

K. A. Nizami, *The Life and Times of Shaikh Nasiru'd-din Chiragh-e Dehli*
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Preface

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My first exposure to the scholarship of K. A. Nizami took place nearly thirty years ago, when I was traveling through India in 1975 just before starting graduate school. At a bookshop in Bombay, I chanced upon a copy of Nizami's *The Life and Times of Shaikh Farid-u'd-Din Ganj-i-Shakar*.¹ For anyone interested in the study of Sufism, it was mesmerizing. Richly documented, with an intimidating range of source material from Persian manuscripts, it nevertheless managed to convey an intensely vivid and personal sense of what was at stake in the master-disciple relationship that lies of the core of the Sufi tradition. This was a volume to be savored and considered at length.

The next year, to my great delight, I had my first seminar with my former teacher at Harvard, the late Professor Annemarie Schimmel. The topic was "Indo-Persian Mystical Texts," and for the half-dozen intrepid souls who took this class, it was a remarkable initiation into the sources of South Asian Sufism. The very first text she assigned us was K. A. Nizami's critical edition of the Persian text of *Khayr al-majalis*, the collected conversations (*malʿuẓat*) of the great Chishti saint, Shaykh Nasir al-Din Mahmud Chiragh-i Dihli (d. 1356).² Reading this text was an amazing experience. Parts of it, particularly the erudite discussions of Arabic terms from the Qur'an, were extremely challenging to novice scholars. Yet the easy conversational flow of the Persian text was direct and full of emotional intensity. Here, in the assembly of like-minded souls, filled with stories, questions, advice, poetry, and weeping, was a powerful portrait of a great teacher, almost like a snapshot from seven centuries ago.

Sufism is a term whose meaning is often disputed. Some define it as the mysticism of Islam; others call it a universal path to spiritual knowledge.³ The main bearers of the Sufi tradition have been, no doubt, teachers steeped in the wisdom of the Qur'an and the spirit of the Prophet Muhammad. Many outside the Muslim community have, nevertheless, been attracted to the great personalities who have passed on the burden of spiritual authority in the lineages of the Sufi orders. These "friends of God," as the saints of Islam are called, are revered from Morocco to China, from the Balkans to Indonesia, and their tombs are still the resort of many in need. Although the Sufi dimension of spirituality has been a major and constant factor in Muslim societies until quite recently, the notion of sainthood has come under attack in the modern era, under the impact of new ideologies. It is ironic that Sufism has been attacked by opponents from both the secularist and fundamentalist camps, despite the differences that ostensibly divide these factions. More striking still has been the role of European Orientalists, who for the past two centuries have often considered Sufism to be un-Islamic. After all, these Orientalists found the aesthetic and mystical aspects of Sufism to be charming, quite at variance with what they considered the dry and legalistic religion of Islam. As a result of these debates, the very concept of Sufism has become problematic.

This contested legacy makes all the more remarkable that a group of historians at the Aligarh Muslim University brought Sufism squarely into the focus of historical research. This modern Indian university, founded by Sir Sayyid Ahmad Khan during the period of British colonial rule, has certainly played a decisive role of intellectual leadership for the South Asian Muslim community, particularly during the time leading up to the Partition of British India in 1947. At a time when nationalism, secularism, and anti-British feelings were rife, it is remarkable that a self-described socialist, Aligarh history professor Mohammad Habib, would feel it necessary to devote a critical study to the sources of Indian Sufism. His article

probing the authenticity of the oral teachings of the Chishti Sufis, the most popular Sufi lineage in South Asia, still remains a classic.⁴ But more striking is the fact that Habib also devoted a separate article to the subject of this book, Shaykh Nasir al-Din Mahmud Chiragh-i Dihli.⁵ That K. A. Nizami, one of the chief students of Mohammad Habib, should then write a monograph on the same Sufi saint, seems hardly accidental.⁶ What was it about the Chishti Sufis, and about Chiragh-i Dihli in particular, that led both these scholars to devote their time to these subjects?

The approach of Habib and Nizami, and their associates, to the study of Sufism was complex. There clearly were deep personal loyalties involved, some of which had been articulated through old family connections. But the expression of their connection with Sufism had to take an intellectual form, through the discipline of history. This was no longer the language of the medieval Islamic academy, which had been broken as an institution by the forces of colonialism. Although Sufism did stand in the background of the modern academy of Deoband, its mystical language was increasingly displaced there by an authoritative emphasis on texts of Islamic law and the hadith sayings of the Prophet. While the modern European-style university was based on secularism, it did offer a language of liberal and romantic thought that was by no means in conflict with the mystical tradition of Sufism.⁷ Thus the modern scientific study of Indian history became the vehicle for the exploration of the rich spiritual heritage of the Sufis.

