



Positioning Islamic Theology and *Karamat* in Sufi Discourse: Examining the Nizamiyya *Tariqa*

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Abstract

Theology and scriptures are often regarded as the core of Shariati perspective of Islam. The sufis are considered to be individuals with mystical leanings who were primarily engaged with unravelling their intuitive power. Did Islamic theology occupy a predominant position in the sufi discourse? This paper studies the early fourteenth century and analyzes the standpoint of a sufi master regarding theology and mysticism. By examining the nuances of the Nizamiyya tariqa, this paper analyzes the complex strategies deployed by a sufi Shaykh to provide a sufi interpretation of ritual prayers and Islamic sciences and demonstrate the superior spiritual prowess of the sufis apparent in the performance of karamat (miracles).

Keywords: *Quran, Hadith, karamat, sufis, Nizam al-Din Awliya, mysticism, Islam.*

Introduction

In the South Asian context historians are increasingly engaging with the study of Islam in its multiple dimensions in the medieval and early modern period. Modern historians have examined the political treatises, sufi textual productions, folk literature and importance of Persian language to historicize accommodation and acculturation of Islam in the Indian subcontinent¹. In the recent years, historians have argued that both Shariati and mystical dimensions of Islam played a critical role in shaping the political culture in the subcontinent in the thirteenth through the eighteenth century. Besides growth and spread of theological sciences in the thirteenth and the fourteenth century under the Delhi sultans, the period was marked by growing importance of sufi shaykhs as alternate locus of power and establishment of several sufi *silsilas* such as Chishti, Suhrawardi, Firdausi, etc. Many historians have produced linear histories of the *silsilas* and hagiographies of sufi pirs² while others have dwelt upon the tensions in the sufi-sultan relations in complex ways³. This paper shifts the focus to sufi textual productions in the fourteenth century and seeks to uncover the relative importance of Islamic theology and sufi intuitive power in the discourse of sufis.

The sufi texts were produced in multiple genres such as mystical treatises, hagiographies as well as transcriptions of oral discourses. Amongst the sufi *silsilas*, the textual productions of the Chishtis were enormous, especially in the fourteenth century and centred on the persona, life and teachings of Shaykh Nizam al-Din Awliya. Historians such as K.A. Nizami tend to argue that the Chishtis were otherworldly and were largely involved in pursuit of sufi virtues⁴. An examination of the early life of Nizam al-Din Awliya reveals that he was trained in both Islamic religious sciences and precepts of Sufism. The Muslim

community in the fourteenth century comprised of people from diverse ethnic and regional backgrounds⁵ and often there was lack of consensus regarding the Islamic praxis. The audience that congregated in Nizam al-Din Awliya's hospice was equally diverse; hence, Nizam al-Din had to communicate and deploy complex strategies to lay down the precepts of his *tariqa*. Since he wanted that his teachings should appeal to both lay and mystically inclined disciples, I wish to underline the relative importance of Islamic religious sciences and sufi tenets in his *tariqa*. As a sufi Shaykh ignoring the Islamic religious sciences or ritualistic prayer would have proved detrimental to his popularity amongst the *Sharia*-minded scholars and lay disciples. Hence, I wish to discuss the nuances of religious sciences and sufi *karamat* as contoured by a sufi interpretation. Did Nizam al-Din consciously place the sufis and their intuitive prowess at a higher pedestal compared to religious scholars? Did he negate the importance of rituals to emphasise the importance of spiritual prowess? What kind of strategies did he use to demonstrate the intuitive power of the sufis—aneecdotes, memory of past heroes or didactic discourse? In other words, I wish to focus on Nizam al-Din's approach towards benefices accrued from reading the *Quran* and offering *namaz*, exegesis of *Hadith*, specific examples of sufi intercession and *karamat* to underline his approach and nuances of his *tariqa* (path). I have chosen to examine Nizam al-Din's oral discourses that were transcribed in dialogic form in the *Fawa'id al-Fu'ad* to underline the relative positioning of theology and *karamat* in his *tariqa*.

