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**The Educational Role of the Sufi Khanqah in Medieval India Women in Sufism: Historical Perspective and Contemporary Relevance**Assistant Professor- Department of History, Shri Ram Sanskrit College,  
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**Abstract:** *This study examines the dual themes of the pedagogical functions of the Sufi khanqah (hospice) in medieval India and the agency, role, and contributions of women within South Asian mystical Islam. While traditional historiography has predominantly emphasized the formal theological curriculum of the madrasa and highlighted male shaikhs as the primary custodians of mystical knowledge, this paper demonstrates that the khanqah served as an inclusive, non-formal alternative educational ecosystem. Through its decentralized pedagogical methods, emphasis on experiential learning (suluk), vernacular literature, and character reformation (tazkiyah-i nafs), the khanqah democratized access to spiritual and social knowledge across social classes and gender lines.*

*Furthermore, this paper re-evaluates the historical role of female mystics, scholars, and patrons- such as Bibi Fatima Sam, Bibi Zulaikha, Jahanara Begum, and Bibi Jamal Khatun-who operated both within and alongside khanqah networks. It reveals that medieval Indian women were not merely passive recipients of Sufi piety, but active spiritual guides, scholars, benefactors, and literary figures. Finally, the study explores the contemporary relevance of these historical frameworks, arguing that reclaiming the egalitarian educational ethos of the khanqah and the legacy of female Sufi leadership offers vital insights for modern discourses on gender equity, interfaith dialogue, religious moderation, and holistic education in South Asia and beyond.*

**Key words:** Sufism, Khanqah, Medieval India, Female Mystics, Pedagogy, Esoteric Education.

**Introduction-** The medieval period in Indian history (spanning roughly the twelfth to the eighteenth centuries) was marked by profound socio-cultural transformation, intellectual synthesis, and institutional evolution. At the heart of this dynamic milieu was the spread of Islamic mysticism (tasawwuf), which established deep institutional roots across the South Asian subcontinent through major Sufi orders (silsilas), notably the Chishti, Suhrawardi, Qadiriyya, Naqshbandiyya, and Firdausiyya. Central to the socio-religious and intellectual landscape of Indian Sufism was the khanqah (also referred to as jama'at khana, zawiya, or takiya). The khanqah operated as a multifaceted institution: a hospice, a community kitchen (langar), a sanctuary for the destitute, and, fundamentally, a center of holistic education and spiritual transformation.

Unlike the formal urban madrasa, which was primarily funded by elite patronage to train state bureaucrats, jurists (fuqaha), and orthodox theologians in exoteric Islamic jurisprudence (ilm al-zahir), the khanqah pioneered an alternative educational model centered on esoteric knowledge (ilm al-batin), moral refinement (akhlaq), and intuitive divine love (ishq). The khanqah functioned as a sanctuary where theoretical knowledge met lived practice, fostering an atmosphere of cross-cultural encounter and intellectual openness.

Concurrently, a critical yet frequently marginalized dimension of South Asian Sufi History is the contribution of women. While traditional hagiographies (tadhkirat) and biographical dictionaries compiled by medieval male scholars often foreground male lineages and spiritual masters, a closer historical analysis reveals that women played pivotal roles in the expansion, sustenance, and intellectual life of Sufism in medieval India. Operating as spiritual preceptors, ascetic scholars, custodians of sacred shrines, patrons of khanqahs, and authors of mystical treatises, women actively shaped the contours of medieval Indian Islam.

**This paper provides a holistic exploration of two intertwined subjects:** The structural, pedagogical, and social role of the Sufi khanqah as an educational institution in medieval India.

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The historical agency of women within Indian Sufism, examining their spiritual, educational, and institutional contributions.

By bridging these historical perspectives, the study demonstrates how the non-hierarchical, inclusive ethos of Sufi institutions created unique avenues for female participation and learning. Furthermore, it highlights the contemporary relevance of these medieval models in addressing modern challenges surrounding gender discrimination, religious polarization, educational reform, and spiritual well-being.

### **The Institutional Architecture and Pedagogical Dynamics of the Medieval Sufi Khanqah-**

**The Khanqah as an Alternative Educational Ecosystem:** To understand the educational impact of the khanqah, it is necessary to contrast it with the formal medieval educational institution, the madrasa. The medieval madrasa was primarily concerned with scholastic theology (kalam), legal jurisprudence (fiqh), Arabic grammar, and administrative sciences. Its entry requirements were often restrictive, catering predominantly to elite males seeking state employment or official religious posts.

In contrast, the khanqah operated as an open-door institutional space grounded in the principle of universal hospitality and spiritual egalitarianism. Situated both in urban hubs (such as Delhi, Ajmer, Uch, and Multan) and remote rural frontiers (such as Pakpattan and Bihar Sharif), the khanqah provided education to a diverse demographic, including scholars, craftspeople, peasants, women, and marginalized social groups.

