



LOVERS OF GOD

SUFISM AND THE POLITICS OF ISLAM IN MEDIEVAL INDIA

Raziuddin Aquil



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This book addresses some of the fiercely contested issues about religion and politics in medieval India, especially with regard to the crucial presence of Sufis who styled themselves as friends and lovers of God. Enjoying widespread veneration even in situations of hostility with regard to Islam and Muslims in general, Sufis are central to an understanding of religious interactions and community relations historically.

The chapters included in the book can be read as stand-alone pieces focussing on some of the most fascinating as well as contentious themes in medieval Indian history – subjects and issues which are otherwise either left untouched by historians because of their sensitive nature from the point of view of modern day secularism or abused by interested parties in their communal propaganda. When read as a monograph, the volume as a whole attempts to combat all kinds of intellectual absurdities, which mar our understating of the place of Islam in medieval Indian history, especially the significant presence of Sufis who were devoted to the love of God and service to humanity.

Historiographically important issues which are also topical in these times of interdependence of religion and politics – the latter exploiting religion for legitimacy and justification of violence, and religion needing political support for expansion and imposition on the gullible – have been dealt in detail, neither bounded by a particular ideology nor by identity politics with its separate blinkers.

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Sufism and the Politics of Islam in Medieval India

RAZIUDDIN AQUIL

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Preface

This volume addresses some of the fiercely contested issues about religion and politics in medieval India, especially with regard to the crucial presence of Sufis who styled themselves as friends and lovers of God. The critical social and political roles played by the Sufis, in contexts in which religion and politics are inextricably linked to each other, are of enduring interest not only to historians and scholars but also to political propagandists and the general public. Enjoying widespread veneration even in situations of hostility with regard to Islam and Muslims in general, Sufis are central to an understanding of religious interactions and community relations historically.

Written over a span of nearly two decades, the chapters included in the book can be read as stand-alone pieces focussing on some of the most fascinating as well as contentious themes in medieval Indian history – subjects and issues which are otherwise either left untouched by historians because of their sensitive nature from the point of view of modern day secularism or abused by interested parties in their communal propaganda. When read as a monograph, the volume as a whole attempts to combat all kinds of intellectual absurdities, sometimes plain deceit and wickedness which mars our understating of the place of Islam in medieval Indian history, especially the significant presence of Sufis who were devoted to the love of God and service to humanity.

Historiographically important issues which are also topical in these times of interdependence of religion and politics – the latter exploiting religion for legitimacy and justification of violence, and religion needing political support for expansion and imposition on the gullible – have been dealt in detail, neither bounded by a particular ideology no matter how exalted its claim to panacea may be nor by identity politics with its sepearate blinkers. It is possible to research and understand contested historical questions

rising above petty politics of various shades of red, green or saffron. In terms of scholarly commitment, I prefer the historic blue of medieval excellence as manifested in significant achievements in visual culture.

Even as I remain deeply tied to the practice of empirical research of an old style historian concerned about sources and evidence for the specificity of time and space—and thus sometimes sounding somewhat ignorant—I have learned a lot on how to retain a critical balance between the particular and the general through my fruitful interactions with scholars not only working within the discipline of history but also in the larger fields of social sciences and humanities. It will be difficult for me to acknowledge all the debts I have incurred over the years, but I must begin with two eminent sociologists—Satish Saberwal and Anjan Ghosh—who literally forced me to open my eyes to see the vast world of popular Islam in practice around Sufi shrines as social anthropologists have done, instead of sparring a lifetime with some narrow-minded medievalists entrenched in Indian academia debating inane issues with little contribution to scholarship. Even as I resisted from my own position as a historian—trying to seek fourteenth century evidence for fourteenth century practice—I understood the value of insights one can gain from other disciplines and deploy them for one's own understanding of historical themes. Professor Saberwal and Dr Ghosh were for a period crucial to my growth as a historian. Unfortunately, they are no longer there to see these lines. I dedicate this book to them as a small tribute remembering their excellence.

