



ANALYTICAL STUDY OF MYSTIC MUSIC IN THE CHISHTI SUFI TRADITION

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Abstract

Mystic music is an integral part of Sufism despite a general despise of music in Islam. It was an endeavour towards enduring union with the Creator of being and the creation. It seeks the dissolution of mundane soul with the supreme soul in a complete denial of the self much like the assimilation of individual stream into ocean or the Majmaul Bahrain. Sufi innovated varied musical tone, rhythm and produced varied instruments for audacious melody and remained a vehicle of transmitting the myriad tone of religious philosophies transcending the socio-economic barriers of the contemporary times and in course of time it has become a means and end also for creating ecstasy or *wajad* for a situation like *fina* or dissolution. India became abode of various Sufi orders or *silsila* in different space and time. Babar in *Tuzk-i-Babri* writes about the presence of 14 orders in different part of the country. The Chishti order however became more spread in terms of the number of Sufi saints aligned with this order and the number of its followers and popularity. In this order mystic musical forms like *qawwali*, *hamd*, *naat*, *sama* have been devised to establish an inalienable connectivity of man with Almighty. *Tabla* and *sitar* were the instruments which they used to add a rhythm and colour in their music without any exaggeration. Chishti Sufis not only added a form of music but made mystic music a vibrant popular cult at the global level. In contemporary times the Sufi music has a wider acceptability and popularity and concert for the Sufi music is organised across the globe which are indeed helpful in enriching cultural ethos and a love for mysticism.

Keywords: Sufism, Chishti, Wajad, Sama, Qawwali, Naat.

INTRODUCTION

India has long been a melting pot of diverse cultures due to its vast, diverse and strategic geographical location. Over the centuries the intermingling of varied cultures both foreign and indigenous contributed in the evolution of a panoramic civilization rich in values and attributes. All such streams met at one confluence like the different streams which ultimately form a sea or the ocean where the rivers or the streams surrender before a great water body. have shaped its culture, literature, and music. One such stream of profound significance was the Sufi traditions, especially the music and its various dynamics and features. Sufis, who came to this country somewhere in the 11th and 12th centuries in various streams from central and western Asia and made their abode in the length and breadth of the country.¹ The period was a formative period from the point of the socio-cultural conglomeration of various cultural streams. *Sufism* as mystical and spiritual dimension of *Islam* became particularly instrumental in shaping the spiritual landscape of India. Mystic music is an integral part of Sufism, despite the general aversion to music within mainstream Islamic thought. This paper explores how music has been used as a tool to foster an enduring union between the individual soul and the divine, seeking the dissolution of self into the Supreme Being. The *Chishti* t. order, one of the most prominent Sufi orders in India, innovated various musical forms such as *qawwali*, *hamd*, *naat*, and *sama* to facilitate this connection.² This paper investigates how *Chishti Sufis* embraced music as a vehicle to transcend socio-economic barriers and engage with the divine. The role of musical instruments, including the *tabla* and *sitar*, is explored as part of the Sufi ritual practice. In contemporary times, *Sufi* music continues to resonate globally, playing a role in fostering intercultural understanding and promoting the ethos of mysticism.

The *Chishti Sufi* order, which flourished in the Indian subcontinent, emphasized music as a medium for spiritual expression. Contrary to the conservative *Islamic* views that often condemn music as a distraction from the divine, the *Chishti Sufis* believed that music could lead to a direct experience of Almighty.³ Mystic music (*sama*) became a form of devotional practice, designed to invoke ecstasy (*wajad*) and achieve *fana* (the dissolution of the self into the divine). This paper aims to explore the role of music in the *Chishti* order and how it became a popular and widely accepted form of spiritual practice.





