



Pakistan Journal of History and Civilization

The Role of Sufi Orders in Shaping Muslim Identity in the Subcontinent

Ahmed Al-Sayed

David Ochieng

Natalia Petrova

Professor of Islamic Studies, Cairo University, Egypt.

Email: ahmed.alsayed@cu.edu.eg

Professor of History, University of Nairobi, Kenya.

Email: d.ochieng@uonbi.ac.ke

Senior Research Scientist, Institute of Oriental Studies, Russian Academy of Sciences, Russia.

Email: n.petrova@ivran.ru

ABSTRACT

Sufi orders played a pivotal role in the religious, cultural, and political formation of Muslim identity in the Indian Subcontinent. From the medieval period onward, Sufi saints not only spread Islam through spiritual teachings but also contributed to socio-political cohesion and interfaith dialogue. Their influence extended beyond the mosque into everyday life, shaping traditions, linguistic developments, and cultural practices. This article explores how Chishti, Suhrawardi, Qadiri, and Naqshbandi orders embedded spiritual values into community life, fostered pluralism, and impacted identity politics in both pre-colonial and colonial South Asia. By analyzing their historical contributions and contemporary legacy, the study highlights the enduring significance of Sufi traditions in shaping a distinctly South Asian Muslim identity.

Keywords:

Sufism, Muslim identity, Indian Subcontinent, Chishti order, Naqshbandi order, Qadiri order, Suhrawardi order, spiritual practices, cultural identity, religious pluralism, colonial South Asia, Islamic mysticism.

INTRODUCTION

The Indian Subcontinent has long been a crucible of diverse religious, linguistic, and cultural traditions. Within this context, Sufi orders emerged as dynamic forces that shaped the development of Muslim identity in ways that transcended mere theological expression. Unlike jurists and theologians, Sufis emphasized spirituality, tolerance, and social integration, making Islam accessible to heterogeneous communities. Orders such as the Chishti, Suhrawardi, Qadiri, and Naqshbandi established institutions like *khanqahs* (spiritual lodges) that became centers of spiritual guidance, charity, and cultural synthesis.

Their influence extended into art, music, poetry, and politics, profoundly shaping Muslim communal life. Even under colonial domination, when Islamic identity was contested, Sufi networks offered continuity and resilience. This paper examines the multifaceted contributions of Sufi orders to Muslim identity formation, structured around historical, cultural, and socio-political dimensions.

Historical Emergence of Sufi Orders in the Subcontinent

The arrival of Sufi saints in the Indian Subcontinent coincided with the establishment of the Delhi Sultanate in the early 13th century. As political power consolidated under Muslim rulers, Sufi mystics traveled from Central Asia, Persia, and the Middle East, establishing spiritual centers that were independent of state structures. Unlike jurists and administrators who were closely aligned with ruling elites, the Sufis sought to connect with common people through accessible spiritual practices.

The spread of Islam through Sufi teachings was primarily achieved by emphasizing inner devotion, love for humanity, and spiritual discipline rather than rigid adherence to law. Saints such as Khwaja Moinuddin Chishti of Ajmer and Bahauddin Zakariya of Multan became central figures in fostering local integration. Their *khanqahs* not only provided spiritual guidance but also served as spaces for communal meals, charity, and dialogue with non-Muslims. By embedding themselves within local cultural and linguistic contexts, the Sufis facilitated a form of Islam that was both spiritually appealing and socially inclusive. This adaptability laid the foundation for Islam's deep roots in South Asian society.

Cultural and Linguistic Contributions

One of the most significant contributions of Sufi orders in the Subcontinent was their role in shaping vernacular languages and fostering cultural creativity. The interaction between Sufi saints and diverse local communities necessitated the use of regional tongues, leading to the development and popularization of languages such as Urdu, Punjabi, Sindhi, and Bengali. Through their teachings, sermons, and poetry, Sufis integrated Persian and Arabic spiritual concepts into local idioms, producing a hybrid linguistic tradition that resonated with common people. The Chishti order, in particular, played an essential role in the cultural foundation of Urdu, where devotional poetry became a medium for conveying complex mystical ideas in an accessible form.

Sufi influence extended beyond language into poetry, music, and architecture. Mystical poetry, composed by saints like Amir Khusrau, Baba Farid, and Bulleh Shah, emphasized themes of divine love, humility, and human equality, inspiring literary traditions across the Subcontinent. Similarly, the development of *qawwali*—a devotional form of music closely associated with the Chishti order—became both a spiritual practice and a cultural art form that continues to thrive in South Asia. In architecture, Sufi shrines (*dargahs*) and *khanqahs* embodied spiritual and artistic synthesis, blending Persian-Islamic designs with indigenous motifs. Structures such as the shrine of Moinuddin Chishti in Ajmer and Bahauddin Zakariya in Multan stand as

enduring symbols of this cultural integration, representing not only places of worship but also hubs of social and artistic life.

