

## SUFISM AND STATECRAFT: REASSESSING SPIRITUAL-POLITICAL POWER IN MUGHAL NORTH INDIA

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### ABSTRACT

The Mughal period in North India (16th–18th centuries) was marked by a complex interplay of spiritual and temporal power, with Sufism and the imperial state maintaining a symbiotic relationship. Sufis, as spiritual leaders, commanded maximum social prestige and were central to medieval Hindustan's cultural and religious life. The Mughal rulers thus gained legitimacy and moral authority from their connection with Sufi orders, especially the Chishtis, Naqshbandis, Qadiris, and Suhrawardis. This dynamic aspect was more emphasized during Akbar's reign from 1556 to 1605, wherein due respect for the Chishti saint Sheikh Salim Chishti showed the meeting of spiritual dominance with political power. Akbar's strategic policy of Sulh-i-Kul, or universal peace, showed Sufi ideals of tolerance and inclusivity, binding imperial authority over a diverse population.

**Keywords:** Sufism, Imperial State, Chishti, Sulh-i-Kul, inclusivity

### 1. Introduction:

The Mughal period, roughly from 1526 to 1857, and especially in North India, marks a critical juncture in the historical evolution of South Asia. Complex and disturbed relations among structures of society, religious groups, and political power mark this period. One salient and striking feature of the socio-political and spiritual landscape is the relationship of the Mughal state with Sufi groups (Taimoor, 2021). Sufism, a mystical and spiritual dimension of Islam, had already struck roots in the Indian subcontinent and the surrounding area long before the arrival of the Mughals. The educated and the illiterate masses of the contemporary age had a deep affection for the Sufi leaders and its religious rituals. Equally significant, while establishing their rule, the Mughal emperors confronted a confusing religious landscape in which Sufi orders-the

Chishti, Naqshbandi, Qadiri, and Suhrawardi-dominated local politics and the people (Hasan, 2025). Therefore, a complex social and national landscape welcomed the Mughal Empire in the sub-continent. This thesis explores the intricate relationship of the Sufi orders with Mughal Rule in North India by reviewing the way spiritual and political leadership intersected, collaborated, and sometimes clashed with each other. The Mughal emperors, for the most part, were solicitous of their assistance and blessings to legitimize their rule by recognizing the penetrating power of Sufi saints and their networks. Hence, most of the times, constructive Sufi-State nexus prevailed at the political landscape during the Mughal era that served the vested interests of the stakeholders. During the process, the government provided grants, stipends and financial aid in developing Suri infrastructures throughout the country. The

political motive behind building shrines, attending spiritual congregations, and making contributions to Sufi institutions was aimed at guaranteeing social cohesion (Abun, 2007). Resultantly, Sufism stood with the government; an atmosphere of social integration and solidarity ensured a sustainable ground to the empire to prolong their rule. In parallel to this, the constructive relationship also served numerous fruits for the welfare and development of the common masses. Along with securing legitimacy from the Sufism, the regime also sought to get the popular support for maintaining social integration and cohesion. Therefore, the government initiated several welfare and developmental projects that helped in maintaining healthy living standard. Moreover, owing to good relations among the governing and religious authorities, an atmosphere of relative peace was maintained that promoted an inclusive and progressive society. At the foreign front, the empire established constructive relations due to popular support and legitimacy of the government. This facilitated the empire to secure economic progress and prosperity. Hence, the state enjoyed positive affects of the relationship at all the fronts. Along with it, Sufi saints were granted several responsibilities in the empire to popularize the authority of the government. In this regard, the spiritual authority adopted many faces vis-à-vis the state; they could be advisors, intermediaries, and sometimes adversaries of colonial policy. The purpose of this paper, therefore, is to shed light on complex layers of interaction between the realms of the spiritual and the temporal during the Mughal period.

