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ISLAM AND TASAWWUF: A STUDY OF SOME EARLY SUFI PERSONALITIES

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Abstract

Tasawwuf is one of the most important notions in the religion of Islam which continues among the Muslims today. It is that mode of the religious life in Islam which emphasizes on the activities relating to the inner-self. The history of Tasawwuf spans all of Islamic Arabic civilization, commencing with the Ahl al-Suffah who lived during the period of Prophet of Islam and ending with the emergence of several Sufi orders in modern times. Tasawwuf has been widely discussed by various scholars since its appearance on the screen of Muslim history. However, after the period of the four orthodox Caliphs, there was a drastic change in the Muslim community. There started political turmoil and civil wars among the Muslims which gave birth to various political and religious groups. A group of pious Muslims separated themselves from this political controversy and decided to devote their time to worship and other religious duties and remained in seclusion. These spiritual Muslims were, to all intents and purposes, none other than the Sufi Saints, whether they were then called by that name or not. Therefore, the aim of this paper is to describe a brief overview of the origin and significance of Tasawwuf in the early phase of the Islamic era and highlight the teachings of some early famous Sufi Masters of Islam who had exerted a great influence on the Muslim society particularly and how their spiritual teachings shaped the lifestyle of the people back then.

Keywords: *Tasawwuf, Inner-self, Ahl al-Suffa, Sufi Saints, Influence.*

Introduction

The derivation of the word *Sufi*, whether it is from *Ahl-al-Suffah*, *Safa*, or *Saff*, leads one to conclude that its origin is found in Islam. A Sufi refers to someone who lives his life according to the Qur'an and Hadith. However, worldly rejection is not a feature of Islamic *Tasawwuf* as it has originated from faithful saints and is also known as self-

created philosophy. *Tasawwuf* plays a significant role in the life of the Muslims. In fact, its practice through the implementation of the primary sources of Shari'ah is the genuine and authentic kind of spiritualism. Through this practice, Sufi-saints are trying to purify the inner self. A spiritual cleansing makes one to distinguish between good and evil, and therefore, man finds the right track to

tread himself towards the seeking of Allah's contemplation. This provides a clear-cut indication that possessing or acquiring positive spiritual qualities helps the moulding of man's character and attitude. This feature, undoubtedly, paves the way to engage himself in the process of fulfilling or accomplishing the Qur'anic commandment of propagating goodness and preventing bad deeds. When he has understood the importance of this divine directive, the fear of Allah will automatically descend in his heart, thus moving him away from the sinful activities.

Regarding the origin of the word *Sufi*, scholars have given various opinions. Orientalistssay that the word *Sufi* originated from the word *Suf* which means *wool*. According to them, Sufi Saints used to wear woolen or rough garments due to which the term *Sufi* was used for them and also for its etymological similarity. On the other hand, some Muslim Scholars are of the opinion that the term *Sufi* came into existence from *Ashāb al-Suffa*. They were those who would spend time in Masjid-i-Nabawi and engage in spiritual activities for a particular period and not for all the times. Other Muslim scholars hold that the term *Sufi* emerged from *Saf* which means *first rank*. Here, they referred that the Sufi Saints were Muslims of first rank. Another group of scholars opine that it originated from the term *Safa* which means *purity*. They emphasised that cleansing the heart and mind is the main motive of the Sufi Saints and develop love for Allah and His Prophet Muhammad (ﷺ).

Early Development of *Tasawwuf*

In the primary sources of Islam (Qur'an and Hadith) the word Sufi is not mentioned. Though, the main concept behind *Tasawwuf* to be found in them. In simple words, we can say that Allah commanded to the Muslims for the purification themselves from internal illness and sins in general; this is the main

aim of *Tasawwuf*. But, it is to be taken into consideration that the word *Tasawwuf* basically emerged nearly two centuries after the establishment of Islam in the world.

When we are tracing the early history of *Tasawwuf*, we traced that it was originated in the eighth century. At that time most of the people were engaged in political and materialistic things. Then, the Muslim Sufi Saints, by not indulge in the political zone, made an effort to bring about a spiritual awakening and to spread human values. When acquisitiveness infected the hearts of, many Muslims, the Sufi saints looked with the call please go back to your Allah, purify yourself and go back to the truth of Islam (Development of Mystic Thought and Indian Sufis, by Dr. Abroo Aman Andrabi, Assistant Professor Department of Islamic Studies Jamia Hamdard, New Delhi). Sufi Saints advised the peoples that do not influence by materialistic things and said to come back towards the true Islam this is the only way to get nearness of Allah. Only for this reason *Tasawwuf* was established in order to eradicate the Western culture that had crippled the Muslim community.