Academia remains hierarchical, a reflection of a society deeply stratified on the basis of birth and power; yet it is possible to get unconditional support and encouragement from senior scholars. As someone who has consistently defied the typical patron-client relationship needed to survive in academics, I have been fortunate to experience the warm kindness of many senior scholars. I gratefully remember the consistent encouragement from Partha Chatterjee, Richard Eaton, Carl Ernst, Tapati Guha-Thakurta, Narayani Gupta, Pius Malekandathil, Werner Menski, Vijaya Ramaswamy and Yogesh Sharma.

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I have profited from the support of my colleagues in the University of Delhi. I thank Saifuddin Ahmad, Yasser Arafath, Amar Farooqui, Parul Pandya Dhar, Shonaleeka Kaul, Anshu Malhotra, Biswamoy Pati, Santosh Rai, Mahesh Rangarajan, Upinder Singh and Vipul Singh for their keen interest in my work. The larger fraternity of historians in DU have been offering encouragement and have allowed me to share my research through invitations to speak on several occasions in college-departments. I especially thank Suraj Bhan Bhardwaj, Radhika Chadha, Pratibha Chopra, Nonica Datta, Jaya Kakkar, Kundan Kumar, Mayank Kumar, Prem Kumar, Nishant Singh, Sanjay Singh, Sharmila Shrivastava, Siddheswar Shukla, Shams Tabrez, Shobhana Warriar, and some others who I believe will prefer to remain anonymous.

My friends of the last couple of decades—who remain steadfast even in these times of unpredictability—do not want to be thanked formally, but I would be remiss not to acknowledge my heartfelt gratitude to: Geeta Arya, Deeksha Bhardwaj, Sohail Firdos, Mazhar Hussain, Bharati Jagannathan, Sanal Mohan, Tilottama Mukherjee, Yousuf Saeed and Anup Taneja. They have seen what has gone into the writing of these chapters—devoted to the Sufis, sometimes sounding like a dedicated spiritual follower yet offering a critique through a strict adherence to historical method and distance. The book, therefore, attempts to provide a multi-layered narrative, but is written in a manner similar to the way in which Sufis would speak – a language accessible to all.

I would like to take this opportunity to express my thanks to my sisters and brothers for their love, understanding, support and home comfort that they have often provided.

Last, but not the least, I would like to thank Ramesh Jain of Manohar, for his interest in this work and seeing it through to the press in his usual gentle and professional manner.

I alone remain responsible for any acts of omission or commission in thanking, citing, or interpreting, even as the quest for historical truth shall continue.

University of Delhi

RAZIUDDIN AQUIL

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1. 'Dispatching *Kafirs* to Hell?: The Languages of Warfare, Politics and Religion in the Delhi Sultanate', in Raziuddin Aquil and Kaushik Roy, eds., *Warfare, Religion, and Society in Indian History*, New Delhi: Manohar, 2012, pp. 63-84.
2. 'Music and Related Practices in Chishti Sufism: Celebrations and Contestations', in *Social Scientist* (March-April 2012), 40(3-4): 17-32.
3. 'Miracles, Authority and Benevolence: Stories of *Karamat* in Sufi Literature of the Delhi Sultanate', in Anup Taneja, ed., *Sufi Cults and the Evolution of Medieval Indian Culture*, ICHR Monograph Series 9, New Delhi: ICHR and Northern Book Centre, 2003, pp. 109-38.
4. 'Conversion in Chishti Sufi Literature (13th-14th Centuries)', *Indian Historical Review*, 1997-8, 24(1-2): 70-94.
5. 'The Study of Islam and Indian History at the Darul Musannefin, Azamgarh', in Raziuddin Aquil and Partha Chatterjee, eds., *History in the Vernacular*, Ranikhet: Permanent Black, 2008, pp. 322-56.