Nizam al-Din Awliya's *Tariqa*: Islamic Theology and Sufi Tenets

To begin with, I would discuss the kind of knowledge systems that Nizam al-Din had acquired that enabled him to cite specific

examples and prescribe precepts that formed the core of his *tariqa*. I would then discuss the complexities and relative positioning of theology and mysticism in the Nizamiyya *tariqa*. In the Middle Ages, acquisition of knowledge entailed extensive travelling and receiving training under discipleship of multiple teachers who specialized in diverse disciplines. Amir Khwurd, the author of *Siyar al-Awliya*, a *tazkirat* (biographical encyclopaedia) on Shaykh Nizam al-Din Awliya reports that the Shaykh's early life was full of struggle to acquire knowledge, but in spite of poverty, Nizam al-Din's mother⁶, Bibi Zulaikha played a crucial role in educating him and had sent him to a school in Buduan. When Nizam al-Din came to Delhi, he received education under the tutelage of several renowned teachers who were masters of Islamic sciences, such as Shams al-Mulk, Kamal al-Din Zahid, and Maulana Ala al-Din Usuli⁷. Hence, he enhanced his knowledge of the *Quran*, *Hadith*, *Fiqh* or Islamic Jurisprudence⁸ and several other extant literature and even acquired the epithet of Nizam al-Din Bahas (the debater) and Nizam al-Din Mahfil Shikan (argumentator, literally breaker of assemblies)⁹. At one point of time, Nizam al-Din even thought of becoming a *qazi* and requested Shaykh Najib al-Din Mutawakkil to pray for him who condemned it outright. Later, his spiritual longing brought him in contact with Baba Farid, his spiritual mentor, who provided him training in mysticism and read several texts with him that helped him to internalize the mystical import of Islamic faith: for instance, he read excerpts from an old manuscript¹⁰ copy of *Awarif al-Ma'arif* under the discipleship of Baba Farid¹¹. Hence, Nizam al-Din was a sufi teacher who had excellent command over both religious sciences such as the *Quran*, *Hadith*, *Fiqh* and sufi texts including the *Awarif al-Ma'arif*, *Lawa'ih* of Hamid al-Din Nagauri, *Kashf al-Mahjub* and several others¹². Having knowledge of both juridical as well as mystical dimensions of Islam, he could easily transit from scriptural interpretation to spiritual interpretation in his discourses.

The discourses of Nizam al-Din were transcribed by his lay disciple Amir Hasan Sijzi and entitled the *Fawa'id al-Fu'ad*. Amongst the various precepts of the sufi *tariqa*, Nizam al-Din underlined the importance of reading the *Quran* to his congregation. While doing so he did not focus on mere rituals but underscored the spiritual benefits incurred from reading of *Quran* and illustrated his point by citing examples from past heroes of the Muslim community. Nizam al-Din argued that reading the *Quran* was vital for all individuals irrespective of whether they were commoners, sufis or *imams*. He cited examples from various kinds of people, that is, itinerant dervishes, sufi Shaykhs and *imams*, who recited the entire *Quran* while offering prayer. An ordinary itinerant dervish's spiritual merits would have not been noticed by Nizam al-Din, but because one of them read the entire *Quran* in prayer, his conduct was worth recollecting. Amongst other heroes whom Nizam al-Din cited in his discourses included Shaykh Baha al-Din Zakariya who read the entire *Quran* in one cycle of prayer and Imam Abu Hanifa who read the entire *Quran* twice everyday during the month of *Ramazan*¹³. Further, Nizam al-

Din argued that those who intend to memorize the *Surat al-Yusuf* and once they are successful in doing that, they would accrue benefits of memorizing the *Quran*. He further corroborated his statement with a saying of Prophet Muhammad that those who have a strong desire to memorize the *Quran* would be able to memorize it through divine intervention before the Day of Judgement (p. 156). In addition, he cited examples of sufis like Bakhtiyar Kaki who had memorized the *Quran* and Shadi Muqri who had such miraculous power that anyone who recited one page of *Quran* before him was able to memorize the entire *Quran* and Nizam al-Din was a direct witness to this.