HISTORICAL BACKGROUND OF SUFISM AND MUSIC IN ISLAM

Music has been a contested subject within *Islamic* jurisprudence. While some *Islamic* scholars have considered music *haram* (forbidden), *Sufi* orders, particularly the *Chishti* order, embraced music as a means of divine worship. This section will explore the historical debates surrounding music in *Islam* and how *Sufi* thought deviated from mainstream views to incorporate music into spiritual practice. As per Sufism an enchanting voice has its own meaning and its own magical impact. Accordingly Almighty endows every refined and tasteful person with an inbuilt nature that when he hears a good voice or a melodious word or sentence, he feels delighted and is transported to an enthralled state which is called ecstasy. A voice which robs one's senses has a magnetic and magnanimous attraction and leaves its electrifying rippling effects which captivate all the beings with even a milder aesthetic sense. Symbolic languages and gestures are indeed inadequate for conveying human thought and feelings.⁴ Therefore God in His Eternal Wisdom and Kindness gifted man with the human voice. Voice has always been important for man to maintain his relationship with others, for receiving and imparting knowledge and for the exchange of ideas. Due to this gift, his loneliness vanished and doors to progress opened. It was this voice through which man conveyed his deepest feelings and used it to attain great heights and thus he grew to love it. Then poetry came into phases of evolution which further enhanced and beautified the very nature of words and sentences. The use of varied musical instruments like *rabab*, *tabla*, *sitar* furthered the melody and the meaning to the sentences.⁵ When mesmerizing musical instruments were added to the voice, it ignited the flame of love hidden in man, and he became intoxicated with the infinite and Music became a mean to unite the creation and the creator with a deep sense of gratitude. According to the Ayat. "He added to His creature what He will" (Al-Fatir, 35:1). This means that God enhances the human composition. The scholars of the Holy Quran have interpreted this ayah to mean that the addition to the human composition is a melodious voice. *Islamic* scholars from different schools of thought have often debated the permissibility of music. Some point to *hadith* that suggest music leads to moral corruption, while others argue that music, when used for the purpose of glorifying God, is acceptable.⁶ The *Sufi* perspective, particularly in the *Chishti* order, framed music as a tool to transcend mundane reality and achieve spiritual enlightenment. Sufism reached Indian shores alongside *Islamic* rule, particularly during the *Mughal* period. Saints like *Moinuddin Chishti* established the *Chishti* order, emphasizing the integration of Indian cultural elements such as music into *Islamic* spirituality. The *Chishti* saints adapted their practices to resonate with the local population, which included incorporating music into their worship, creating a uniquely Indian form of Sufism. Sufism and Its Contested Legacy. Sufism began as a spiritual revolt against the worldliness and rampant materialism in the Umayyad⁷ and Abbasid Caliphates in the Middle East within the first couple of centuries of the emergence of Islam (seventh and eighth centuries CE). Famous early figures such as Bayazid Bustami, Rabiya Basari and Hasan Basari led simple, ascetic lives, and aspired to achieve union with God through meditation and other spiritual disciplines. The early Muslim mystics, who were often charismatic leaders with popular appeal, were eventually organised or institutionalised in *silsilas*, or orders, branching into quite a few competing strands (for a good introduction to the formative phase of Sufism).⁸

THE *CHISHTI* ORDER AND ITS RELATIONSHIP WITH MUSIC

Despite the fact that Sufis have been careful not to stray outside the pale of Islam, while attempting to integrate themselves in the society in which they flourished, the ulama's attitude towards Sufi orders has generally been hostile, for the former considered many Sufi ideas and practices as heretical from the point of view of their own interpretation of the shari'at, or Islamic law. Even as the ulama were more concerned with guarding orthodoxy than spreading Islam, and their contact with non-Muslims was limited and perhaps unproductive, the role played by Sufis in conversion and Islamicisation was not counted as important by the ulama, for they thought that the quality of Islam practised and preached by Sufis was inadequate and inferior. In fact, the ulama attacked many Sufi practices, condemning them as un-Islamic.





The *Chishti* order, one of the most significant *Sufi* orders in India, is known for its emphasis on devotional music. Unlike other Islamic traditions that saw music as a distraction, the *Chishti* Sufis viewed music as a means of creating a direct connection with the divine.⁹ In spite of opposition from various quarters, Sufism remains a vibrant movement, attracting devotees from across various strata of society: rural-urban poor, thugs, criminals, politicians and ministers can be seen offering ritual Sufi *chadars* and prostrating in the *dargahs*. The ability of the Sufis to speak in the language of the masses, in local dialects, and their perceived paranormal powers have attracted people, some for following the ways of the Sufis, but mostly for blessings and benedictions.¹⁰

Qawwali and other song and dance techniques are central to most forms of devotional religion. In his lifetime, the leading *Chishti* Sufi, Nizam-ud- Din Auliya, himself fought a bitter struggle against the ulama of Delhi in the early fourteenth century, who contested the legitimacy of his practice of organising musical sessions. For the theologians professing Hanafi interpretation of mainstream Sunni Islam, music is haram, or a forbidden act. For most Sufis, on the other hand, music is one of the most effective and perfectly valid ways to remember Allah and achieve ecstasy. *Qawwali*,¹¹ a form of Sufi devotional music, became central to the *Chishti* order. This section will analyze the structure and content of *qawwali* performances, which typically include praises to God (*hamd*), eulogies of the Prophet Muhammad (*naat*), and songs of devotion to saints. *Qawwali* performances are designed to induce a state of spiritual ecstasy, leading listeners to a deeper experience of *wajad* or the presence of God.¹²