Yet Nasir al-Din Chiragh-i Dihli would not have been the obvious choice, out of hundreds if not thousands of Chishti Sufi saints. His tomb south of Delhi is off the beaten path and relatively hard to find, though it did enjoy the patronage of the last scions of the Mughal dynasty in the early nineteenth century. One of the questions Nizami had to explain was why there were only three surviving manuscripts of the Persian text of *Khayr al-majalis*,

recording the conversations of Chiragh-i Dihli (only one of which was complete). There are any number of Sufi texts from the Chishti order that are found in many more copies, which would ordinarily indicate popularity and, therefore, a certain authority. How can one understand both the choice of Chiragh-i Dihli and the relative rarity of his discourses?

Nizami originally explained it as follows:

The only explanation that one can offer is that the views of Shaikh Nasir-u'd-din as propounded in *Khair-u'l-Majalis*, particularly those relating to strict adherence to *Shari`at*, rejection of government service, repudiation of hereditary succession to the *sajjadah* [prayer-carpet] of saints, condemnation of the fabricated *malʿuz* [discourse] literature and other similar things, were not acceptable to the later day mystics who discouraged, on that account, its wide circulation.⁸

I would venture to say that the real reason for the emphasis on Chiragh-i Dihli has to be sought in the contestation over the legitimacy of Sufism in colonial and post-colonial Muslim South Asia.

The story of the advent of reformism to the Muslim community of South Asia in the nineteenth century, and the consequent controversy over Sufism, is too lengthy to recount here.⁹ It is sufficient to say that among the major critiques of Sufism were charges of deviation from Islamic law (*shari`ah*), feudalistic corruption through hereditary succession, and miracle-mongering in order to impress the credulous masses. I would suggest that both Habib and Nizami found the discourses of Chiragh-i Dihli to be a powerful refutation of these charges. There is no doubt that he was a scholar steeped in Islamic law, called "a second Abu Hanifa" by his chronicler Hamid Qalandar; indeed, the title of his discourses, *Khayr al-majalis* ("The Best of Assemblies"), comes from a saying well known to the Chishtis, that "the best of assemblies is that in which discussion of religious learning (*ilm*) takes

place."¹⁰ He was, moreover, a serious moral presence who did not hesitate to reject the fraudulent hagiographic texts that were wrongly attributed to the early Chishti masters. In this respect, *Chiragh-i Dihli* served as a powerful example to rehabilitate the Islamic credentials of Sufism against reformist criticism.

Yet beyond these accurate observations made by both Habib and Nizami, one cannot help but see that they regarded a number of personalities from the fourteenth century as surrogates for debates taking place six centuries later. Certainly, *Chiragh-i Dihli* served as a strong example of the shari`ah-minded Sufi master who refuted in his person the anti-Sufi attitudes of the new reformists. One might also see contemporary relevance in Nizami's frequent references to the bizarre sectarian movements, which Sultan Firuz Shah denounced so vociferously in his lengthy triumphal inscription, the *Futubat-i Firuz Shahi*. But one of the surprising observations of Nizami concerns an otherwise obscure figure named `Abd al-`Aziz al-Ardabili, who gained the admiration of Sultan Muhammad ibn Tughluq by reciting hadith sayings from the Prophet Muhammad regarding the `Abbasid family, whose descendants became caliphs.¹¹ Now al-Ardabili was said to have been a pupil of Ibn Taymiyya (d. 1328), the celebrated Syrian Hanbali jurist who wrote volumes refuting Greek logic, philosophy, Sufi metaphysics, and numerous practices that he judged to be in conflict with Islamic law. Nizami took this seriously enough to devote an entire chapter of this book to the "Reaction and Response to Ibn Taymiyya's Ideology," considering al-Ardabili to have been the conduit for an anti-Sufi influence on the sultan.¹²

In retrospect, this conclusion seems to have been overdrawn. We have no other information about al-Ardabili from biographical sources of the Hanbali school of law. More importantly, recent studies have shown that Ibn Taymiyya, while certainly critical of certain Sufi doctrines and practices, was himself a member of the Qadiri Sufi order. So although Ibn

Taymiyya has been used as a bludgeon against all of Sufism by certain modern reformist Muslims (particularly the Wahhabis), this is clearly an erroneous oversimplification. To turn back to the fourteenth century, there is no doubt that Sultan Muhammad ibn Tughluq was ferocious in his domination and manipulation of the religious elite of Delhi, including Sufi leaders such as Chiragh-i Dihli. Indeed, there is considerable evidence that Chiragh-i Dihli in particular suffered from the persecution of the emperor. But to lay this responsibility at the feet of Ibn Taymiyya now seems misplaced. Nizami was subtly drawing attention to the way in which Wahhabi reformists in modern times were using Ibn Taymiyya to tar all of Sufism with the same brush, and the most effective response he could find to this attack was to point to the counter-example of a great legal-minded Sufi shaykh of the same period, Chiragh-i Dihli.

