Introduction

*Women’s Activities and Sufi Shrines—Some Perspectives*

A number of ethnographic studies conducted since the late 1970s have suggested that there is a substantial gap between discourses about women’s participation in ritual life and women’s lived experiences in the world of Sufi shrines. While this issue has produced several promising studies of the role women play in contemporary Sufi praxis, the subject remains largely unexplored. Historical, theological, metaphysical, and philosophical studies of the question of gender in Sufism have yielded a rich tapestry of discussion about its ultimate ephemerality in the search for God. However, the question of living, flesh-and-blood women—particularly those considered saintly, possessed of divine attributes, or capable of mediating the power of a deceased Sufi *shaikh* (*barakat*)—has helped to fuel stereotypes about the “dubious” nature of Sufism today. At the same time, the relationship between women and Sufi shrines is cited as evidence of Sufism’s greater regard for women than “orthodox” or “scripturalist” Islam. Alternatively, and particularly among feminist scholars, women’s activities in Sufi shrine settings are characterized as a manifestation of resistance to an Islamic patriarchy that is threatened by women’s power, agency, or increasing public presence. None of these paradigms effectively answers the question of how women figure in contemporary Sufi praxis, nor can they address the question that is the central concern of this book, namely, how women can operate in the world of Sufi shrines as spiritual authorities and be recognized as such, even by those who otherwise condemn or criticize their activities.

Women as Participants: A Disconnect between Discourse and Praxis

While women frequently appear as pilgrims, clients, and disciples in written narratives about saints and shrines, much less is known, or reported,
about those activities in which they are able to exercise a greater degree of agency and autonomy. As members of the family of a pir (pirzade), they are privy to information and knowledge about the shrine and its saints that the average pilgrim does not possess. As “ritual specialists” they may act on behalf of other women by petitioning the saint, and as healers and wise women, they may serve as the advisers and spiritual guides for male and female clients, although with few exceptions they are denied official recognition as pirs and sajjada nishins. They appear sometimes as storytellers and composers, and less frequently as performers at the qawwali musical assemblies held on major commemorative occasions. As the relatives of particularly prominent Sufi masters, they may be buried in shrine complexes, widely considered as saints, and venerated as such alongside their pious male relatives. A few have had shrines erected solely in their honor, as in the case of Bibi Kamalo, the maternal aunt of Shaikh Sharaf al-din Maneri, or Bibi Fatima Sam, whose tomb now lies in obscurity in the old Indraprastha section of Delhi but was at one time frequented by such notables as the fourteenth-century Chishti shaikh Nizam al-din Auliya.

These facts were revealed only with patient prodding, and even then only after I had spent many months among the Sufi families who became the subjects of this study. I came to believe that their initial reluctance to discuss these aspects of women’s experiences did not simply come from a religious or cultural sense of the impropriety of doing so, but rather that it was rooted in deeply entrenched, socially constructed and mediated attitudes about how women’s participation (or lack thereof) in ritual life at Sufi shrines reflects prevalent ideals about Islamic womanhood. Thus an important agenda of this study was to go beyond a description of how women’s participation in the world of Sufi shrines challenges and contests some of these ideals by investigating the ways in which participants also internalize and project dominant discourses in Islam about male-female relationships and the proper place of women within collective ritual spaces. This would require an integrated approach to the questions of language, action, and meaning as these are embedded within social experience but also shaped by a shared sense of culture, (meta)history, and faith.

In the past quarter century there has been an increase in the number of studies being published (and republished) in English about women’s lived experiences in the Sufi milieu. Studies that have taken the historical approach2 have focused primarily on the biographical literature of Sufism (tazkira, tabaqat) or on poetry, oral histories, and legendary accounts as sources of information for women’s lives. Ethnographic and anthropological studies have relied on methods of participant observation to paint a picture of women’s religious beliefs and observations in local contexts.3 A
few publications featuring autobiographical and didactic writing by Sufi women have also recently appeared. Finally practitioners of Sufism have offered a glimpse into women’s experiences through descriptive and theological treatments of their lives as practicing Sufis or as de facto shaikhas. These studies have all made important and much-needed contributions to our knowledge of the historical, theoretical, and practical aspects of women’s experiences in the world of Sufi shrines and have significantly informed my investigation of women’s lives. Still, there is a need for studies that can situate women’s experiences in both their wider religious and historical contexts and their particular, “lived” aspects, and in so doing convey an integrated picture of how women’s activities in the Sufi context have changed over time and in response to historical, cultural, and socioeconomic variables. It is in light of this need that this book is situated; it investigates women’s lived experiences as they relate to three Sufi families in India: the Gudri Shah branch of the Chishti order, the Bihar Sharif branch of the Firdausi order, and the Maner branch of the Firdausi order.