**Institutional Dimension**  
**The Medieval Madrasa**  
**The Sufi Khanqah-** Primary Focus Exoteric Sciences (Ilm al-Zahir: Fiqh, Kalam, Grammar) Esoteric & Moral Sciences (Ilm al-Batin: Tazkiyah, Suluk, Akhlaq) Pedagogical Method Rote Memorization, Textual Commentary, Debates Experiential Mentorship, Oral Discourse, Meditation, Service Funding Source State Grants (In'am, Madad-i Ma'ash), Royal Patronage Voluntary Donations (Futuh), Endowments (Waqf) Social Accessibility Elite Males, Aspiring Jurists and Bureaucrats Universal: All Social Classes, Castes, Faiths, and Genders Primary Goal Intellectual Licensing (Ijaza) for Legal/State Roles Moral Transformation, Spiritual Perfection, Universal Service The pedagogical methodology of the khanqah was distinctively holistic, combining cognitive learning with behavioral discipline, emotional refinement, and communal service. The primary educator within the khanqah was the shaikh or pir (spiritual mentor), whose authority rested not merely on legal erudition, but on recognized spiritual realization and exemplary moral character.

**Core Components of Khanqah Pedagogy-** The educational program within a medieval Indian khanqah revolved around four interconnected components:

**Direct Mentorship (Suhbah) and the Master:** Disciple Relationship (Pir-Murid): Learning in the khanqah was inherently relational. The disciple (murid) underwent systematic spiritual training (suluk) under the direct guidance of the pir. Knowledge was transmitted through proximity, observation, and personal dialogue rather than passive lecture attendance.

**Moral Reform and Character Development (Tazkiyah-i Nafs):** The curriculum prioritized the purification of the self. Disciples engaged in manual labor, such as cooking in the communal kitchen (langar), drawing water, sweeping floors, and tending to visitors. This physical service (khidmat) was viewed as an essential pedagogical tool to break egoism (kibr) and cultivate humility (inqisar).

**Malfuzat Literature and Oral Instruction:** A major contribution of medieval Indian khanqahs to South Asian educational culture was the compilation of malfuzat (recorded conversations of Sufi masters). Works such as Fawa'id al-Fu'ad (discourses of Nizamuddin Auliya recorded by Amir Hasan Sijzi) and Khair al-Majalis (discourses of Nasiruddin Chiragh-i Dehlavi) served as open textbooks. These texts covered diverse subjects including ethical conduct, Quranic interpretation, Hadith criticism, poetry, social justice, and practical wisdom, making complex spiritual doctrines accessible to non-scholarly audiences.

**Audition and Aesthetic Education (Sama and Devotional Music):** Particularly within the Chishti order, the practice of sama (spiritual music/audition) served as a powerful pedagogical tool for emotional and intuitive learning. The integration of local dialects, regional music styles, and vernacular poetry (Hindavi) enabled the khanqah to communicate complex metaphysical ideas-such as Wahdat al-



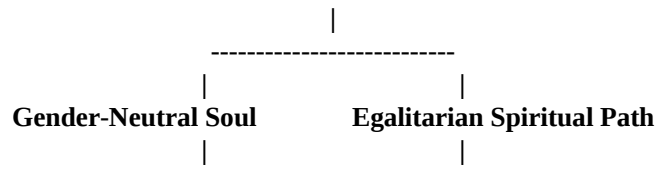
Wujud (Unity of Being)-to unlettered masses, fostering cross-cultural understanding between Muslim and non-Muslim communities.

### **Women in Medieval Indian Sufism: Historical Perspectives and Epistemic Agency-**

**Historiographical Reclamation:** Mainstream historiography of medieval India has often portrayed women within patriarchal constraints, confining their visibility to royal courts or domestic quarters. However, Sufi history provides a contrasting narrative where women frequently transcended conventional gender roles. In Sufi metaphysics, the human soul (nafs or ruh) possesses no gender; true spiritual elevation depends entirely on devotion, discipline, and divine grace. This theological foundation allowed female mystics to attain high positions of spiritual authority (wilayah).

Despite patriarchal biases in written documentation, historical sources, including malfuzat, hagiographies, and royal memoirs, confirm that women actively participated in Sufi life as spiritual preceptors, scholars, ascetics, and institution builders.

#### **Sufi Metaphysical Ethos**



#### **Avenues for Female Agency & Authority**



#### **Key Female Sufi Figures in Medieval India-**

**1. Bibi Fatima Sam (13th Century, Delhi)-** Bibi Fatima Sam is widely regarded as one of the most prominent female mystics of the early Delhi Sultanate. Known for her extreme asceticism, profound wisdom, and poetic composition, she maintained close intellectual and spiritual exchanges with premier Chishti saints, including Baba Farid Ganj-i Shakar and Shaikh Najibuddin Mutawakkil.

