



ANALYZING THE ROLE OF THE PRIESTLY CLASS IN THE DARGAHS OF DELHI: THE CASE OF NIZAMAD-DINAULIYA SHRINE

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ABSTRACT

The Sufi dargahsin the Indian subcontinent are managed by groups of people who have since centuries been managing the shrines like their personal enterprises. These individuals who belong to the priestly class are called khadims, and the onus of managing the shrines and looking after the day-to-day functioning of the shrines is placed on them. These khadims have an important role to play in the Sufi realm because they are the ones who not only look after the administration of the shrines but also manage the finances, and to a large extent can be called the ‘managers’ of Sufi shrines in the Indian subcontinent. This paper aims to analyze the role played by the khadims in the Sufi dargahs in India, with specific reference to the shrine of HazratNizamad-dinAuliya in Delhi.

The Sufis of the Indian sub-continent in general and of Delhi in particular lived a life of piety interspersed with social, economic, political, and cultural roles that they played from time to time. In the spiritual realm, they guided the faithful and in the temporal realm they engaged in matters of socio-political concerns, and also managed the economic matters of their respective *khanqahs*. Their *khanqahs* provided a platform for social interaction and cultural integration, and

their disciples and followers visited the *thekhanqahs* of the *shaikhs* often during their lifetime. After the death of a saint his grave became the most significant area of worship and later tombs were raised in order to sanctify the divine grace of the saint. These places called *dargahs* came to be managed by people who belonged to the priestly class and were called *khadims*. The *khadims* took upon themselves the task of administering the shrine vis-a-vis managing the finances, supervising and conducting rituals, and interacting with visitors. Hence, they emerged as important functionaries in the *dargah* set-up.

The *khadims* have a well-defined role to play in the *dargahs*. The early chronicles as well as hagiographical records do not contain accounts of daily practices and numerous rituals performed in *dargahs*. However, these sources do mention that a large number of devotees visited these shrines and were assisted by a permanent group of priestly attendants called *khadims*, or the group of people performed *khidmator* service at the *dargah*. They were servants of the shrine who had two distinct tasks to perform each day—looking after the ceremonial life of the mausoleum and looking after the pilgrims.

They helped the devotees to perform *ziyarat* and guide them through the rituals at the *dargah*. Because of their association with the *shaikh* and because of their commitment to the upkeep of the mausoleum, these officials were often given stipends in the form of land grants not only by rulers and saints but also by the masses, both Muslim and non-Muslim. One major function of the *khadims* was to lay down strict disciplinary rules for the visitors to the *dargah*, particularly during the performance of the annual ceremonies of the saint's birth and death.

The *dargah* of Nizamad-din Auliya can be taken as a case study for elaborating the functions of the *khadims*. The rituals of this mausoleum were in the hands of a group of *khadims* known as *haft baridar* or *haft chowkidar*, and they continue to remain an important link between the pilgrims and the shrine. Gradually, the duties of these officials became structured in a way that each person/group of persons was responsible for performing his duty on one particular day/days of the week. On their duty day, the *haft baridar* used to take charge of the keys of the mausoleum and the treasury of the *dargah* called *Toshakhana*. The group used to assume full responsibility of whatever happened within the *dargah* on that particular day. It is important to explain the working of this system in some detail. The *Bari* system worked on the principle of

weekly rotation. The four main *baris* or families of *khadims* were the *Bari Nabiregaan*, *Bari Haroonian*, *Bari Hindustanian*, and *Bari Qazizadgaan*.