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Prologue

Some Historiographical Concerns

Ideology-driven research agenda, left or right of the centre, and divergent Hindu-Muslim interpretations of India's medieval history have less to do with any serious attempt at understanding how the past might have been like and more of an exercise in abusing it for the politics of the present. The desperation to show the past in a particular light in popular histories of the public domain is understandable, for it serves the purpose of identity-politics and political aspirations of people, ethnic or religious, but professional historians falling in the same trap is against the protocol of their discipline, the primary purpose of which is to contribute to knowledge production, mainly for experts in the field, but also for some diffusion in public.

Consider the example of conversion and Islamization in medieval India. Politically-motivated popular Hindu and Muslim interpretations can be easily dismissed as biased and unverifiable propositions. On the other hand, unfortunately, serious historians have tried to hush up this communally sensitive topic, instead of applying rigorous historical methods to analyse and interpret whatever little evidence available and come to some conclusion even if that conclusion may not be consistent with one's preferred political position in, say, a context like the current Hindutva aggression. For instance, it is the responsibility of the historians to examine and illustrate how such a vast Muslim population has come to take root in the Indian subcontinent—India, Pakistan and Bangladesh taken together. These are mainly local converts to Islam and not immigrants from Central Asia, Iran and the Arab world, despite claims from sections of Muslims of their being of Turkish, Iranian and Arab descent. Their DNA test might reveal it to be a far-fetched genealogical claim as part of a process of Islamization, which is perhaps still continuing. This process, beginning from around

the thirteenth century when various Muslim Sultanates emerged, needs to be analysed and explained, but even the best of the historians have been in a denial mode: that Muslims are not foreign immigrants, that sword was not used by rulers to convert people, that sections of Muslim religious leaders, *ulama*, would have wanted to use political power for proselytization but did not get that support, and that it would be erroneous to say that Sufis were responsible for conversion, for they always worked for communal harmony and tolerance. Thus the question remains that if neither rulers, nor *ulama* and not even Sufis were responsible for conversion and Islamization, how do we explain the making of Islam and such a huge population of Muslims in large parts of the subcontinent, not only in mainland Hindustan, but also in Punjab, Bengal and the Deccan?

My own understanding developed over the past couple of decades is that Sufis have shown the way, taking Islam culturally and peacefully to most remote corners of erstwhile Sultanate and Mughal rule, being part of the political process, yet maintaining critical distance from politics, which often involved violence especially in conquests and control of areas offering resistance. Sufi traditions have been claiming and showing at least since mid-fourteenth century that Islam has spread in localities wherever Sufis of various spiritual genealogies were settling down, carving their own sacred geographies with large numbers of followers, with no demand or pressure to formally convert to Islam. Over time, these communities of people have undergone multifaceted processes of religious change and many formally adopting Islam without abandoning cultural practices of localities they inhabited. Thus, for example, Punjabi Muslims would remain culturally Punjabis as would be Bengali Muslims Bengalis, with various aspects of their cultures shared with fellow Punjabis and Bengalis, who subscribed to some other religious world-view and rituals abhorred by Islamists.

Self-styled reformists have risen from time to time to put pressure on these Muslim communities, telling them that they were not Muslim enough and that all the 'innovations' in their religious rituals have to be purged for them to be proper Muslims of the Arabic kind; they also identified non-Muslims as hostile *kafirs*,

infidels, who were to be eliminated in the most violent manner possible. Such reformist streaks are now being organized in terror groups of the kind the world is confronted with, rupturing older traditions and bringing such a bad name to Islam even if the ideal for them is an understanding of seventh century Arabia ideologically developed since the eighteenth century. At the root of the struggle is political control for forcibly implementing a particular kind of Arabic Islam, a flawed and wicked strategy creating so much difficulty wherever it can.

Historians need to stand up, authoritatively confront and educate the public on the complexities involved in these issues, rather than attempting to sanitize or exploit them in conformity with their ideological positions, which they wish to uphold. Much of what was said about medieval India in the late-nineteenth and early-twentieth centuries have turned out to be inaccurate, incomplete and even downright false and misleading propositions. We know British colonial administrators especially made a lot of untenable assertions about 'pre-colonial' India being barbarous, dark age, etc. Similarly, it is also possible that much of the contestations about medieval India in the late-twentieth and early-twenty-first centuries are bogus fabrications, relevant only to the politics of the present. Fifty years from now, with the context changing, historians may laugh at the irrationalities of our time.