The history of the Chishti order is well known among scholars of South Asian Islam, while the fourteenth-century writing of the Firdausi shaikh Sharaf al-din Maneri, the writing of Hazrat Zahur al-Hasan Sharib of the Gudri Shahs, and the prolific literary output of other prominent shaikhs and disciples of these two orders provide valuable insight into their historical development. Using historiographic information produced by members of these orders and their chroniclers, including biographical compendia (tazkira, tabaqat), recorded discourses of important shaikhs (malfuzat), surveys produced by servants of the British Raj, and secondary sources produced by scholars since the 1970s, this study seeks to understand the role of major historical events and sociocultural processes in transforming Sufi praxis and thus creating new opportunities for women’s involvement. Thus the data derived from observations at a number of Chishti and Firdausi shrines and from my interviews with members of these orders and their sympathizers appears within a comparative, interdisciplinary framework that suggests how discourses about women in the public sphere have shifted over time.

The ethnographic research for this study took place primarily in the western and eastern states of Rajasthan and Bihar, and intermittently between 1996 and 2002, with the longest stretch from September 1997 to August 1998. The women who contributed their stories to this study live, work, and pursue moral and spiritual development, as well as help others pursue their own, in the towns of Ajmer, where the famed Chishti shaikh Mu’ın al-din Chishti lies buried; Bihar Sharif, site of the burial shrine of the Firdausi scholar-shaikh Sharaf al-din Maneri; Maner, birthplace of
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Sharaf al-din and final resting place of his equally saintly father, Shaikh Yahya Maneri; and Patna, where several descendants of these shaikhs and their families reside today. In light of the paucity of ethnographic data on contemporary Sufi women in South Asia within the scope of the establishment orders, I also liberally incorporated into my study (and my interviews) the research conducted by others “on the ground,” particularly the work of Joyce Burkhalter Flueckiger on a female Muslim healer in Hyderabad (now deceased), affectionately known as “Amma.” This work helped me to gauge individuals’ reactions to the existence of real-life examples of female pirs, to develop a taxonomy of praxis among such women, and to get a better sense of how common (and accepted) the phenomenon is.

Dominance and Authority as Framework for Articulations of Selfhood

The idea of the subaltern as both victim of superior structural forces and as possessor of a consciousness outside of the influence of those forces, an idea that was germane to the earliest wave of scholarship on the topic, has been effectively challenged in many works of postcolonial and postmodern theory that have appeared within the past quarter century. However, these initial forays into subaltern consciousness have opened up many promising avenues for further investigation of relationships of dominance, subordination, and power as expressed through social, economic, religious, and political structures of organization; cultural production; and the material conditions under which individuals, groups, and communities engage in processes of exchange. Ranajit Guha (1997), Douglas Haynes and Gyan Prakash (1991), and James Scott (1985), among others, attempt to derigidify the idea of structured power relationships between dominant/elite and subordinate/subaltern groups by looking at balance-of-power shifts. Rather than characterizing these shifts as great upheavals by subordinate groups bent on undermining a dominant structure (or dominant culture), they contend that dominant structures and hegemonies are inherently unstable mechanisms of organization and power that produce elements of “resistance” within them.

