaikhs, as knots, were connected to their khalifas and these further to their khalifas leading to the establishment of more and more khanqahs as seats of spiritual knowledge and instruction. Yet Sufism began to blanket the Indian subcontinent, too, as the normative way of being a Muslim, male and female, ashraf and ajlaf. With few exceptions, to be a Muslim was to be a Sufi; not a shaikh, but a follower who had definite attachments to a spiritual master. The ‘ulamā‘ did not stand apart from Sufism. At certain moments there were tensions between groups of ‘ulamā‘ and Sufi shaikhs but over time many an ‘ālim became also a Sufi, and many Sufis belonged by training to the community of ‘ulamā‘.

Sufism did not come to South Asia fully formed. Nor, having arrived, did it remain static. It evolved in interaction with cultural and religious milieus. Just as some Sufi tariqas and shaikhs came to adopt things Indian, there were others who cautioned against supporting popular practices and tried to draw the spiritual enterprise back towards Islam’s core commitments. These reformers came initially from within the Sufi establishment. “It is obvious”, states Saiyid Zaheer Husain Jafri, one of the editors of this volume, “that ‘reformist Islam’ could only appeal to a constituency which understood, and had hitherto been associated with, Sufi thought” (p. 5, emphasis in original). It was largely with the coming of Islamism that the demand for the reform of Sufism was turned into a call for its abolition.
The papers collected in this volume were presented at a conference on “The political role of popular Islam (Sufism)”, held in India under the auspices of the Konrad Adenauer Foundation within its “Dialogue with Islam” programme. The 18 essays in this book are divided into six sections. An introductory segment is followed by parts on literature and Sufic thought; society and politics in Sufic centres; cultural contexts and gender; ‘reformist Islam’ and Sufism; and, finally, the denial of Sufism. Most of those whose views are presented here are either sympathetic to Sufism or actively engaged Sufis. One of the contributors is the sajjada nashin of the major Chishti Sufi shrine in Delhi; others are relatives of the sajjada nashin of a Chishti khanqah in Uttar Pradesh. They write as Sufis and academics.

In the introduction, Saiyid Zaheer Husain Jafri contends that “since ‘reformist Islam’ shared its constituency with ‘popular Islam’, it was incumbent on the former to expand its mass base [...] by employing, negating, criticising and appreciating the paradigms of the latter.” (p. 5). Islamic reformers divided Sufism into ‘popular’ and ‘doctrinal’, the latter to be encouraged, the former reformed. Jafri argues further that at the same time as the reform movements spread in the nineteenth century, colonial policies and laws eroded the financial and social basis of Sufi institutions, thus “rendering them ineffective in continuing liberal Islamic education” (p. 34). He laments the destruction of the “composite social fabric” with its “pluralistic ethos” which Sufis had created in the subcontinent by orthodox Muslim “claimants of ‘self-righteousness’” (pp. 34f.).

It is in the second, third and fourth sections of the book—those on literature, society and cultural contexts—that the contributors look at the creation of this composite social fabric. In the part on literature the four contributors portray in-depth how Sufi poetry and writing shaped local dialects and, in turn, how local literary conventions opened up new ways of expressing Sufi thought. The contributions range chronologically from the medieval to the modern periods; geographically the emphasis is on northern India, the linguistic regions of Awadhi and Punjabi. The third section on the social and political impact of Sufi centres provides insights on Sufism and society in Kashmir, the enduring legacy of Shaikh Sharafuddin Maneri in Bihar, and the involvement of Sufis in medieval Deccan politics. In the fourth part dealing with cultural contexts and gender we find essays on Sufism and humanism, the Sufis’ role in creating inter-cultural understanding within India, and an overview of the gender dimension within Sufism.

Sections five and six of the book, those on reformist Islam and the denial of Sufism, then look at how this composite social fabric was severely shattered, if not destroyed, by self-righteous forces of Muslim orthodoxy. In the fifth part we find essays on Saiyid Ahmad of Rae Bareli, his companions and their writings as well as on the founders of the Deoband movement. These three articles aim to establish that Saiyid Ahmad’s mission had relatively little impact on the Sufi movements and practices of northern India, that the writings of his companions and their intellectual heirs while stridently anti-Sufi were in fact aimed at “reforming rather than denying Sufism” (p. 337, emphasis in original); and that the early Deobandis were advocates of an “academic”