Tolerant and free speech demands that contrary opinions are respected, for it is possible at the current stage of our knowledge that we may not know enough and, therefore, a contrary opinion may be more accurate. At least, let us consider the possibility that there may be a variety of perspectives and approaches through which we may have some approximation of truth relating to the past, rather than attempting to establish an absolute truth. On the other hand, adherents of different contemporary political ideologies and political propagandists with commitment to political interests of various ethnic groups might contest each other's understanding of the past and press for only one of them as epitomising the truth. They might try to establish their understanding of the truth through a variety of strategies, ranging from outright academic dishonesty and academic stupidity to straightforward and obvious

forms of academic suppression, as Philosopher Akeel Bilgrami has recently delineated in his exposition on liberalism and the academia. What happens to the question of truth then? An attempt is being made in the following pages to grapple with the problem.

There are two kinds of limitations in the writing of history. One pertains to the interconnection between ideology and history. Religious and political ideologies deeply affect the writing of history. Various approaches are shaped by competing ideologies such as imperialism and nationalism in the colonial period and Marxism/secularism/communalism in more recent times. The respective 'schools' of historiography denigrate and thwart each other, through false assumptions, violent assertions and use of political power. The politically neutral kind of empirical approach with no commitment to any of the competing ideologies is also suppressed, though truth remains discounted in political neutrality or 'balanced' approach as well. The second problem relates to the abuse of history in the politics of identity. History is a major site, a battleground, or at least a weapon in the political struggles of identities based on religion, caste, region, and languages. In these contestations, a lot of crude political propaganda is peddled not only as historical memory, but also as authentic history.

Some of the themes in medieval Indian history, which are marred by struggles on ideological grounds and politics of identity, include extractive or inclusive nature of political and economic institutions, allegations of political violence and desecration of temples, Sufis' role in conversion and Islamicization, even as their presence was crucial in the making of a pluralistic society, forms of pre-colonial identities (syncretic or shared customary practices *versus* separate religious identities of Hindu, Muslim, Sikh, Christian, etc.), and the larger question of medieval legacies. The most ingenious characterization of the period as a dark age is like this: medieval India was a dark age, because there was no electricity in medieval India; there was no electricity, because Muslims were in power and they followed Islam, which is against science.

Thus, the study of history is often not so much about what possibly might have happened in the past, but it is about struggles over competing claims on what the interested parties like to believe

what must or should have happened; it is also a struggle between reason and faith, truth *versus* falsehood. And, as we know, political pressures and political appointments will also continue. After all, conquerors have always written histories on the body of those they have decimated. Compared to that, NDA/UPA determining and sponsoring divergent kinds of politically-motivated histories, not only at the level of school textbooks but also controlling platforms like the ICHR, is not such a big deal, even though the autonomy of the discipline of history is seriously compromised.

More crucial and disappointing is politics within academia, often of a very petty kind—struggles over topics of Ph.D. thesis, research grants and fellowships, controlling academic journals and publishing houses, nepotism, corruption and group-politics in appointments, syllabus revision and reading lists, arbitrary course allotment, unjust hurdles in promotions, etc. For those at the receiving end of the power relation, it can be simply a long period of frustration; once senior dons retire and leave, the next generation takes over and repeats the same thing.

In an intolerant society, difference of opinion, or even saying something different from what the entrenched orthodoxy wants to keep reinforcing, is misunderstood and misrepresented as vilification or animosity, which the venerable old guards seek to suppress with due force. This is particularly true in the small field of medieval Indian history. Fresh thinking and interpretations are always blocked by those who continue to work with a paradigm of research developed in the 1950s-60s. And, unfortunately, these people are identified as leftists and secularists, condemning others who do not blindly toe their line. As for the more regressive right-wing Hindu fringe, the period remains a black aberration.