## 2. Literature Review

Sufism, as practiced in the Indian subcontinent, played a central role in the formation of Muslim society and made a crucial contribution to the spiritual and cultural life in India (Advani, 2022). At this time, our Sufi practices were merged into the local customs, leading to respect for the different Sufis. Sufism and mysticism got much emphasis from the Mughal rulers, particularly Akbar (Richards, 1993). Sufi influence grew during this time due to its advocacy of a strategy of

religious tolerance. During the dark age of Islamic Religious revivalism Sufi warriors such as Shah Waliullah led a resurgence of Islam through Sufism. He promoted the purity of Sufi instructions because of his devotion to reconciling Sufism with Quran and Sunnah (Baljon, 1986). Poetry and prose turned out an asset that guaranteed Sufi ideas and methods to be placed among the best products of Sufi literature. This literature, which was popularized to the major culture cardiovascular verbosity determined to proclaim frequently blatant truths of faith (Schimmel, 1975). Different Sufis and their writings have played an integral role in guidance and counselling of people and peaceful co-existence in the society. Mughal era was an important period regarding Sufism in the subcontinent. The Mughal kings were devotees of different Sufi orders and promoted Sufism and Sufi literature (Rizvi, 1983). Digby's study has highlighted how the Sufi shaykhs in medieval India were able to wield social and spiritual authority often parallel to and sometimes even surpassing the formal political power. The work offers valuable insight into scholarship regarding the way Sufi institutions contributed toward regional governance, cultural integration, and the routine socio-political life of the subcontinent (Digby, 1986). Chowdhury examines how Sufi ideals, practices, and institutions gave shape to Mughal political culture, social ethics, and imperial identity in meaningful ways. The work highlights how Mughal rulers relied on Sufi networks to legitimate power, forge unity across communities, and facilitate cultural syncretism. It contributes to the historiography by reflecting on the close interpenetration between spiritual authority and statecraft in the maintenance of Mughal governance and cultural life. (Chowdhury, 2025). Anjum thus represents how Sufism and political authority in South Asia evolved a mutually reinforcing relationship that defined governance, social mores, and communal identities. This work underlines how the Sufi orders influenced political legitimacy, while rulers for their part patronized Sufi institutions to consolidate authority and social harmony. It enriches the scholarship by framing Sufism not

merely as a spiritual force but as an active participant in political processes across Islamic ate South Asia. (Anjum, 2016)

### **3. Theoretical analysis of Sufism and statecraft in the Mughal India**

#### **3.1 Legitimacy Theory: A Source of Political Legitimacy**

From a legitimacy point of view, Sufi Saints provided spiritual and moral support to the Mughal rulers and legitimized the era among the masses. Through the nexus, people started to develop a devotional relationship with the Mughal rulers and the government became popular throughout the sub-continent. In return, the Mughal kings provided financial and material support to the shrines and Sufi saints shrines. Resultantly, the Sufi's enjoyed government privileges and institutional support (Mehdi, 2025). Moreover, Sufi enjoyed the reach in court matters and religious governance domain. Hence, it turned out to be a win-win situation for all the parties. The study by Digby has shown how Sufi shaykhs in medieval India commanded social and spiritual authorities parallel to, and sometimes more overarching than, formal political power.

#### **3.2 Social Cohesion Theory: Sufism as a tool of social integration**

Mughals ruled over a diverse population across religious, cultural and linguistic domains. Given the landscape, the fears of social unrest and political instability were also a looming danger on the stability and sustainability of the government. To counter it, Mughal rulers adopted a policy of reconciliation with the Sufi saints to get popular support for the government. The Sufi's were provided grants, administrative positions and state patronage. In return, Sufism ensured such an environment that promoted social cohesion and integration. Sufism diminished social, linguistics, cultural and other differences among the masses and promoted social cohesion and harmony on the principle of peaceful coexistence. Hence, the environment served the Mughal government in solidifying and strengthening the writ of the state. The Sufi-State nexus served the government, Sufism and the people in developing a peaceful

and harmonious national landscape (Lawrence, 1998).