Sufi Saints practice such spirituality which does not oppose to the Scripture (Qur'an) and Prophetic Traditions (Hadith). Although, they elucidate some Qur'anic verses and Ahadith in a different manner sometimes. The Sufi Saints discussed in deeply some verses which are related to the *Tasawwuf* and they add some meaning which is not accepted by other scholars. But all the Sufi Saints are agreed that the authenticity of *Tasawwuf* is the primary source of Islam (Qur'an and Hadith). Especially *Tasawwuf* focused on spiritual attention. Because Sufi Saints believed that when a Muslim possesses good faith, it leads to the development of a good spiritual life thus shaping his character. His life will be functioning according to the Islamic rules and regulations.

Tasawwuf developed in the 8th and 9th centuries in three major centres are as follows:

1. Basra, Kufa and Baghdad (all these places are in Iraq).
2. Balkh (is a town in the *Balkh* Province of Afghanistan).
3. Egypt (a country linking northeast Africa with the Middle East, dates to the time of the pharaohs).

In the early phase of development, *Tasawwuf* said more nothing except the internal teachings of Islam. From the one viewpoint, they opine that the *Tasawwufis* directly from the Qur'ān. Others grasp that it is the copy of the way of Prophet of Islam (ﷺ), through this the connection of heart is strong with Allah. Furthermore, *Tasawwuf* teaches one to get nearer to Allah, and this is to be accomplished through various stages. They are as follow:

1. Stage of Repentance.
2. Stage of Abstinence.
3. Stage of Patience.
4. Trust in Allah

These stages constitute the ethical and spiritual disciplines of *Tasawwuf*. It is important that the total pledge of a Sufi at each phase is energetic towards spiritual progress. The soul is also known as *Nafs* in the Arabic Language. *Tasawwuf* explained that the soul primarily is a demanding soul, which should be under control into a "contented soul", and later on "soul at peace". These features of the Soul are discussed thoroughly in the Holy Quran and many Sufi teachers and scholars are commented on it.

The initial teachings of *Tasawwuf* are based on the oneness of Allah (*Tauhid*). Believe of Sufi Saints that the initial creation of Allah is human's mind which gives sense to the human for acquiring knowledge and differentiates between the right and wrong, good and evil. In *Tasawwuf*, this knowledge raised up to the highest level, which arises in the heart rather than the mind. This is the

simple knowledge that keeps away from a spiritual person from a philosopher. It makes eligible to experience spiritual phenomena and visions to the Sufi Saints.

The Early Sufi Saints

The Sufi Saints who belong to the early stage were spiritualists in the actual sense of the word and they lived their life as a penniless person and always keep ideal to poverty. They opine that the materialistic belongings and problems distracted someone from a concentrated religious life. Sufi Saints persuaded that the needed attention was possible only when someone was not greedy for material things. Some agreed with this and take it further, favouring the rejection not only of materialistic desires but of wish itself. Only after that, someone can actually devote himself to acquire the divine pleasure. Further, they explained that when complete dedication and devotion were required to attain materialistic success in this life on the earth, then achievement in the next (eternal life) without equal or even more devotion and dedication, was not possible.

Ibn Khaldun describes the way of the life of early Sufi Saints, he said- *Early Muslims thought that the way of life of Sufi Saints as the way of Truth and salvation*. The early Sufi Saints maintained piety and left all the belongings of materialistic charm for the sake of Allah; they rejected worldly pleasure, wealth and power, renounced the society and chose a spiritual life devoted to the nearness of Allah. These were the primary notions of *Tasawwuf* that spread among the companions (those who lived with Prophet of Islam ﷺ) and Muslims of the initial stage. Therefore, we find that the early time of *Tasawwuf* was a search of spirituality in actually.

We have many Ahadith that depict the companions of the Prophet (ﷺ) and the Tabi'un that how they lived their life in the respect and fear of Allah. One of the most famous Sufi Saint of the first

stage, Hasan al-Basri (642-728 A.D./20-106 A.H) had once he said his disciples or students that *I have seen many people among the companions of Prophet for them the world, not more than the dust of their foot.* He met many senior companions. They wore simple garments that were made from the camel's hair, due to always involved in the righteous life that they were lost for the world. *Were the best among you to see, they would think: 'These people do not believe in the Day of Judgement,* says Hasan al-Basri, testifying to the fact that theirs was the profound consciousness of the sin of disobedience and an extreme dread of divine punishment. They often spent the whole night in vigil, repeating the Qur'ānic verses.

Hasan al-Basri

Hasan al-Basri (642-728 A.D./20-106 A.H) was a prominent Sufi personality among the early Sufi Saints, who emphasized unnecessary worldliness, piousness, and fear of Allah. He was born in Medina and later on migrates to Basra and settled there. In all the possibilities, Hasan was too young in age for becoming a disciple of Ali Bin Abi Talib (d.661 A.D./39 A.H), however, almost all Sufi orders traced their spiritual lineage from Prophet of Islam (ﷺ) through Ali. According to some Sufi traditions, as they assumed that Hasan, became Ali's student or disciple due to many indescribable spiritual experiences.