In works on peasant rebellion, Guha (1983) and Prakash (1991) investigate the processes by which subaltern peasant and tribal groups, in imbibing, adapting, and rejecting elements of the dominant culture, developed a sovereign (though not autonomous) consciousness that enabled them to subvert and even fracture this culture. Prakash shows how, even while reproducing the language and principles of upper-caste Maliks, the Bhumniyas in southern Bihar used performances of traditional oral narratives to
problematize and reformulate their position as outcastes and laborers who are dependent upon the Maliks. Ultimately, however, this did not lead to a break with the dominant culture, nor did it change the socioeconomic position of Bhuniyas. Rather it pointed to the ability of Bhuinyas to self-constitute in ways that contested the operation of power as “naturally” rather than historically and materially determined. Drawing on paradigms of “resistance,” Guha elaborates how peasant groups subscribed to ideologies of subservience rooted in such Hindu religious and social paradigms as bhakti (total submission to divine and human superiors as an indication of spiritual commitment) and the caste system. Yet these paradigms contained—or accommodated—elements of negation or reversal that could be expressed in ritual observances as seen in the celebrations of social inversion during Teyyam in Malabar or Holi in much of northern and central India. While these observances represented temporary, prescribed reversals of the dominant order, they nonetheless harbored the potential for more sustained changes. Insurgency, on the other hand, was meant to disrupt and undermine such order. Together these strategies worked to alter the borders of the structure of relations between dominant and subordinate. According to Guha, these relationships predated and outlived British colonial rule and manifested as a system of relations that contained, produced, and reproduced antagonistic elements that ultimately served to deny ultimate authority to any of its individual components.

The production of counterhegemonic elements within a dominant framework of reference is also illustrated in Guha’s later study of the colonial state in India. He characterizes this state as a “paradox” that wholly resembled neither the British colonial power, with its championing of democracy in Europe and support of both feudalism and capitalist-driven “improvement” among its Indian subjects, nor the Indian bourgeois elites who both accommodated and agitated against British imperialism on the one hand and what Guha calls “pre-capitalist values and institutions in Indian society” on the other. Guha stresses the inherent fragility of British claims to represent the Indian past, arguing that the production of colonialist historiographies was an “exercise in dominance” serving to aid British efforts to exploit the resources of the land. However, its by-products, particularly programs of English education that sought to displace Indian “tradition,” linked the educated Indian to the state apparatus and developed a class of Indian elites who wholly subscribed to the (ostensibly) Western values of self-determination and liberalism. It served, then, to produce an educated elite culture among Indians that resembled neither the liberalbourgeois capitalist culture of late-nineteenth-century Britain nor the pre-capitalist culture of India. The educated Indian political elite imbibed, and
learned to manipulate, the language of democracy and democratic institutions for reasons of expediency, but they did so while also tolerating, participating in, and sustaining unequal relations of dominance and subordination with their subaltern neighbors.

The British ultimately failed to contain the resistance of the subject population by either force or accommodation, and the Indian bourgeois elite proved unable to cast off what the feminist writer Audre Lorde called the “master’s tools” in order to dismantle long-held feudal and semifeudal practices and concepts of power and authority. Thus, in the postcolonial state, ruling Indian elites could not truly command the allegiance of subaltern groups who did not, on the whole, benefit from the expansion of capital that followed the demise of the colonialist state. It is this failure of the Indian elites to break away from the structures of control, order, and persuasion (dominance) established in the British colonial state, and to ensure the general consent of the subject population (hegemony) to its ruling authority, that Guha and, following him, Partha Chatterjee (1993) refer to as a “dominance without hegemony.”

These dominant-subordinate, produced-producing paradigms are also evident within relationships among colonial-era and postcolonial European observers; secular, English-educated Indian elites; the Sufi orders and their male representatives; and the women who patronize Sufi shrines. Many of the essentializing discourses about women’s participation in Sufi shrine and *pir* “cults” that were promoted by European and secular, English-educated Indian observers in the colonial era affected Sufis’ own attitudes toward women. Both European and Indian observers weighed their sense of an “authentic” or “orthodox” Islam against shrine-based practices found among contemporary Muslims and found the gap between the two uncomfortably large. Sufis also had their own sense of “authentic” Islam, at least those among them who represented the elite, and this sense was often colored by their education in the Islamic sciences (in such institutions as the local *madrasa*), their familiarity with key texts written by respected and renowned Sufi *shaikhs* (such as Ahmad Sirhindi), or their participation in the Hajj and subsequent periods of study in Middle Eastern centers of Islamic learning such as al-Azhar, though even those who represented the educated elites among Sufis remained ambivalent toward the question of how local beliefs and practices conformed (or not) to that sense of Islam. This is perhaps illustrative of Muhammad Arkoun’s sense of Islam as a tradition that

is informed and conditioned by changing backgrounds, teaching, guiding, and conditioning these backgrounds in return. This interaction is
translated into the self-entitlement of each Muslim community to incarnate and monopolize the authentic expression of the “orthodox” tradition. . . . there is no Tradition with capital “T,” but traditions that are more-or-less influenced by the scriptural tradition developed under the impact of four ideological forces: a central state, writing, learned written culture and thought—orthodoxy. . . . The dialectic tension develops everywhere, in all contexts between the sacred Tradition and local, ethnographic traditions. . . . The affirmation, promotion, protection or oppression and negation of the person will then depend on the social structures, the collective representations and the scale of values enforced by each central power or leading authority in limited communities such as brotherhoods, clans and tribes.15