#### **3.3 Historical theory of Sufism**

Sufism, the mystic order of Islam, played an important role in the religious, cultural, and social milieu of the Indian subcontinent. The Sufi organizations had been an integral part of the spiritual life of the Muslim societies, from the early medieval period right through the Mughal period. They also helped to promote interfaith understanding and build a comprehensive Indo-Islamic civilization during that era. Sufism is not pre-Islamic and emerges for the first time within the Islamic world; its adherents have practised and lived the Sufi way as interpreted through the message of the Qur'an and example of the Prophet. The message of Islam was spread across the length and breadth of the sub-continent by the Islamic mystics. All work of educating people in direct message of Islam was done by Sufis like Ali Hajvery of Lahore, Khawaja Moinuddin of Ajmer, Khwaja Bakhtiyar Kaki, Baba Farid of Pakpattan, Sheikh Bahaudin Zakriya of Multan, Makhdoom Jahania Jhangasgt of Bahawalpur, Sheikh Nazimudin of Delhi etc (Zaman, 2002).

Sufism in Mughal India was a many-faceted force that influenced political alliances, promoted religious conversions, and enriched social life. The Chishti and Naqshbandi orders were particularly influential, with their teachings and practices leaving a lasting impact on the region's spiritual and socio-political fabric.

#### **4. Analysis of Sufism and Statecraft**

Sufism played an important role in defining the religious, cultural and political landscape of the Mughal led India. Different aspects of influence can be observed during that era. In political domain, the Mughal emperors, particularly Akbar, found strong support in the Chishti Sufi order that aligned with their vision of power. Despite earlier disagreeing with the Mughal vision, the Naqshbandi order formulated its power under leaders like Shaikh Ahmad Sirhindi and Khwaja Baqi Billah, who made efforts to manage their religious values with the empire's political philosophy. The Sufi saints played a key role in the

Islamization of centers such as Bengal apart from their political influence because they preached doctrines of equality, justice, and fraternity that connected with the local populace (Alam, 2004). Sufism promoted interreligious cooperation, offered spiritual support, and had an impact on politico- social systems, Sufism was bases to Mughal government. Emperors of the Great Mughal Empire, such as Akbar, derived legitimacy from the spiritual authority of Sufi masters and sacred sites. Along with acts of devotion, Akbar's visits to the Sufi shrine of Muinuddin Chishti in Ajmer were measured attempts to strengthen his authority and exercise kingship. Mughal kingship was surrounded on Sufi charisma and Islamic piety, albeit these with time gave way to more Universalist principles during the epoch (Aquil, 2007). Sufis were tools in advancing human rights and interreligious patience. In order to attach non-Muslims into society and advance equality and justice they advocated for a liberal and legitimate stance towards them. This strategy contributed to the stability and social integrity of the heterogeneous Mughal Empire (Ibad, 2025).

#### **4.1 Sufism and Statecraft: Reassessing Spiritual–Political Power in Mughal North India**

Sufism in Mughal India was a many-faceted force that influenced political alliances, promoted religious conversions, and enriched social life. The Chishti and Naqshbandi orders were particularly influential, with their teachings and practices leaving a lasting impact on the region's spiritual and socio-political fabric.

#### **4.2. Four major Sufi Orders in the Mughal India**

##### **4.2.1 The Chishti Order**

During the Mughal period, the Chishti order was basically the most important Sufi order in North India. The order, which was brought to India in 12th century by Muinuddin Chishti, placed great emphasis on communal service, spiritual poverty (faqr) and the renunciation of material wealth. Its influence was at its peak in the Mughal Empire, particularly through individuals such as Nizamuddin Auliya and his spiritual successors, whose monasteries became strong centres of learning, music (sama') and social mediation and

cohesion. Chishti Pirs acted as mediators in land disputes in an official capacity. Because of their spiritual status, they were able to resolve disputes between landlords and tenants without going to court of mediation. According to court documents from Agra around the mid-20th century, land ownership was informally transferred with the mediation of the shrine, an alternative legal system that was provided by saintly authority (Iqbal, 2016).