Nizam al-Din further illustrated the therapeutic powers of reciting the verses of *Quran* and benefits derived from reciting select *Surats* of *Quran* while praying. He argued that one should perform *zikr* (remembrance) to heal ailments, read the *Surat al-Buruj* during customary afternoon prayers to get relief from affliction of boils (p. 264). While arguing the importance of reciting the *Surat al-Fatiha*, he argued that of the ten articles of Islamic faith at least eight are present in this *Surat*; citing an anecdote Nizam al-Din argued since Maulana Taqi al-Din read the *Surat al-Fatiha* and *Surat al-Buruj* in the first inclination after evening prayer and *Surat al-Tariq* after the *Surat al-Fatiha* in the second inclination, hence all his sins were forgiven at the Day of Judgement. Nizam al-Din argued that in order to preserve one's faith, one must read the *Surat al-Ikhlās* seven times and *Surat al-Falak* once in the first inclination and the *Surat al-Ikhlās* seven times and *Surat al-Nas* once in the second inclination (p. 133). He corroborated his prescription with a Prophetic Tradition that the *Surat al-Ikhlās* is equivalent to one-third of the *Quran* and further explained this prescription by pointing out that if one misses reading the *Quran* in prayer then reciting the *Surat al-Ikhlās* was equivalent to reading the entire *Quran* (p. 245). He further suggested if an individual derives peace by reading the verses of *Quran*, he should keep doing it. Nizam al-Din argued that one should perform two extra prostrations for faith before sunset and at sunrise and recite the *Surat al-Kafirun* five times at night and *Surat al-Ikhlās* five times at sunrise besides *Surat al-Fatiha* and mentioned this prescription can be seconded by Prophetic tradition (p. 134). In addition, he argued that his *pir*, Shaykh Farid al-Din had commanded him to read *Surat al-Naba* five times after evening prayers and on consulting the commentaries of *Quran*, he realized that one read this *Surat* became a captive of God's love (p. 190). He argued that one should not wait for misfortune to descend before offering prayers because offering prayers would ensure the hardships are lessened. In this context he argued that Imam Nasiri had mistakenly been considered dead and buried and he recited the *Surat al-Yasin* forty times and a grave robber happened to pass by so he dug up his grave to steal his shroud but he got relief from his distress (p. 151). While relating the benefits from reading the *Quran*, Nizam al-Din not only enlightened his congregation the benefits accrued from reciting sections of the *Quran* but demonstrated his authoritative voice and displayed his adept knowledge of the *Quran* as a sufi Shaykh.

While guiding the congregation regarding norms of doing prayer, Nizam al-Din also addressed specific queries of his disciples and provided them solutions to their problems and also advised them on norms of praying in order to improve their spiritual quotient. He advised his lay disciple, Amir Hasan Sijzi, the compiler of *Fawa'id al-Fu'ad* regarding the invocations that should be offered before offering prayer, the importance of offering prayer in congregation, performing supererogatory prayers besides regular prayers. Further, he argued that the Prophet used to offer prayer not only on appropriate time or on just cause but also when there was neither time nor cause (p. 181). Besides guiding his readers regarding number of prostrations to be offering while praying, he was critical of sufis who merely focused on posture while praying, for instance, Shaykh Baha al-Din Zakariya, who was not willing to offer prayer with an individual who was not able to put his feet in appropriate manner while praying (p. 328). But Nizam al-Din highly praised the conduct of Shaykh Jalal al-Din Tabrizi as he understood the inner meaning of praying. In an anecdote he noted that when Jalal al-Din Tabrizi went to Qazi Kamal al-Din Jafri's house in Budaun, the Qazi was praying; Tabrizi rebuked him as he argued that the Qazi did not know the ritual of prayer correctly. He argued that the (*ulama*) externalist scholars prayed at the direction of Kaba while (*fuqara*) God's beggars prayed only on seeing the God's throne (p. 345). From this anecdote we can note that Nizam al-Din wanted his audience to appreciate how the intuitive genius of the sufis was superior to the powers present in mere ritualistic prayers. Unlike Baha al-Din Zakariya, who was stringent about matters concerning [external] ritual Nizam al-Din's views were akin to Jalal al-Din Tabrizi: relying on intuition and underlying objectives while emphasizing the inherent difference in the manner in which *ulama* and the sufis offer prayers. While guiding his congregation on matters concerning the norms of prayer he was careful to lead them away from any superficial perfunctory performance of ritual, emphasizing instead the need to comprehend its inner meaning so that the experience of praying could become life orientational as was their original intent.