In the first week of the month, the *Bari Nabiregaan* took care of the shrine of Shaikh Nizamadin Auliya and *Bari Haroonian* took care of the shrine of Hazrat Amir Khusrau. In the second week, *Bari Haroonian* looked after the shrine of Shaikh NizamadinAuliya and *Bari Nabiregaan* took care of the shrine of Hazrat Amir Khusrau. In the third week of the month *Bari Hindustanian* took charge of the shrine of Shaikh NizamadinAuliya and *Bari Qazizadgaan* looked after the shrine of Hazrat Amir Khusrau. After this rotation, the first two *baris* fell out and the *bari* of Hindustanian went to the shrine of Hazrat Amir Khusrau from where the new cycle of rotation began.¹

Even today, the responsibility of conducting the affairs of the dargah is managed by each group for one whole week, and considering that the number of pilgrims has increased manifold, and also the nature of work has changed from what it used to be in medieval times, it is remarkable to see how the activities of the dargah are carried out from time to time without any compromise on the rituals and the ceremonial functions. Most *khadims* today, as in the past, depend on the pilgrims for their livelihood. Some *khadims* or their representatives/subordinates wait at bus and railway stations to escort the pilgrims to the shrine. A hierarchical net of large number of *khadims* from seniors to juniors and their retainers is in place.

An important ritual which is performed everyday within the dargah is a ceremony which begins fifteen minutes after the *maghribnamaz*. The *khadims* carry unlighted candles to be placed on each corner of the tomb. This is accompanied by drummers beating the drum vigorously, and slowly a crowd begins to gather around the tomb. The candles are placed at four corners of the tomb and are lit. The *khadims* then hold these candles above their head and recite some Persian verses in praise and honour of the saint. When one fifth of the night has passed a bell is rung five times. The *baridars* on duty ask people to leave the mausoleum and sweeps the floor to clean its precincts. The *baridar* then walk out of the mausoleum and a bell is rung six times. At this point, the *qawwal* sings a special song called *kadkha* which narrates the story of the saint and describes his life and work. *Kadkha* is sung only by the official hereditary *qawwals* of the shrine. Literally

¹ Siddiqui, Sameena Hasan, *Aura and the Institution: A Chishti Dargah*, Gateway Publishing, Delhi, 2008, pp. 94-95

it means a folklore, verse or canton. Once the *qawwali* ends, the *dargah* is locked for the night. This is a routine ceremony which is performed on each day of the year except during the *Urs* when the ceremonies are altered to include some new rituals.

Documentary evidence suggests that the custom of making offerings to the shrine through a *khadim* is an old practice. This was and still is a major source of income for the *khadim* community. These offerings were mostly in cash or in kind but sometimes endowments in the form of land were also made in their favour. The Mughal court also gave them liberal grants. However, the Indian government took over all these revenue-free land holdings in 1950 and compensated the *khadims* by giving them money. After the government took over the land, the *khadims* were left with only endowments made by the pilgrims, and this became their main source of livelihood.

The role of the *khadims* within a *dargah* can be understood from the point of view of them being part of the priestly class, people without whom the *ziyarat* cannot be performed or those who have convincingly portrayed themselves in a manner that they are indispensable in the act of performing the *ziyarat*. They act as a priestly class and assume significant powers because the devotees are dependent on them. Right from presenting the *tokri* of flowers at the shrine to covering the grave with the *chadar* brought by the devotees, the *khadim* have a substantial role to play in the everyday functioning of the *dargah*.

The larger *dargahs* which work as an institution and are frequented more by people have larger number of *khadims* to serve the visitors, while the smaller or lesser-known *dargahs* in Delhi have fewer number of *khadims*. For example, the number of *khadims* at the Nizamad-din *dargah* and the *dargah* of Khwaja Qutubad-din in Mehrauli is much higher than the numbers found in the shrines of other saints such as that of Shah Turkman Bayabani at Turkman Gate or Shaikh Sala ad-din Dervish at Shaikh Sarai. It must also be noted here that in most shrines that are not frequented by people or are not known to people as such, there is only one or maximum two *khadims* who take care of the shrine and look after its maintenance.

British records also mention the payment which was being made to the *khadims* by the government for the upkeep of the *dargah*. The *dargah* of Qutub Sahib at Mehrauli was one such *dargah* in which the *khadims* (word used in the gazetteer is *mujawar* or hereditary guardians of

the shrine) were being paid Rs. 2000 for the services rendered by them.² The *Gazetteer of Delhi District* published in 1935 also mentions that the land revenue assigned to the *dargah* was Rs. 2200 per year.