##### **4.2 .2 The Suhrawardi Order:**

Bahauddin Zakaria of Multan brought the Suhrawardi order to India from Baghdad in thirteenth century. Compared to the Chishtia, it was structurally organized and allowed its followers to negotiate with rulers and hold positions of power as long as their spiritual purity was developed. In parts of Punjab, Sindh, and Gujarat, the Suhrawardis gained their power by running large waqf estates and manipulating magnificent monasteries. The Suhrawardi order's focuses on observance of Sharia law and its relatively bureaucratic structure made it well-suited to imperial rule. Makhdoom Jahanian Jahan Gasht and other Suhrawardi leaders promoted relations with local sultans and later Mughal rulers. They differed from the broader exclusive Chishti order in that they were willing to engage in state affairs (Khan, 2016).

##### **4.2 .3 Naqashbandiyya Order**

The Naqashbandiyya is the most important of the Sufi orders in India. Its foundation is provided to Bahauddin Naqashband, a resident of the town Naqashband, situated near Bokhara. Ahmad Ata Yaswi (d. 1116 A.D.) supported it. During the era of Mughal Emperor Akbar (1556-1605 A.D.), Muhammad Baqi Billah (1536-1603 A.D.) founded the peace and order in India. In the 17th century, the great Indian Naqashbandi Sufi Shaikh Ahmad Sirhindi (d. 1624) supported to further popularize the organization at the time. The present study visualizes the social and religious contributions made by Pir Syed Jamaat Ali Shah, a well-known Naqashbandi sufi player in the late 19th and early 20th centuries (b. 1841–d. 1951). To reform Sufism 'from inside' and avoid it

of all behaviors that were not Islamic at the time, he campaigned a Sufi revivalist movement. He established Anjuman-i-Khuddam-as-Sufiyya, a Sufi organization, to strengthen his cause by bringing together the many Sufi segments and foundational Sufi knowledge (Weismann, 2007).

#### **4.3 Spiritual-Political Power Nexus in Mughal India**

A close collaboration existed among the Sufism and the government that was beneficial to all the parties involved. It served a great deal in developing a national landscape that established the Mughal Rule on a sustainable foundation. The characteristics of the epoch are highlighted in the following:

##### **4.3.1 Inter-twined nature of Sufi-State relationships**

In the formative years of the Mughal Empire, religion and politics were deeply interlinked, with spiritual figures often playing a crucial role in shaping public opinion and political legitimacy. Of all the religious currents in the Indian subcontinent, Sufism was the strongest spiritual and social force and enjoyed large-scale devotion among groups and communities (Lawrence, 1998). The relations between Babur and the Sufi saints and institutions, while laying the bedrock for the establishment of Mughal rule, reflected both a cultural sensitivity to local traditions and a calculating understanding of their influence (Brill, 2019).

##### **4.3.2 Shrines: sources of social and economic prosperity**

The shrine became a center of devotion upon the death of the crown prince, although the monasteries continued to flourish in their lifetime. On Urs festivals, commemorating his death, while the tombs were actually physical entities, they nevertheless, as spiritual unions with God, became places of pilgrimage attracting considerable crowds. The shrines of Bahauddin Zakaria in Multan, Nizamuddin Auliya in Delhi, and Muinuddin Chishti in Ajmer would eventually become centers of interfaith discussion, economic activity, and political imagery in

addition to being places of spiritual veneration (Richards, 1993).

##### **4.3.3 Use of shrines for political purposes**

Recognizing the social influence of shrines, the Mughal government regularly used these organizations for political purposes. Linking their legitimacy to sacred grace, emperors such as Akbar, Jahangir, and Shah Jahan provided gifts, land grants, and ceremonial visits to notable shrines. Certain well-known examples of this state-Sufi interaction include Akbar's numerous pilgrimages to Ajmer and the establishment of Fatehpur Sikri near the shrine of Salim Chishti during the contemporary era (Lawrence, 2002).