Beyond this controversy, there is much in this volume to claim the attention of anyone interested in the development of Sufism. Nizami's particular gift lay in his ability to synthesize political and social history with the spiritual, thereby recovering Sufism as an ethical source for life in the world. He has called attention to the fact that Chiragh-i Dihli was the first Sufi master in the South Asian subcontinent, as far as we know, to quote the poetry of Rumi, which is so central everywhere that Persian is known. It is striking to see the poetic response that Chiragh-i Dihli used to recite to mischief-makers, as quoted by the Suhrawardi master Makhdum-i Jahaniyan:

Come back, come back, whatever you are, come back;

If you've broken your vows a hundred times, come back!

Since God's mercy is for the sake of sinners,

Whether infidel, drunk, or idolater - come back!¹³

The same verses, though attributed to various authors, are now inscribed on a plaque in Konya outside the tomb of Jalal al-Din Rumi. It is this breadth of spirit and magnanimity that makes Sufis like Chiragh-i Dihli so universally appealing. I hope many readers will appreciate the special genius of this Chishti master through this remarkable work of K. A. Nizami.

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¹ K. A. Nizami, *The Life and Times of Shaikh Farid-u'd-Din Ganj-i-Shakar*, IAD Religio-Philosophy Series No. 1 (Delhi: Idarah-i Adabiyat-i Delli, 1955; reprint ed., 1973).

² Nasir al-Din Mahmud Chiragh-i Dihli, *Khayr al-majalis*, comp. Hamid Qalandar, ed. Khaliq Ahmad Nizami (Aligarh: Department of History, Muslim University, 1959).

³ For surveys, see Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill, NC: University of North Carolina Press, 1975); Carl W. Ernst, *Guide to Sufism* (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1997).

⁴ Mohammad Habib, "Chishti Mystics Records of the Sultanate Period," *Medieval India Quarterly* 1 (1950), pp. 1-42; reprinted in *Politics and Society During the Early Medieval Period, Collected Works of Professor Mohammad Habib*, edited by K. A. Nizami (2 vols., New Delhi: People's Publishing House, 1974), I, 385-433.

⁵ Mohammad Habib, "Shaikh Nasiruddin Mahmud Chiragh-i Delhi as a great historical personality," *Islamic Culture* 20 (1946), pp. 129-53; reprinted in *Politics and Society During the Early Medieval Period*, I, 356-84.

⁶ The intense emotion expressed by both Mohammed Habib and K. A. Nizami about the discourses of Chiragh-i Dihli is indicated in the Introductory (III), n. 61.

⁷ Nizami's dedication of this book to "that restless spirit of Divine Love and Devotion which made Shaikh Nasir-u'd-din Chiragh's heart '*love's fev'rous citadel*'" explicitly quotes a phrase (shown in italics) from John Keats's poem, "The Eve of St. Agnes."

⁸ Nizami, Introduction to *Khayr al-majalis*, p. 7.

⁹ See Carl W. Ernst and Bruce B. Lawrence, *Sufi Martyrs of Love: Chishti Sufism in South Asia and Beyond* (New York: Palgrave Press, 2002), especially chapter 6.

¹⁰ Mir Khwurd, *Siyar al-awliya'* (Delhi: Matba`-i Muhibb-i Hind, 1302/1884-5), p. 148.

¹¹ According to the traveller Ibn Battuta, "It happened one day that he recited to the sultan some hadiths on the excellence of `Abbas and his son (may God be pleased with them), and something of the deeds of the caliphs descended from them. The sultan was astonished at that, because of his love of the `Abbasids, so he kissed the feet of the jurist, and ordered that he be given a gold plate with a thousand tankas in it, and he poured them over him with his own hand, saying, "This is for you, along with the plate!" (cited in `Abd al-Hayy al-Hasani, *Nuzhat al-khawatir* [Hyderabad: Dar al-Ma`arif al-`Uthmaniyya, 1966], 2:66). For the importance of the imperial symbolism of the `Abbasids during the Delhi sultanate, see my *Eternal Garden: Mysticism, History, and Politics at a South Asian Sufi Center* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1992), pp. 55-59.

¹² Nizami may also have been responding to European Orientalist scholars on this issue. Although Ibn Battuta had dismissed Ibn Taymiyya as a hypocrite, Sir Hamilton Gibb in his translation of Ibn Battuta's travel narrative had confessed his astonishment at the way in which Ibn Battuta treated Sufism as a normal part of Islam; see Ibn Battuta, *Travels in Asia and Africa, 1325-1354*, trans. H. A. R. Gibb (New York: Robert M. McBride & Company,

1929), pp. 36-38, 67-68. In this respect, Gibb manifested the by now standard Orientalist conclusion, that Sufism was opposed to "true Islam" as defined by European scholars.

¹³ Jalal al-Din Bukhari Makhdum-i Jahaniyan, *Siraj al-bidaya*, p. 301, quoted in the text, chapter 14 (my translation).