Women pilgrims are not allowed inside the sanctum in many *dargahs* including that of Shaikh Nizamad-din, KhwajaQutubad-din, Shaikh Nasir ad-din. In these *dargahs*, the role of the *khadims* is enhanced further as they become the main agents who perform the *ziyarat* on behalf of women visitors. In some *dargahs* like that of Shah Turkman, Shah Sham ad-dinAtaullah (near Humayun's tomb), Shaikh Imadad-din Firdausi, Shaikh HaidarDhauaPir (Said al-Ajab), women are allowed to enter the sanctum and place flowers and *chadar* on their own. Even at the *dargah* of the Qalandar saint Shaikh Abu Bakr Tusi near PragatiMaidan, women perform the rituals on their own, although on some occasions they are assisted by the *khadims*.

Rituals also differ from one *dargah* to another, and the role of the *khadims* in the *dargahs* where elaborate ceremonies are not performed is, therefore, limited. The maximum number of rituals in a shrine complex in Delhi are perhaps performed at the shrine of Shaikh Nizamad-dinAuliya and the strict adherence to these rituals is supervised by the *khadims*. The rituals at the *dargah* of Shaikh Nizamad-din are carried out with clockwork precision by the *khadims* and day after day the same rituals are performed. It is important to note that the *khadims* not only perform the daily chores of the shrine but the functions performed by them are intrinsically linked to the spiritual discipline of the Chishti order. They manage and organize public ceremonials and functions like *Urs*, *sama* gatherings, visits of dignitaries, apart from other important tasks performed by them. The *khadims* have been very successful in perpetrating the holiness of the saint through these public ceremonials that are organized by them. They have helped in ensuring that the shrine appeals to the masses by preserving the tradition of welcoming everyone.

According to Sameena Hasan Siddiqui in her work on the shrine of HazratNizamad-din, 'the *dargah* of Shaikh Nizamad-dinAuliya incorporated the authoritarian and hierarchical principle of a developed organization, clearly defining disciplinary and initiating principles, veneration of the *shaikh*, collective *zikr* and cult of the tomb. This cult of the tomb created seats of social and

²*Gazetteer of Delhi District*, 1935, p. 227

spiritual power for the *khadims*.³ They were also involved in financial transactions that were made during the Sultanate and Mughal periods. Sultan Muhammad Shah is supposed to have bought land for his burial from the *khadims* of the *dargah* of HazratNizamad-din. Princess Jahan Ara also bought a piece of land from the *khadims* for her grave.⁴

The *Wajib al-Arz* document of *Ghiyaspur, Parganawa Tehsil waZila, Delhi, Bandobast 1880* also confirms the predominant position of the *khadims* with respect to all the economic transactions at the shrine. It states that ‘the *khadims* of the shrine of Shaikh Nizamad-dinAuliya take their share of the offerings made at the shrine according to custom. Offerings to the shrine are made every day. The *khadims* of *dargah*HazratNizamad-dinAuliya divide these offerings in accordance with their usual rights.’⁵ This document also emphasizes the role played by the *khadims* in the financial transactions during the *Urs* and the *BasantMela* which is held every year stating that even on these two festive occasions, the *khadims* take their share of the offerings. Another land grant document, the *Shijratul-Ansab* dated 1880, also mentions the role of the *khadims*. It states that ‘after the demise of HazratNizamad-dinAuliya, the *khadims* continued to draw the expenses of the *dargah* of the Auliya from this village.’⁶

An analysis of historical and archival records, therefore, suggests that the *khadims* played an extremely significant role in the *dargahs* of Delhi, particularly at the shrine of HazratNizamad-dinAuliya, and they have been responsible for institutionalizing ritual practices in shrines across the country.

³ Siddiqui, Sameena Hasan, 2008, Op cit, p. 53

⁴Op cit, p. 54

⁵Ibid, p. 92

⁶ Siddiqui, Sameena Hasan, ‘The Dargah of Shaikh Nizamad-dinAuliya: References in the Revenue and Judicial Records (1859-1973), *Third Frame: Literature, Culture and Society* 1(2) (2008), pp. 15-25