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**Cosmopolitan Culture of Medieval India; An appraisal of Sufi contribution**

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**Abstract**

*Owing to common and contiguous borders, with similar geographical features and geo-cultural affinity, India-Central Asia relation dates back to the remote past. This relationship covers all aspects of human relationship-social, political, intellectual, commercial etc. Caravans of men and stream of thoughts constantly shuffled across the India and central Asia. It gave fillip to intimate cultural contacts between the two regions. The exchange thus played a significant role in developing both these societies. In this paper an attempt is made to analyse the contribution of Central Asian immigrants especially the Sufis and saints of 13<sup>th</sup> 14<sup>th</sup> centuries in establishing and developing a unique phenomena of absorption, adjustment, and assimilation of diverse cultural elements in India, giving shape to a new culture which Babur in his Tuzki- Baburi refers as "Hindustani culture".*

*This Hindustani culture was not restricted to living only, but in thinking and writing as well. Besides the literary personals who introduced Persian style in Indian historiography, the Khanqahs of medieval Sufis consequently developed into places where people of all types, belonging to different religious and cultural backgrounds, assembled and a process of interaction started in language - language of elite i.e. (Persian and Arabic) and the language of common man i.e. a colloquial Indian one came together and paved the way for the emergence of new language intelligible to both. So the earliest sentences of Hindawi that we have discovered were uttered in the Khanqahs.*

**Keywords:** civilization, culture, assimilation, synthesis, acculturation, Indo-Muslim culture.

**Introduction:**

Historical and Cultural contacts between the peoples of India and Central Asia can be traced back to pre historic times when the ethnic community of Indo-Iranian tribes existed. In the course of time the two regions of the East due to its strategic position became centres of earliest world civilizations. During certain phases of their history, when some areas of India and Central Asia became parts of same State formations, the spiritual, cultural and economic ties grew particularly strong. The Taklimakan explorations have brought to light thousands of manuscripts written in different scripts and also a multitude of works of art, pictorial and plastic, which mark out India and Central Asia as the meeting ground of Hellenistic, Indian, Persian and Chinese forms of civilization. Changes in political climate coming though, exchange of population- of scholars, religious preachers, traders. Job –seekers, etc continued; since travel was facilitated by good number of available entry points from Kashmir in the north to Sind on north –western boundary<sup>1</sup>. The Delhi Sultanate, established by Islamized Central Asian Turks in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, made these contacts long and regular. To quote Prof Nizami, "Tribal pressure, love of learning, mystic wanderjahre, commercial considerations, prospects of employment, and

unsettled conditions were some determining factors for frequent movement of men between India and Central Asia.<sup>2</sup> Considering the broader perspective of India's contact with central Asia which revolutionised the socio-cultural and political spectrum of Medieval India, its history falls into distinct phases; Phase 1st begins from 7<sup>th</sup> century to the year 1220-i.e from the Arab conquest of Central Asia to the rise of Chengiz Khan; phase 11 from 1220-1370-i.e from the conquest and the overthrow of Central Asian States especially Bukhara by Chengiz Khan and the rise of Timur. This period of century and a half witnessed in Central Asia the destruction of state-system evolved over a period of several decades by the Turkish dynasties and in India the establishment of Delhi Sultanate. The unsettled conditions created by the Mongols led to the migration of large number of administrators, poet, scholars, saints and artisan from Persia and Central Asia to India. Therefore, long before Turkish conquest of India, Sufis and saints entered peacefully into the plains of India, established centres amongst the lower sections of Indian population to facilitate their contacts with common masses.<sup>(3)</sup> Systematic organisation of *Silsilahs*, however, began almost with the foundation of the Delhi Sultanate when two of the most important mystic orders-the *Chistiya* and *Suharwardiya* were introduced in India. Within a short span of time these *Khanqahs* sprung from Multan to Lakhnauti and from panipat to Deogri. It is significant to mention that the development of these mystic orders was greater in India than in the lands of their birth; Central Asian centres began to look toward India for guidance and inspiration.<sup>4</sup>