Among Sufi and non-Sufi elites in the Indo-Pakistan subcontinent, the pilgrimage of women to saints’ shrines, their participation in mixed-gender assemblies, their observance of rituals involving possession, and their practice of making vows to a deceased saint have often been seen as evidence of either a general decline in Sufi practice or the illegitimacy of a particular order of Sufis. Yet as this study will demonstrate, women can at once subscribe to the general prescription that their participation in the institutions of Sufism (particularly where this involved their exercise of authority) should have limits and at the same time engage in behavior, including ritual behavior, that consciously or inadvertently undermines that prescription. This has been particularly true for the women of Sufi families and for female disciples of a *shaikh* who have come to be considered spiritually gifted. Their actions may be better understood within the context of important socioeconomic changes that have altered the views of Indian Muslims toward gender roles and relationships, particularly among the upwardly mobile, socially elite classes.

Change and Continuity in India’s Muslim Community

Prominent among these changes is the post-1857 state of Muslim intellectual elites in the northeastern swath of the country, particularly the area comprising Delhi, the United Provinces (UP), and Western Bengal (then comprising Bihar). In the wake of the Uprising of 1857, many of the UP-based ‘ulama’ retreated to small towns such as Deoband, where a new phase of Islamic reform and revival was inaugurated toward the end of that century. While the initial reform movements, such as that led by Sayyid Ahmad Barelwi (d. 1831), were politically motivated (for example Sayyid Ahmad’s role in the Pindari wars and his declaration of jihad against the
Sikh state), the reform movements of the latter part of that century focused more pointedly (though not exclusively) on the moral and spiritual reform of the Indian Muslim umma. Within those efforts of reform, the values of Islam came to be inscribed on the bodies of women as women’s behavior in public and domestic spaces became a major subject of discussion by intellectual elites and the wider public. As such, women came to embody the values and fortunes of the broader Indian Muslim community, and that association acquired political currency in both the colonial and the postcolonial state. This was also true in the case of Hindu women.16

The connection could be readily observed in the literary output of Muslim men—many of them embodying dual sources of authority as both Sufi shaikhs and members of the ‘ulama’. In the first decades of the twentieth century there was a proliferation of didactic literature directed at the “improvement” of Muslim women. A number of these texts were written by men who had received training in the traditional Islamic sciences through the madrasa system, which itself had been undergoing systematic changes since the close of the preceding century.17 Much of the literature they produced was initially modeled on older Persian adab literary forms and, as such, both enabled ties with older Islamic discursive traditions and forged new ones. Although Francis Robinson has effectively argued that print undermined the traditional sources of authority whereby knowledge was handed down from master to pupil in a prescribed manner that underscored the hierarchy of authority in Islamic circles of learning,18 the reality was more complex. Print, coupled with a widening system of education in British India that targeted women as well as men, also helped to create new sources of authority, for those armed with education could avail themselves of Islamic (and/or secular) knowledge that opened their eyes to the wider parameters of Islam and contributed to a growing sense of Muslim selfhood that reached beyond local, regional, and even national borders. At the same time, these new forms of authority enabled some of the ‘ulama’—men who were the chief producers of demotic literature targeting women as objects of reform—to make the most of emerging cultural capital and extend their authority by means of these new technologies. Among their ranks were Sufi shaikhs. The willingness of these shaikhs and ‘ulama’ to exploit the new textual technologies that print afforded them and thereby increase the awareness of other Muslims about their efforts toward Islamic tajdid o islah, renewal and reform, should not be underestimated.