While citing anecdotes from the lives of sufis, Nizam al-Din also provided examples of sufis who followed rigorous schedule while offering prayer. For instance, Baba Farid kept reading prayers even while being on his death bed; Sayf al-Din Bakhrazi would stay up one-third of the night offering prayer and Bakhtiyar Kaki would send 1000 invocations each night to Prophet. Nizam al-Din also discussed several individuals in his discourses who were regular in offering prayer. Nizam al-Din related that Khwaja Ahmad and his friend did not deter from offering both customary and supererogatory prayers in a desolate place that had potential threat from highway thieves. Even when Bakhtiyar Kaki was awestruck after listening to *sama*, he did not forego his canonical prayers. Nizam al-Din also discussed the consequence of missing prayers and also cited a Tradition to underline the Prophet's views on consequences of missing prayers. He further explained the conditions under which exception could be allowed and the

calamity that befell on Maulana Zahid when he forgot to read his daily prayers. Further, he related that after marriage Bakhtiyar Kaki forgot to pray for three nights hence a disciple dreamt of his death and he decided to divorce his wife. Hence, Nizam al-Din sought to induce some code of conduct amongst the people that could alter their daily life. By referring to discourses and lives of several sufis Nizam al-Din gave credence to his own views.

In addition, Nizam al-Din constantly cited and explained the Traditions of the Prophet in his congregational assemblies, contextualizing and clarifying the soundness of his principles by citing Prophetic Traditions. Sometimes, he provided a simple exegesis while some other traditions were discussed in detail to unravel their inner meaning; but by and large Nizam al-Din relied on his intuitive knowledge to interpret and elaborate on the import of the reported *Hadith*. Nizam al-Din was often asked questions relating to veracity of traditions of prophet or if an individual's conduct was in consonance with Prophetic traditions. Nizam al-Din used his vast knowledge of theology to satisfy the queries of the questioners relating to various fields such as sin, lawful food, conduct in a saint's assembly, etc. But while explaining the inner meaning of a Tradition he relied on his intuitive genius and often contextualized it with norms of conduct that he wished to prescribe. To illustrate this, Nizam al-Din reported that the essence of divination by the *Quran* was authorized by the Prophetic Traditions (*Hadith*). Moreover, he also narrated an anecdote regarding an event in the life of Shaykh Badr al-Din Ghaznawi and how following an omen from the *Quran* saved his life from Mongol onslaught (p. 165). While guiding his disciples on norms of conduct in a *pir's* assembly, Nizam al-Din narrated a tradition: once a group of people were sitting near Prophet and had encircled him. One person came and made space to sit within that group while another person saw no space and left. The Prophet apparently condemned this conduct and said a person who leaves from his assembly without meeting would be denied any mercy. Nizam al-Din concluded this discussion with his prescriptions on similar lines.

Nizam al-Din not just impressed his audience with his knowledge of theology and his intuitive abilities but drew upon the spiritual prowess of the sufi Shaykhs by citing specific examples of sufi *karamat*. Nizam al-Din argued that their *nur-i batin* (inner light of the sufis) and intuitive genius set them apart from theological scholars. By citing awe inspiring narratives on their abilities to perform miracles, shield disciples from unforeseen troubles, predict the future and play a key role as intercessor on behalf of common Muslims, Nizam al-Din could overwhelm his audience about the supremacy of sufis and their piety. Nizam al-Din argued that the acts of the saints are sinless and due to their perfect knowledge and directions from God they can perform *karamat*. Hence, sufis commanded respect on account of their inner light as illustrated in the following examples. Baba Farid advised some dervishes to avoid the jungle route while travelling as he could foresee the dangers but they chose to ignore him and suffered

fatal mishaps (p. 361). When a thief entered Baba Farid's mother's house and she cursed him he lost his vision and later his vision was restored on account of her spiritual prowess. Through intuition Jalal al-Din Tabrizi got to know about Najm al-Din Sughra's death at the precise time even though he was not in Delhi and argued that Najm al-Din had driven me out of Delhi hence my Shaykh has driven him out of this world.