Mālek ibn Dinār

Mālek ibn Dinār al-Sāmi (d.130 A.H/748 A.D) was also a famous Sufi; his father was a Persian slave from Sejestān (Kābul) and later on, became a disciple of Hasan al-Basri. His conversion starts with one evening he had been enjoying himself with a party of friends. When they were all asleep a voice came from a lute which they had been playing: *O Malik! Why dost thou not repent?* Malik abandoned his evil ways and went to Hasan Al Basra, and showed himself dedicated in repentance. He attained to such a high

degree in the Spirituality. Malik bin Dinar was one of the first Muslims who came to India for propagating Islam in Indian Subcontinent after the departure of King Cheraman Peruman (Tajuddin).

Rabi'a al-Basri

Rabi'a al-Basri (713-801 A.D./91-179 A.H) was a younger contemporary of Hasan Basri. Both of them knew each other well. She was born in Basra and spent her whole life there. She belonged to a poor family and during a famine she was sold into slavery. She used to worship Allah whenever she could. Finally, her master, impressed by her pietistic nature and tolerance decided to liberate her. From then on, she devoted all her time to Allah.

She opined that Allah should be loved and worshipped without any selfish end in mind. She criticized those who worshipped Allah to secure His favours. She went so far as to say: *'I want to light a fire in Paradise and pour water in Hell so that people no longer worship Allah for hope of Paradise or for fear of Hell.'* She prayed: *'O my Lord, if I worship You from fear of Hell, burn me in Hell, and if I worship You out of hope of Paradise, exclude me from it, but if I worship You for Your own sake, then do not withhold from me Your eternal beauty.'*

Ibrahim Bin Adham

Ibrahim Bin Adham (d.782 A.D./160 A.H) was born in a royal family of Balkh. He was a hunter and once was on hunting and followed a deer due to this he loses his way in the forest. During his stay in the forest once he heard a strange crying voice: *Awake! Were you created for this?* After heard these words his heart was too touched and he began to involve himself in heart-purification. And at the end, Ibrahim found that his way of life was not according to the commandment of Allah and, therefore, decided to change the ways of life. He starts to remember Allah the whole night after he repented and asked Allah for forgiveness for spent

a careless life before. Very next day Ibrahim became a transformed man. After that, he left all his property and join Abdul Wahid bin Zayed, who was a great spiritual teacher and disciple of Hasan al-Basri.

The practice of the early Sufi Saints

By the time of Hasan Basri, Rabi'a al-Basri and Ibrahim Bin Adham (8th and 9th century AD) asceticism had become the dominating feature of a movement, which later came to be known as *Tasawwuf*. The Sufi Saints wanted to withdraw from the world and spend all their time to worshipping Allah. They were convinced that, in order to concentrate on this spiritual path, it was crucial for them to withdraw themselves from the world. This was possible only by limiting their needs to the bare minimum. All the time they had at their disposal was to be spent in performing supererogatory prayers (*Nawāfil*), fasting and so on. They took extra care to spend their day in the honest remembrance of Allah. In this process, they got strayed a little from the path of Allah, as Qur'an and Hadith showed clearly the pleasure of Allah.

The Sufi Saints of the primary stage thought that the lesser the materialistic belongings, the more they would be able to devote themselves selflessly to the worship of Allah. Therefore, they thought that having fewer goods was taken as an authenticity for securing entry into paradise. Just because of this reason why the Sufi Saints held poverty in high regard. Due to this, hand and the heart must be empty to attain the desirable-goal. The absence of desire implied total liberty from all things and was considered as 'real poverty' from the Sufi point of view. This concept stated by a later Sufi saint, Nizamuddin Awliya (d.1325 A.D/803 A.H) in these words- *Rejection of the world does not mean that one should strip oneself of one's clothes and sit idle. Rejection of the world means that one may put on clothes and take food. But one should not set one's heart on*

anything. This and this alone is rejection of the world.

Although, no one should forget that the Sufi Saints of early-stage all were practicing Muslims. They pragmatic all obligatory forms of worship. Due to this practice, some called them as orthodox Muslims. But in fact, they meaningfully highlighted on certain points in the teachings of Qur'an and Hadith. Increasingly, additional worship (*Nawāfil*) came to have more importance connected to them than the mandatory forms of worship.

Conclusion

Tasawwuf (Sufi Saints) considers itself for a quest of right path and truth and all its dimensions provide service to this world. This spiritual journey is so difficult and it required many sources. For this, the *Dhikr of Allah* (Remembrance of Allah) and *Muraqaba* (existence of mystery of Being and Creation) are the best way. Although, ultimately, it is Allah who provides His grace for the traveller and no one can try to his spiritual exercise with comparison to Allah's compassion. Once a Sufi dreamt that he saw the great Sufi Saint Junayd al-Baghdadi and asked him how Allah dealt with him. Al-Baghdadi said- *Allah forgave me through His mercy, not for my spiritual activities and practices, rather for just two Rakat namaz (prayer) which I offered to Allah at midnight.* So, *Tasawwuf* emphasized the spiritual practices within the true guidelines of Islam.

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