One significant factor which contributed for their flourishment in India was socio-political setup of medieval Hindustan. The period under review was coincide with socio-political decadency, with no unifying bond, no idea of social oneness. Caste-system had played havoc and people in general lived under unenviable conditions,<sup>5</sup> religion was monopoly of a particular section and majority of people never had a glimpse of an Indian temple. The Sufis completely rejected the idea of superior birth - the bedrock on which the entire social structure of medieval Hindustan stood. The idea of being born from the Sun or the moon, or the head or foot of Brahmans, was meaningless in the eyes of Muslim mystics. Piety was the only criterion of superiority, and an ordained priesthood or a hereditary class of Brahmans was the very negation of the real spirit of Islam and Sufi teaching. This was all contrast to the caste ridden social and legal structure of medieval Hindustan, where majority of people consisting of workers and artisans were living outside the cities, deprived of all amenities of civic life. As Beni Prasad rightly puts it, "the principle of caste strikes the root of individuality and amounts almost to denial of personality".<sup>6</sup> The munificence of Sufi Saints to identify religion with human services alarmed the medieval society and provided new impetus to religion. Their *Khanqahs*, numerous and extensive as they were, soon developed themselves into the complex culture-pattern of India and contributed in the growth of cosmopolitan tendencies in Indian society. They threw open doors of their *Khanqahs* to all sorts of people-rich and poor, citizens and villagers, Hindus and Muslims, free born and slaves, men and women, scholars, politicians, merchants, artisans, peasants. They looked upon "social services as the supreme object of all their spiritual exercise. Salvation, for a medieval mystic, was not something to be attained in the world beyond; it was to be attained here by the healthy development of cosmic emotion-an emotion which drew its sustenance from attitudes towards the problems of misery-stricken and down-trodden masses of humanity.<sup>7</sup> Once asked about the highest form of devotion, Sheikh Mu'in' ud-Din chistti is reported to have remarked 'Devotion to God is of two types: *Lazimi* (intransitive) and *Muta'addi* (transitive). In *lazimi* devotion, like prayer, fasting, pilgrimage to Mecca, the

benefits which accrues, is confined to the devotee alone. The *Muta' addi* devotion on the contrary is achieved by spending money on others, by using energies in helping his fellow human beings without any discrimination, brings comforts and privileges to others.<sup>8</sup> A man, comments Sheikh, "should develop river-like generosity, sun-like affection, and the earth-like hospitality-as the river, the sun, the earth extended their benefits to all, so a man should also rise above all narrow considerations in dealing with his fellow beings"<sup>9</sup>. The reward of *Muta'addi* devotion is endless and limitless. Commenting on *haqu-'q- ul' lah* and *haqu'q'ul Ibad* another eminent mystic of the period is reported to have remarked "performing prayers day and night is a work more befitting an old widow than a mystic." A mystic's work was to strive day and night to bring happiness to the hearts of men by alleviating their miseries." The leitmotif of Sufis life was:

*Bringing solace to a human heart is like Haji-Akbar*

*One heart is better than a thousand Kabas<sup>10</sup>*

This concept of humanism and conciliation towards various religio-cultural groups however does not mean that they did not believe in their religious identity. While firmly adhering to the basic principles of their faith, they did not carry this difference to social relationships. Their toleration was the toleration of a spiritually powerful man who admires other forms of thought and behaviour which is reflected from the remarks of Sheikh Nizam-ud-din Auliya, when he saw Hindus bathing in the Jumna and singing devotional songs:

*Every people have their own path,*

*Their own religion and centre of worship*

The religious tolerance and broad-mindedness is lucidly expressed in the following verse of Amir Khusrau:

*Though Hindu is not faithful*

*He often believes in the same thing as I do.*

Prof. Gibbon remarks, "The spirit of toleration springs from very different attitudes of the mind of man. There is the toleration of the philosopher, to whom all religions are equally true; of the historian, to whom all are equally false; and of the politician, to whom all are equally useful. There is the toleration of the man who tolerates other modes of thought and behaviour because he has himself grown absolutely indifferent to all modes of thought and behaviour. There is the toleration of the weak man who, on account of sheer weakness, pockets all kinds of insults heaped on things or persons whom he holds dear. It is obvious that these types of tolerances have no ethical value. On the other hand, they unmistakably reveal the spiritual impoverishment of the man who practises them. True toleration is begotten of intellectual breadth and spiritual expansion. The Sufi's toleration was an expression of confidence in their faith. For them all people were the children of God on earth and any social discrimination was a negation of the true spirit of faith."<sup>11</sup> To them

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*All the religions and faiths are*