**Her spiritual status was so elevated that Baba Farid famously remarked:** "When the lion comes out of the forest, no one asks whether it is male or female." Nizamuddin Auliya frequently quoted her sayings in his gatherings, treating her statements with the same authority as those of major male masters. Her shrine in Delhi became a historic pilgrimage site, highlighting that female spiritual authority was publicly recognized and revered.

**2. Bibi Zulaikha (13th Century, Delhi/Badaun)-** Bibi Zulaikha, the mother of Nizamuddin Auliya, represents the foundational role of women as primary educators within Sufi lineages. Following the early death of her husband, she managed her household in extreme poverty while providing her son with rigorous spiritual and intellectual training. Her home functioned as an informal domestic khanqah, where lessons of trust in God (tawakkul), patience (sabr), and devotion were daily lived practices. Historical accounts attribute Nizamuddin Auliya's moral character and spiritual height directly to the pedagogical foundations established by his mother.

**3. Jahanara Begum (1604–1681)-** Jahanara Begum, the eldest daughter of Mughal Emperor Shah Jahan, illustrates the intersection of royal patronage, scholarly production, and deep Sufi initiation. A devout disciple of the Qadiriyya order under Mullah Shah Badakhshi, Jahanara was not merely a passive follower; she was a prolific author and patron of Sufi architecture.

**She authored two major biographical works:** Munis al-Arwah (The Companion of Souls), a biography of Khwaja Moinuddin Chishti and his immediate successors, and Risalah-i Sahibiyyah, a treatise detailing her spiritual journey and her master Mullah Shah. Jahanara funded and designed extensive additions to the dargah of Moinuddin Chishti in Ajmer and established hospice structures for



pilgrims. Her writings offer valuable historical evidence of female scholarly output and spiritual autobiography in seventeenth-century India.

#### **JAHANARA BEGUM (1604–1681)**

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#### **Royal Patron, Sufi Scholar, and Qadiriyya Initiate**

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#### **Literary Output**

- Munis al-Arwah (Chishti Biographies)- Expansions at Ajmer Dargah
- Risalah-i Sahibiyyah (Spiritual Memoir)- Construction of Khanqahs & Rest-houses

#### **Architectural Patronage**

**4. Bibi Jamal Khatun (d. 1647)-** The sister of the celebrated Qadiriyya saint Mian Mir of Lahore, Bibi Jamal Khatun was an ascetic and spiritual preceptor in her own right. Renowned for her rigorous spiritual retreats (chilla) and deep mastery of mystical theology, she instructed both male and female seekers. Mian Mir himself held her spiritual attainments in high esteem, often directing seekers to her for guidance, thereby acknowledging her status as a legitimate teacher (murshid) within the order.

**5. Female Relatives of Baba Farid-** Bibi Sharifah and Bibi Mastura: The daughters of Baba Farid Ganj-i Shakar were deeply integrated into the spiritual life of the Chishti order. Historical records indicate that Bibi Sharifah possessed such exceptional spiritual maturity that her father stated that had it been permissible in the formal tradition to hand the primary Chishti khilafat (spiritual succession) to a woman, he would have bestowed it upon her. She nevertheless served as an informal spiritual guide to numerous female devotees in the Punjab region.

#### **Intersection of Khanqah Pedagogy and Female Spiritual Authority Spaces of Learning-**

**Domestic Khanqahs and Zenana Devotional Spheres:** While the public quarters of large urban khanqahs were often male-dominated due to contemporary social customs (purdah), women created and operated parallel, highly effective spaces for spiritual education:

**Domestic Khanqahs:** Female mystics transformed their homes into informal educational centers where women from surrounding neighborhoods gathered to learn Quranic recitation, Hadith, vernacular Sufi poetry, and practical ethics.

**The Zenana (Women's Quarters):** Within elite and non-elite households alike, the zenana served as a hub for devotional gatherings, where women performed dhikr (remembrance of God), recited manqabat (praises of saints), and listened to readings of Sufi literature.

**Shrine Culture (Dargah Communities):** Female pilgrims and devotees actively utilized the sacred space of the dargah (tomb shrine of a Sufi saint). The dargah acted as an extension of the khanqah, offering women a public space to seek spiritual solace, participate in community meals, interact with female preceptors, and engage in vows (mannat).

#### **Spatial Dimensions of Female Sufism**

#### **Domestic Khanqahs**

- Household learning hubs
- Neighborhood outreach

#### **Zenana Spaces**

- Devotional gatherings
- Dhikr & vernacular poetry

#### **Shrine Complexes**

- Public sacred access
- Community support & vows

**Transmission of Esoteric Knowledge (Ilm-i Batin) Across Gender Boundaries-** The educational methodology of Sufism permitted women to act as both recipients and transmitters of esoteric knowledge. In many cases, male Sufi saints received their foundational spiritual training from female relatives or preceptors. The transmission occurred through:

**Oral Pedagogy:** Women passed down moral instruction, folk songs enriched with Sufi metaphors (such as the Chakkinama and Lullaby literature of the Deccan), and devotional narratives to children and younger women, embedding mystical philosophy into everyday domestic routines.