Role in Community Building and Social Cohesion

The establishment of *khanqahs* (Sufi lodges) and shrines across the Subcontinent played a crucial role in fostering community cohesion and shaping the social fabric of Muslim identity. These institutions were not merely spiritual retreats but functioned as centers of communal welfare. Within the *khanqah*, seekers of knowledge and spiritual growth were offered guidance, food, and shelter, irrespective of their social or economic background. By embodying the principles of charity (*khidmat*) and hospitality, Sufi lodges served as spaces where the marginalized found dignity and belonging, thus bridging social divides. Shrines of prominent saints, such as those of Nizamuddin Auliya in Delhi and Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai in Sindh, became enduring centers of pilgrimage and local identity, embedding Sufi traditions deeply within everyday life.

Equally significant was the contribution of Sufis to interfaith harmony. Unlike rigid theological authorities, many Sufi saints embraced inclusivity, allowing non-Muslims to participate in communal practices such as devotional gatherings, music, and charitable feasts. Their teachings often emphasized universal love and compassion, appealing across religious boundaries. For instance, Baba Farid's Punjabi verses entered Sikh scripture, reflecting the cross-cultural influence of Sufi spirituality. Through such practices, Sufi orders not only spread Islam but also fostered pluralism, enabling Muslims to coexist harmoniously within a multi-religious Subcontinental context. This ethos of inclusivity contributed profoundly to the shaping of a tolerant and resilient Muslim identity.

Political Engagement and Resistance

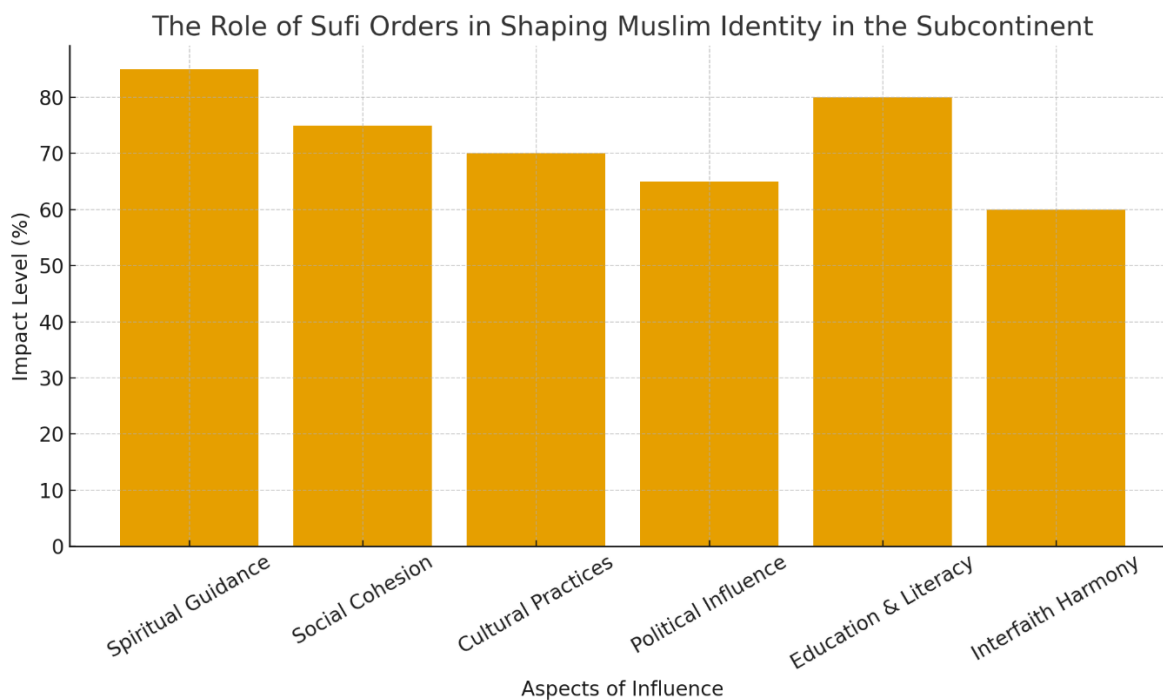
The relationship between Sufi orders and political authorities in the Subcontinent was complex, ranging from cooperation to resistance. Many rulers of the Delhi Sultanate and the Mughal Empire sought the legitimacy of Sufi saints, whose spiritual influence extended across diverse populations. While some Sufis, such as members of the Suhrawardi order, maintained closer ties with the ruling elite and even served as advisors, others like the Chishti saints deliberately distanced themselves from political power to preserve their moral authority. Despite this diversity of approach, the recognition of Sufi figures by rulers highlighted their indispensable role in legitimizing dynastic rule and ensuring social stability. Shrines often received patronage, turning into centers of both religious devotion and political symbolism.