Another important site of change lay within the shifts in orientation for some shaikhs who sought to expand the territorial boundaries of their influence. In so doing they also opened the doors for the women of their families to assume a greater amount of responsibility in ensuring the
proper functioning of the order. These shaikhs—described by Arthur Buehler as “traveling mediating shaikhs”—have been aided in their efforts by innovations in transportation that made journeying vast distances, and reaching large numbers of people, much more feasible from the latter part of the nineteenth century onward. Whether embarking on extended “spiritual travel” tours or regularly departing their lodges (khanaqahs) for journeys to different parts of the country to promulgate Sufism and meet with disciples, admirers, and fellow Sufi leaders, they left the women of their families behind to attend to the needs of disciples and petitioners at home. At such times the wives and daughters of the shaikh often served as “substitutes” in his absence, acting as counselors or go-betweens for the pilgrims who came to the khanaqah seeking advice, assistance, or spiritual guidance.

Finally an emerging site of major socioeconomic change in contemporary Indo-Pakistan is the rise of a large urban middle class that increasingly aspires to upward mobility. Defining the parameters of this class is challenging, in part because of its social complexity. (In other words it comprises groups as disparate as former upper-class, upper-caste royalty, divested of much of their wealth by the economic reforms of the 1950s, and the most socially marginalized caste groups, some of whom became wealthy in the economic boom decades of the 1990s.) However, in many ways the values of today’s middle classes in India mirror the social, cultural, and political orientation that Pavan Varma, Leela Fernandes, and Sanjay Joshi all associate with the middle classes formed during the latter part of British Raj. This orientation is further demonstrated in today’s middle classes’ awareness of (and verbal support of) social justice issues, which often translates into political claims of representation for the general public. It is also encapsulated by ethical and intellectual aspirations to influence, change, or propose state policies. Finally it is characterized by the pursuit of upward mobility through English-language education (at the primary, secondary, and higher education levels). In recent years, with the rise of global economies and mass media, middle-class aspirations in most South Asian countries have further expanded. These aspirations are manifest not only in the rise of income levels, consumerism, and activity in the political and cultural arenas, but also in changing attitudes toward women’s roles and responsibilities in the home and the broader public sphere. For example the education of daughters in areas that were once considered traditionally male (as in the hard sciences and engineering), particularly where that education is conducted abroad in British, American, Canadian, and Australian institutions or, alternatively, in the English-medium higher education institutions of the Subcontinent, is increasingly
pursued by upper-middle-class and upwardly mobile families, whether Hindu, Muslim, Christian, Sikh, Buddhist, or secular.

According to Leela Fernandes, the Indian state has become heavily invested in producing dominant conceptions of middle-class respectability that define middle-class womanhood. Muslim religious elites continue to play a significant role in these productions for Muslim women too—at least those women who understand Islam to be a primary mode of their self-identification. Within the heterogeneous ranks of the religious elites has emerged a kind of consensus on the cultural, social, and economic changes that compete with the notion of a transcendent, Shari'a-based vision of Islam to shape the values of middle-class, religiously observant Muslims. Their contemporary production and dissemination of an ever-growing body of didactic texts for Muslim women—many of which are modeled on Maulana Ashraf ‘Ali Thanawi’s famous 1905 work, *Bihishti Zewar*—speak to these changes in suggesting that a compromise in some areas of cultural and civic life is possible, without undermining the fundamental Islamic spirit of gender roles and responsibilities. Accordingly for many observant and traditional-minded Muslim families, middle-class aspirations have been marked by a relaxation, or reformulation, of the rules governing such cultural practices as *parda*, or modesty and sex-segregation.

Far from being merely recipients of prescriptive discourses devised by male religious elites, Indian Muslim women also actively participate in constructions of Islamic womanhood. This is readily apparent in the ways in which women in the Sufi orders—particularly, but not exclusively, the female relatives of the presiding *pir*—can become the catalysts for change. Some women—as mothers, but also as wives and daughters—are able to exercise authority because of their relationship to the *pir* (here authority should be understood as influencing major decision-making processes and engaging in acts that sustain the ideology or ethos of an order or undermine it). Others are able to do so because the *pir* provides a way for them to participate in events or assume roles that had previously been denied them. A *pir* may allow a woman do to things that would otherwise contradict social, cultural, and religious norms: for example, as rare written records and occasional oral testimonies suggest, some *pirs* in the Subcontinent have named women as their successors. However, a woman who crosses the boundaries into traditionally male territory typically must cloak her influence with the mantle of female modesty and compliance to an ideal of female subordination to male authority.

If the *pir* does not explicitly demand it, cultural norms dictate that most women operating within the sphere of the establishment Sufi orders