SAMA: THE RITUAL OF LISTENING

Sama is the *Chishti* practice of listening to music with the intention of reaching a spiritual state of ecstasy. This section will explore the role of *sama* in *Chishti* rituals, describing how music facilitates a journey from the physical world to divine consciousness. Through rhythmic patterns, musical tone, and devotional lyrics, *sama* helps participants reach a heightened awareness of Almighty. The first ecstasy which the human soul experienced was on hearing the Divine melody: “Am I not”, said He, “your Lord?” (Al-Anif, 7:172).¹³ The final ecstasy which the human souls shall experience will be when the trumpet (*soor*) is sounded, whose life-giving notes will resurrect the dead who shall come forth dancing before their Lord. Voice has two miraculous powers; it can make the living die and make the dead, alive. At the sound of the first ‘trumpet’, all life shall perish and at the sound of the second ‘trumpet’, the dead shall be resurrected. God had granted the miracle of a beautiful voice to Prophet David. When he recited the Psalms (*Zaboor*) some in the audience died on the spot and funerals were held at the end of the gathering. There are well known instances of the Sufi saints, who succumbed on hearing an exquisite verse or a powerful line in a couplet. The incident of the death of Hazrat Qutbuddin Bakhriar Kaki is very well known. He placed himself under the dagger of submission and sacrificed his life while hearing a verse during *sama*.¹⁴ Glory be to Almighty! With what unique splendor he demonstrated his supreme control over ascendance and descendance, in this awesome event which people witnessed for days that on the first line of the couplet the Shaikh would surrender his life and on the first line of the couplet the Shaikh would surrender his life and on the second line he would come alive and dance in ecstasy. Had the *qawwals* not been stopped from singing the second line of the couplet, they would have continued witnessing the spectacle; the dying and rising to life by this martyr, on the altar of love.

INSTRUMENTS AND THEIR ROLE IN CHISHTI SUFI MUSIC

Instruments like the *tabla* and *sitar* have played a significant role in *Chishti Sufi* music. These instruments add rhythm and melody to *qawwali* performances, creating an atmosphere that enhances spiritual experiences. Initially the most popular among these instruments is the Turkish reed flute, known as the *Ney*. The other that represents African Sufi music is the *benedir*. It is a drum that is still popular in Morocco. Beside





thes the *Gimbri*, a stringed instrument also well known in the African region. All these have been used to sing the music in the *Chishtiya* order. While arranging all these into one then there will be a complete symmetry of *sur* and those responsible for rhythm *taal*. Within the strings category, the *ney* is accompanied by *saz*, *santoor*, *rabab*, *oud* and the *komuz*.¹⁵

THE TABLA AND SITAR: MELODIC SUPPORT IN *SUFI* MUSIC

This section will explore the role of the *tabla* (a percussion instrument) and the *sitar* (a string instrument) in creating the distinctive sound of *Chishti Sufi* music. The combination of percussion and string melodies adds depth to the devotional songs, enabling a deeper emotional and spiritual engagement with the music. Over time, *Chishti* Sufis innovated within the genre, adding new instruments and experimenting with musical forms. This section will discuss how this innovation allowed *Chishti* music to evolve and maintain its relevance across centuries and geographic boundaries.

THE GLOBAL INFLUENCE OF *CHISHTI SUFI* MUSIC

In contemporary times, *Sufi* music, particularly that of the *Chishti* order, has gained international recognition. Concerts and festivals devoted to *Sufi* music are held across the world, promoting a message of love, unity, and spiritual transcendence. This section will analyze the global appeal of *Chishti* music and its influence on modern-day music and culture.¹⁶ *Chishti Sufi* music, through *qawwali* performances and other forms, is now performed on global stages. Artists like *Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan* have played a pivotal role in popularizing this music worldwide, emphasizing its message of spiritual unity. This section will explore how *Sufi* music concerts serve as cultural bridges, promoting an ethos of mysticism that transcends religious boundaries.¹⁷

CONCLUSION

The *Chishti* order's integration of music into their spiritual practices transformed Islamic spirituality in India and beyond. By embracing music as a vehicle for divine connection, the *Chishti Sufis* created a rich tradition of devotional music that continues to resonate globally. From *qawwali* to *sama*, *Chishti Sufi* music offers a unique lens into the spiritual practices of the mystics, showing how music can transcend socio-economic and cultural barriers, fostering a collective experience of the divine and also it contributes in the cultural and civilizational intermingling resulting an evolution of a plethora of values and tradition.

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