**Philanthropy and Social Welfare:** Female patrons utilized their personal wealth (meher, inheritances, or royal stipends) to endow khanqahs, construct wells, feed the destitute, and support poor scholars. This philanthropic activity was regarded as a direct expression of Sufi pedagogy-translating love for the Divine into service to humanity.

**Contemporary Relevance-** Reclaiming Gender Equity, Pluralism, and Spiritual Education: The historical examination of the medieval khanqah and female Sufism holds significant relevance for contemporary socio-religious and educational challenges in South Asia and the modern world.

**1. Countering Religious Extremism and Patriarchal Dogmatism:** In recent decades, South Asian societies have experienced an rise in rigid, literalist, and patriarchal interpretations of religion that frequently restrict women's social visibility, educational access, and spiritual agency. Re-examining the history of medieval Sufism provides an authentic, historically grounded Islamic counter-narrative.

By highlighting figures like Bibi Fatima Sam and Jahanara Begum, contemporary educators and reformers can demonstrate that gender equality, female scholarship, and female spiritual leadership are deeply rooted in South Asian Islamic tradition. The historical precedent of women leading spiritual circles challenges modern fundamentalist assertions that female public or spiritual agency is an un-Islamic or purely Western imposition.

**2. Holistic and Inclusive Educational Reform:** Modern educational systems in South Asia and globally often focus heavily on technical instruction and material outcomes, frequently neglecting character formation, emotional maturity, and ethical grounding. The khanqah model offers valuable pedagogical insights:

**Values-Based Education:** Integrating the khanqah's focus on tazkiyah (moral self-purification) and akhlaq (virtuous conduct) into modern curricula can help foster empathy, social responsibility, and emotional intelligence.

**Experiential and Service-Oriented Learning:** The khanqah principle of service to humanity (khidmat-i khalq) as a prerequisite for intellectual growth aligns with modern educational philosophies that emphasize community service, experiential learning, and social leadership.

**3. Promoting Interfaith Harmony and Cultural Pluralism:** Medieval khanqahs were primary sites of interfaith dialogue and cultural integration, where Hindus, Muslims, and followers of other traditions interacted freely through shared devotional aesthetics, vernacular poetry, and humanistic values. In an era marked by communal polarization, the revival of the khanqah ethos-characterized by the Chishti doctrine of Sulh-i Kul (Universal Peace)-provides a proven framework for building social cohesion, interfaith tolerance, and mutual respect.

#### CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE

| Gender Empowerment                              | Holistic Educational Reform        | Interfaith Pluralism      |
|-------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------|---------------------------|
| - Authentic counter-narrative to fundamentalism | - Focus on character (Tazkiyah)    | - Doctrine of Sulh-i Kul  |
| - Historic models of leadership                 | - Service-learning methodology     | - Cross-cultural dialogue |
|                                                 | - Moral and emotional intelligence | - Community cohesion      |

**4. Psychological Well-Being and Spiritual Solace:** In a fast-paced, hyper-connected, yet increasingly isolated modern society, the practices associated with khanqah life-mindful meditation (muraqaba), communal gathering, aesthetic expression (sama), and spiritual mentorship-offer practical avenues for psychological resilience, stress reduction, and inner peace.

**Conclusion-** The medieval Indian khanqah was far more than an ascetic retreat; it functioned as a dynamic, inclusive, and decentralized educational institution that transformed the socio-cultural landscape of South Asia. By prioritizing moral purification, spiritual transformation, vernacular communication, and universal service over rigid scholasticism, the khanqah democratized learning and created a sanctuary of peace and cross-cultural understanding.

Crucially, within this mystical framework, women carved out vital spaces of authority, intellect, and leadership. Figures such as Bibi Fatima Sam, Bibi Zulaikha, Jahanara Begum, and Bibi Jamal Khatun



demonstrated that female agency was an integral component of South Asian Sufism. Through domestic mentorship, literary output, philanthropic patronage, and spiritual preceptors, these women contributed significantly to the dissemination of ethical and spiritual knowledge.

In the contemporary era, reclaiming the historical legacy of the *khanqah* and female Sufi masters offers a powerful blueprint for addressing modern challenges. It provides a historically authentic foundation for promoting gender equity, revitalizing holistic and ethics-centered education, combating religious extremism, and fostering interfaith harmony. Re-engaging with this rich heritage reminds us that true intellectual and spiritual elevation transcends gender, class, and dogma—a timeless lesson from medieval India that remains profoundly urgent today.

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