##### **4.3.4 Institutional framework of Sufism:**

The institutional framework of Sufism included the khanqah, or Sufi lodge, and the dargah, or shrine, both fundamental elements in the social, cultural, and spiritual life of Mughal India. Besides serving their religious purposes, such places constituted centers of political debate, public assembly, education, and philanthropy. The part played by Sufi organizations in everyday life contributed to the growth of an Indo-Islamic culture with its own particular characteristics and which survived long after the Mughal period. The center of Sufi practice was the monastery. It served as a place for gatherings for dhikr and sama', a residential lodge for followers (murids), and a facility for the teaching of Sufi knowledge (Rizvi, 1983).

##### **4.3.5 Waqf: sources of stability to ruling classes**

In the Mughal period, the local elites or ruling classes endowed monasteries with waqf (pious endowment) that gave them the financial stability to run langars (kitchens), accommodate tourists, and distribute alms among the underprivileged (Richards, 1993). These centres often enjoyed a greater influence and penetration than madrasas and mosques in places as far apart as Delhi, Agra, Multan, and Lahore. Besides being spiritual guides, their leaders, variously called pir, sheikh, or khwaja, thus came to assume the role of local arbiters whose opinions often influenced

decisions regarding matters as diverse as land ownership to marriage disputes.

#### **4.3.6 Gender Equality: ideals of Sufism**

Shrines served as places for spiritual experiences that were also gendered. Many shrines allowed women to worship, tie vows, participate in rituals, although mosques often excluded women from entry. Women formulated a unique place of feminine devotion that was often lacking in formal Islamic contexts for the purpose of procreation, protection, and the well-being of their families (Schimmel, 1975). The presence of women at shrines was not symbolic. It also described how Sufi sites provided more inclusive religious experiences for people of all genders.

#### **4.3.7 Welfare activities by the Sufism:**

In Mughal India, monasteries and shrines were complete civic institutions other than being just places of worship. Sufi complexes would do street cleaning, marketplace ethics, and protection of orphans especially in towns like Lucknow, Hyderabad, and Bikaner. Often, these duties were violated by the imperial rulers. For example, the Chishti monastery in Karamanikpur had a dedicated Diwan-e-Sadaqah (charity council) that set records of aid given to the poor and widows (Rizvi, 1983).

#### **4.3.8 Sufism inter-religious cooperation and Mughal statecraft:**

Sufi saints were the focal points of interfaith negotiations. Jesuit sources in Akbar's court confirm that Christian missionaries were essentially welcome in Sufi residences rather than in the royal palace. The open-minded atmosphere of the shrines made it possible to discuss theology without fear of any reprisals. Zoroastrian, Jain, and Bhakti spiritual seekers were drawn by this openness, particularly in Gujarat and the Deccan (Perveen, 2023). Their architectural features also contributed in no small measures to their cohesive importance. Shrines welcomed people from all spheres of life with their wide courtyards, covered verandas, and even water basins. Some shrines even displayed multi-faith signs for cultural

inclusion with crescent domes, peacock statues, and lotus designs.

#### **5. Conclusion:**

A majority of the religious life of Mughal India was influenced by the Sufi organizations, which, going beyond the boundaries of formal theology, joined in active participation with the subcontinent's social, cultural, and political life. The present study has shown how orders such as the Chishti, Suhrawardi, Qadri, and Naqshbandi served as deeply intertwined civil organizations that mediated between the spiritual and the material, rather than simply religious groupings. Religious pluralism could flourish even during periods of political instability. Sufi influence persisted even beyond the Mughal period and is still strong today in South Asia due to their adaptability, persistence, and local embedding. People of many faiths found resonance in Sufi ideas because they provided an emotional, inclusive, and humanistic perspective on Islam through their teachings on divine love, self-sacrifice, and mystical unity. The saints and their teachings were at the core of communal life in both imperial capitals and rural villages.

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