If scholarship, in any field, is to grow with time, young researchers with fresh ideas and energies must be given an opportunity to be heard seriously, else the Ibn Khaldunian rule automatically applies, where old *zamindars* have to give way to new turks; this is more true in politics and statecraft where new people displace decadent old political culture with fresh strategies and tactics, often deploying sophisticated technologies of warfare and violence. In the field of medieval Indian history, it is sought to be dismissed as

mere *badtamizi*, or mischief, which can be easily suppressed by those in positions of power, the venerable dons of academia.

Insofar as serious scholarship is concerned, if it is to remain relevant and credible, it must engage with intellectual concerns emerging out of contemporary political and social contexts, of course armed with methods of critical historical distance. In the last four decades or so, Indian society and politics have grappled with a host of issues ranging from some legitimate questions of identity—ethnic, religious, linguistic—to longstanding cries of injustices based on gender, caste and tribe, and attempts to address these issues politically, with some success. All these are largely reflected in the historiographical trends of the last couple of decades or more, especially in the works of scholars specializing in what are conventionally identified as ancient and modern periods. Anyone with a little bit of exposure to the study of medieval Indian history, and not bound to commitments of group-politics—legitimate or otherwise—will know that scholarship in related fields is lagging behind considerably, with new researchers actively discouraged to explore research agendas developed through their own thinking.

Thus, medieval Indian history writing is a besieged field today. It has to constantly battle on one hand with popular perceptions which erroneously equate the period with one religion—Islam—and with centuries of darkness, an image that school textbooks do little to dispel, and on the other hand with near ignorant fellow practitioners. It is being completely marginalized in some universities because of the grossly misinformed association with only one language, Persian (and absence of language experts), and domination of one set of people, Muslims. The polyglossian cosmopolitan medieval world is being reduced to a monochromatic caricature. The exceedingly rich corpus of European sources, Indic vernaculars, and Sanskrit texts, as well as a variety of visual, epigraphic, numismatic, and archaeological material are ignored in the process. Demise, sadly, looks imminent until drastic measures are swiftly adopted. Maliciously attacked from orthodox votaries, new research does not reach the classrooms. Acceptance is grudging, or absent, and worse, rejection vicious; and dissemination is restricted through control of syllabi and so called expert reviews.

Mercifully, some of the most innovative research is happening on this vast thousand-year period in institutions abroad, especially in US universities, and in rare instances in some still 'open' Indian ones. Indian and American scholars, among others, have produced, in recent years, some pioneering works on the Portuguese, Mughals, Marathas, Vijayanagara, and a host of other important regional kingdoms. Working on a variety of themes related to political theory and governance, literary traditions, religious practices, connections with the wider world, urbanization and consumption, visual cultures, body and sexuality, etc., the current generation of scholars have opened new frontiers of research. Unfortunately, very little of this is made available to students in Indian universities. Only a handful of Indian academic journals publish these kinds of new research, and the ones which do, lack wide circulation. The same kind of orthodoxy controls publication of research monographs through the peer review system, where even a whiff of iconoclasm is quickly smothered.

Regrettably, this is more or less the norm in different streams of expertise also in Indian academia. Yet, we still expect and feel disappointed that Indian universities consistently fail to figure in international rankings. No amount of wishful thinking and even serious reform will help, till the rotten apples are weeded out, and new ideas are allowed to germinate, question, and flourish. Excellence only happens where there is freedom; it cannot thrive in a stultifying patron-client network of mediocrity, dishonesty, and hypocrisy.

Combating this suffocating environment, this volume offers a discussion of Sufism, which is disliked by the protagonists of the left and the right alike. The Sufis are known for their intense love for the eternal God, surpassing that of a mad Majnun for his lovely Layla, for their aspiration to follow the path of the Prophet, for service to entire humanity and not Muslims alone, as well as for maintaining a critical distance from social and political injustices. The medieval Sufis' spirituality was also about controlling the body and cultivating the soul at a time when a materialistic milieu celebrated a life lived with gay abandon. Thus, acquiring a position of great authority in society, not stooping before the ruling dispens-