The intuitive knowledge was not restricted to only sufis as several pious but illiterate people who were blessed with the perfect knowledge of God. For instance, Khwaja Hasan Afghan was an illiterate person; nonetheless he could recognize the Quranic lines distinctly from rest of the text due to his *nur-i batin*. Sufis were also identified as individuals whose intercession shielded their disciples. Qutb al-Din Bakhtiyar Kaki protected Nasir al-Din Qubacha from the Mongols through his blessed arrow (p. 205). Chronological discrepancies in the account notwithstanding, Nizam al-Din explained how Baba Farid's supplication healed the illness of Muhammad Ghuri's brother (p. 341). These anecdotes regarding interactions of the sufis with commoners along with their powers of healing further helped in advancing their heroic image in the eyes of common people.

Furthermore, Nizam al-Din described the miracles performed by several sufis, though he himself did not perform any miracle. But by exemplifying the spiritual prowess and achievements of the saints he sought to enhance their esteem in the eyes of the congregation. These instances also illustrated the perfect knowledge of the sufis which was based on complete reliance on God¹⁴. The miracles not only portrayed the sufis as conductors of miracles but also exhibited that God also performed miracles to shield the sufis. For instance, Ibrahim Adham was shielded from extreme temperatures through dragons which were themselves a source of destruction. Shihab al-Din Suhrawardi clarified the wrong notions of the Caliph and proved his thesis about the universe through his miraculous powers. Safi al-Din Gazaruni outclassed a yogi by belittling his magic with the demonstration of his superior spiritual prowess. The intuitive knowledge also enabled sufis to interpret and communicate through dreams. Badr al-Din Ghaznawi came to know about the death of Qutb al-Din Bakhtiyar Kaki in his dream. Sayf al-Din Bakharzi visualized symbols of his death in *zikir* and his *Pir* communicated his yearning for him in his dreams. The *Fawa'id al-Fu'ad* was careful to portray specific individuals who should be venerated because they possessed super-normal powers to foresee danger, interpret dreams and omens and provide appropriate advice on how ordinary mortals could negotiate the vicissitudes of daily life. By presenting the sufis as embodiment of perfect practices, Nizam al-Din was able to communicate that their lifestyle were worth emulating and the past was a glorious period.

Conclusion

In the Nizamiyya *tariqa*, as underlined in the *Fawa'id al-Fu'ad*, Nizam al-Din gave primacy to sufi ideas and principles but this did not incur any negation of Islamic theology. Through

episodes drawn from the lives of sufis and pious individuals Nizam al-Din demonstrated the importance of reading the *Quran*, corroborated his precepts with Prophetic traditions and highlighted the norms of offering prayer. In doing so he demonstrated his sound knowledge of Islamic sciences and made his discourses legible to the scholarly class as well as scripturally inclined people¹⁵. However, in most of his discourses the anecdotes reported the conduct of sufis and detailed their rigorous schedule of offering prayer, sound knowledge of *Surats* of *Quran* and hence portrayed them as true carriers of the Islamic faith who had internalized the spiritual essence of the scriptures. By subtle criticism of individuals who merely focused on external rituals rather than inner meaning of praying, Nizam al-Din demonstrated to his audience that his *tariqa* epitomized the norms of Islamic faith in a superior manner. In addition, Nizam al-Din displayed that sufis were endowed with spiritual prowess apparent in *nur-i batin* that enabled them to perform miracles, interpret omens and foresee dangers, shield disciples and heal the ailment of the supplicants. Hence through subtle mechanisms, Nizam al-Din could place the sufis in a higher spiritual terrain compared to externalist scholars since they not only had sound knowledge of Islamic sciences, they could lucidly comprehend and cite its inner meaning and utilize it for spiritual upliftment and use their intuitive knowledge for empowering the commoners. Thus, sufis could readily fit in the category of ideal heroes of the Muslim community whose memory and conduct needed to be recollected, appreciated and emulated by people.

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