*Branches of the same tree,*

*They have sprouted from one and the  
Same root.*

Toynbee has very correctly observed that the missions of the higher religions are not Competitive but complementary. If the unity of Divine revelation is accepted, it would automatically lead to this attitude of mind and soul. The Sufis not only preached it but practised it and helped in pulling down the barriers between various religious groups. This concept of humanism and religious catholicity helped them in understanding India and the basic character of her composite society and, within no time their hospices developed into places where people of all types, belonging to different religious and cultural backgrounds, assembled and a process of cultural diffusion, instead of acculturation initiated in language, social life, religious thought and behaviour. The Sufi saints were concerned more with emotional harmony than ideological synthesis, which was a gradual process and touched a limited section of intellectuals. Emotional harmony of course a herculean task, was achieved at large scale and created an atmosphere of mutual trust as well as goodwill.<sup>12</sup> The approach of accommodation and understanding by emphasising respect for basic human values was later on strengthened by the Bhakti saints like Chaitanya, Kabir, Guru Nanak, Namadev, Pipa, Sen and others who familiarized themselves with the cosmopolitan ideas of the Sufi cult and advocated them in their respective regions. Their reverberated ideology in the form of songs was

*Religion consisteh not in mere words,*

*He who looks upon all men as equal is religious:*

The assertion of deep influence of Muslim mystics and their *Khanqahs* is substantiated by the leadership of Bhakti movement who all belonged to lower strata of society, a significant fact not to be ignored. There was hardly any saint of Bhakti school who had not passed some of his time in a *Khanqah*.<sup>13</sup>

The eagerness of Muslim Saints to develop close relations with the Hindus and understand their religious life and thought facilitated the evolution of a common medium for exchange of ideas. Therefore, the earliest sentences of *Hindawi* a common lingua franca adopted both by Muslims and Hindus, were first uttered in these *Khanqahs* since they discouraged linguistic chauvinism and regarded all languages as different vehicles for the communication of feelings. They helped in the development of regional languages — Bengali, Punjabi, Marathi, and so on. .

It is pertinent to mention here that these Sufi Saints belonging to different orders were highly educated intellectuals, capable of communicating in many oriental languages, yet in India the meters they used were mostly Hindi and occasionally Persian. The rhyming of all works whether of Hindi or Arabic or Persian origin was based on their similarity of sound as they were pronounced by the inhabitants and their foreign accent was lost<sup>14</sup>. In their mystic utterances they have freely borrowed from the Indian literary motifs. Amir Khusrau poetry, [the son of Turkish Amir and first Hindustani born Muslim], is best example of this synthesis. As a true Indian he breaths the true Indian patriotism and upholds the greatness of everything Indian-language, rivers, and her gifts of Nature. This legacy of Sufis in language link was buttressed further by the Delhi Sultans and the Mughal rulers subsequently who ruled India for nearly 600year.

Besides religion, culture and language, Sufi literature generated and compiled at the Khanqahs has remarkably contributed to the historiography of medieval India. The historical literature of medieval India is largely the product of chronicles, which followed the Persian traditions of history writing and confined their histories to the camp or the court. Unlike Arab historians, their accounts were devoid of history of age in which socio, economic and cultural events were given equal rather greater importance than political details. Moreover, their accounts on many occasion represents elements of subjectivity since their selection of material and criticism of events was determined by the wishes, both explicit and implicit of his royal patron. Therefore, non political literature of the period, comprising general religious works, mystic treatises, *Mulfuzat*, literary works of poets and saints etc abridges the gap and provides a mine of information on medieval society. It also helps in cross checking the wrong impressions created by contemporary political chroniclers. Among such literary works of the period, Amir Khusrau's historical Masnavi, *Qir'an-sa'dan*, occupies a pre-eminent position. Its real value does not lie so much in the details that it supplies about the historic meeting of Kaiqubad with his father, Bughra Khan, but in the fullness with which the social life and culture atmosphere has been depicted. Since no study of men or institution can be considered complete without an understanding of the spirit of the age, the *Qir'an-sa'dan* certainly occupies a high place in the historical literature of medieval India as it provides a viewed picture of different ideas of the Urban Revolution initiated by the Turks. With this background in mind, it becomes easier to evaluate the significance of the many socio economic measures of Ala-ud-din Khilji. It is only through Khair-ul majalis that one comes to know that as a result of these measures even a mendicant could afford to get two blankets prepared for him.