In the colonial period, Sufi orders became pivotal in mobilizing spiritual resistance against foreign domination. Leaders of the Naqshbandi order, for instance, played a prominent role in organizing anti-colonial movements during the 19th century, often framing resistance within the language of spiritual revival and moral duty. Shrines and *khanqahs* became safe spaces for political dissent, blending religious devotion with nationalist sentiment. This spiritual resistance not only challenged colonial authority but also reinforced a shared sense of Muslim identity under foreign rule. By navigating the tensions between cooperation with power and opposition to oppression, Sufi orders demonstrated their adaptability and enduring role in the political life of South Asia.

Contemporary Legacy of Sufi Orders

The legacy of Sufi orders continues to shape Muslim identity in contemporary South Asia, where shrines and *khanqahs* remain vibrant centers of devotion and cultural life. Pilgrimage to the tombs of saints such as Data Ganj Bakhsh in Lahore, Moinuddin Chishti in Ajmer, and Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya in Delhi attracts millions of devotees annually, underscoring the enduring social and spiritual relevance of Sufism. Beyond ritual devotion, Sufi practices—such as *qawwali* performances and communal charity—serve as markers of cultural continuity, reinforcing a shared sense of heritage among South Asian Muslims. In many contexts, Sufi orders also provide platforms for community welfare, education, and spiritual guidance, linking past traditions with modern social needs.

However, the authority and influence of Sufi orders have faced challenges from modernist and reformist movements that advocate a more scripturalist interpretation of Islam. Reformist groups such as the Deobandi and Ahl-i Hadith movements often criticize Sufi rituals—particularly shrine veneration—as innovations (*bid'ah*) that deviate from orthodox Islam. Furthermore, the rise of transnational Islamist ideologies in the late twentieth century introduced new critiques of Sufi practices, framing them as incompatible with modernity. Despite these pressures, Sufi traditions have demonstrated resilience by adapting to contemporary contexts, including their incorporation into digital media and cultural festivals. This ongoing negotiation highlights the dynamism of Sufi orders in balancing continuity and change, ensuring their role in sustaining South Asian Muslim identity.



Summary

Sufi orders played a foundational role in the evolution of Muslim identity in the Subcontinent by blending spirituality with social and cultural life. The Chishti order emphasized love and tolerance, shaping interfaith relations. The Suhrawardi and Qadiri orders reinforced spiritual authority while integrating local traditions, whereas the Naqshbandis influenced political resistance during Mughal and colonial periods. Collectively, these orders contributed to linguistic evolution, artistic expression, and the establishment of enduring cultural practices.

Today, their shrines remain vibrant centers of devotion and cultural life, reflecting their continued influence on identity. Despite challenges from reformist interpretations of Islam, Sufism continues to embody pluralism and resilience in South Asia.

References

- Eaton, R. M. (1993). *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier, 1204–1760*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Rizvi, S. A. A. (1978). *A History of Sufism in India*. New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal.
- Ernst, C. W. (1997). *The Shambhala Guide to Sufism*. Boston: Shambhala.
- Schimmel, A. (1975). *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*. Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press.
- Digby, S. (2001). *Sufis and Soldiers in Awrangzeb's Deccan*. Oxford University Press.
- Green, N. (2012). *Sufism: A Global History*. Wiley-Blackwell.
- Alam, M. (2004). *The Languages of Political Islam in India c. 1200–1800*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Troll, C. W. (1989). *Muslim Shrines in India: Their Character, History and Significance*. Delhi: Oxford University Press.
- Gilmartin, D. (1988). *Empire and Islam: Punjab and the Making of Pakistan*. Berkeley: University of California Press.
- Hardy, P. (1972). *The Muslims of British India*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Metcalf, B. D. (1982). *Islamic Revival in British India: Deoband, 1860–1900*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- Hermansen, M. (1992). *Hybrid Identity Formations in South Asian Islam*. *Journal of South Asian Studies*, 15(1), 75–98.