Besides their literary works, *Mulfuz* writing is next invention of these Sufis. The historical value of this type of mystical literature cannot be over-emphasised. Through these records of conversation we can have a glimpses of the medieval society in its fullness, if not in its all perfection-the moods and tension of the common man the religious thought at its higher and lower levels, the popular customs and traditions and above all the problems of the people. While evaluating the importance of *Mulfuz* literature in medieval historiography Prof. K A Nizami has rightly remarked that "there is no other type of literature through which we can feel the pulse of the medieval public. This information furnished by Sufi literature is of infinite value in understanding and appreciating medieval life in all its fullness".<sup>15</sup>

Toynbee while commenting on the role of mystics in the growth of civilizations has remarked "It is through the inward development of personality that individual human beings are able to perform those creative acts in the outward field of action, that cause the growth of human societies."<sup>16</sup> one is constantly reminded of this remark While assessing role of Muslim Sufis and saints in the socio cultural history of India. No human thought or movement proceeds in a straight line, there are deviations, disagreements and aberrations: but the general direction of mystical thought in India was invariably towards the growth of a cosmopolitan outlook which Babur designated as the Hindustani way of life, so significantly buttressed by his successors in the subsequent years. The contribution of Sufis lies in their sincere and dedicated struggle to unite the heterogeneous elements of Indian society at various levels. Durkheim's view that 'Religion is the source of superior culture' fully applies to Sufis and saints of medieval India who exerted their energies to eradicate the cast-ridden structure of Indian society, as well as moral laxities and social vices, a necessary concomitant of cultural growth in the wake of Urban Revolution followed by the establishment of Delhi Sultanate.<sup>17</sup> Their *Khanqahs* acted as a counter force

against social and moral crimes, like slavery, hoarding, black marketing, profiting and wine which is fully acknowledged by the contemporary historians like Barani when he remarks, "vices among men had been reduced as a result of teachings of these mystics"<sup>18</sup>.

Contrary to the rigid and orthodox thinking pattern of Ulema who categorized men into believers and non believers, they believed that all people are children of God and this attitude inculcated a deep and genuine spirit of humanism in their daily life. Sheikh Hamid-u-din Nagauri, a distinguished *khalifa* of Sheikh Muin -ud-din Chishti rebuked [admonished] one of his disciples for addressing a Hindu as "Kafir" commenting that " you never know , what a inner spiritual life of this man is". They abhorred the words like Kafir, infidel, or the fire-worshipper. For them all were like beads in the same rosary. They rejected all ideas of social and racial superiority and turned down the idea of physical pollution through contact with any human being. There are instances of saints dining with low-caste people.<sup>19</sup>

Intellectuals and commoners apart, their benevolence and dynamic approach served as torch bearer to ruling elite <sup>20</sup> who were puffed with Sassanid social and political concept while dealing with multi-religious, multi racial and multi-lingual subjects. The Sultanate of Delhi under their influence barring few was managed and run on secular lines despite the dictates of theologians who expected the rulers to enforce the laws of Shariat without having insight into the socio-political milieu. Zia-u,' din Barani writing about Sultan Firoz Shah, who's reign is generally deemed as theological oriented, remarked, Sultan per forced to promulgate *Zawabit* or state laws, with reference to the public good and in case of conflict between *Shariat* and state laws, state law used to prevail. The concept of distinction between the noble and low born which finds strong expression in political chronicles like *Fatawai-Jahandari* and *Adabu,'l –Harab Wa Shujaat* was meaningless to Muslim mystics. They in fact launched a persistent campaign against caste concept and class distinction and prevented the growth of "Indo-Muslim society" on the perverted ideology of the governing class who deemed education as the exclusive privilege of the upper class and behold the Islamic principles of equality and brotherhood in letter and spirit.

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5. For details of Social structure in India during 11<sup>th</sup> century see, *Alberuni's India*, English translation, E.C.sachau, vol II, PP,101-56 6.,London,1910.
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10. Nizami .K.A, *State & Culture, in Medieval India*, p, 182, Adam Publishers, New Delhi, 1985.
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12. This concept of universal harmony is reflected in the following verses of Amir Khusrau when he identified himself with the Indian milieu and writes "Though o Hindu is not a believer like me, he nevertheless believes in many things in which I do". Viewed from Nizami, *State and Culture in Medieval India*, p, 189.
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17. For details see Amir Khusrau's *Qi'ran u'sadin* and Barni's *Tarikhi Feroz - Shahi*, p 344.
18. Zia-u, d din Barani, *Tarikhi-Feroz-Shahi*, p 344, edit, Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan, Bib India, Calcutta, 1862.
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20. Forty Turkish families (Turkani-Chelgani) controlled and monopolized all important offices in the government and did not approve the appointment of low born in the administration. Nizami. K. A, *State and Culture in Medieval India*, p, 73.