

BULAVA



OUR CALLING TO THE AJMER SHARIF DARGAH

DISCOVER INDIA PROGRAM
2019-2020

BULAVA:
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Ajmer Sharif
Dargah

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PROGRAM
2019 – 2020

CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that the work incorporated in this report titled “*Bulava: Our calling to the Ajmer Sharif Dargah*” submitted by the undersigned Research Team was carried out under my mentorship. Such material as has been obtained from other sources has been duly acknowledged.

Sr. No	NAME OF THE STUDENT	DESIGNATION	SIGNATURE
1	Abhinav Shah	Logistics/ Finances	
2	Ananya Velidanda	Content/ Writing	
3	Divya Jagathi Myneni	Documentary	
4	Dhruvi Shah	Finances/ Content/ Writing	
5	Eesha Dusad	Documentary	
6	Eesha Potdar	Documentary	
7	Kritika Dua	Content/ Writing	
8	Lekha Donur	Content/ Writing	
9	Palak Jain	Group Representative/ Content/ Writing	
10	Manaa Ahmad	Documentary	
11	Shubha Arvind	Content/ Writing	
12	Swati D	Content/ Writing	
13	Tarasha Gupta	Content/ Writing	

MENTOR

Name: Dr. Sabah Siddiqui

Signature:

Date: 1st April, 2020

Contents Page

Topic	Page number
Certificate	i
Table of Contents	ii
Acknowledgment	vi
Abstract	viii
List of Images	ix
Chapter 1 : Introduction	1
1.1. Our calling	4
1.2. Research Statements	5
1.3. Research Objectives	5
1.4. Methodology	6
1.4.1. Limitations	11

Chapter 2 : Literature Review	13
2.1. History of Sufism	14
2.2. Moinuddin Chishti and His Teachings	16
2.3. Relation to Mughal rulers	18
2.4. Women in Sufism	21
2.5. Syncretism	23
Chapter 3 : Inside the Dargah	27
3.1. Introduction	28
3.2. Structure and Environment	28
3.2.1. Map of the Dargah	28
3.2.2. The Khadims	30
3.2.3. Security	30
3.2.4. Qawaali	31

3.2.5. The Mazhaar and its Rituals	32
3.2.6. A Divine Space	34
3.2.7. A Facade?	35
3.2.8. Jumma ki Raat	36
Chapter 4 : Sukoon	38
4.1. Sentiments	39
4.2. Syncretism in Every Aspect	45
4.3. Positive Space	48
4.4. Langar ka Khana	48
4.5. The Degh	49
Chapter 5 : Present Day	51
5.1. In Contemporary Times	52
5.1.1. Politics	52

5.2. Technology	53
5.3. Commercialization	53
5.4. Tourism	54
5.5. Relationship with the City	55
5.5.1. Vendors Outside the Dargah	55
5.5.2. Market Architecture	56
5.5.3. Ajmer as its People Know it	56
Chapter 6 : Looking Back	60
6.1. Conclusion	61
6.2. Limitations	63
6.3. Final comments	63
References	65
Glossary	70

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Abstract

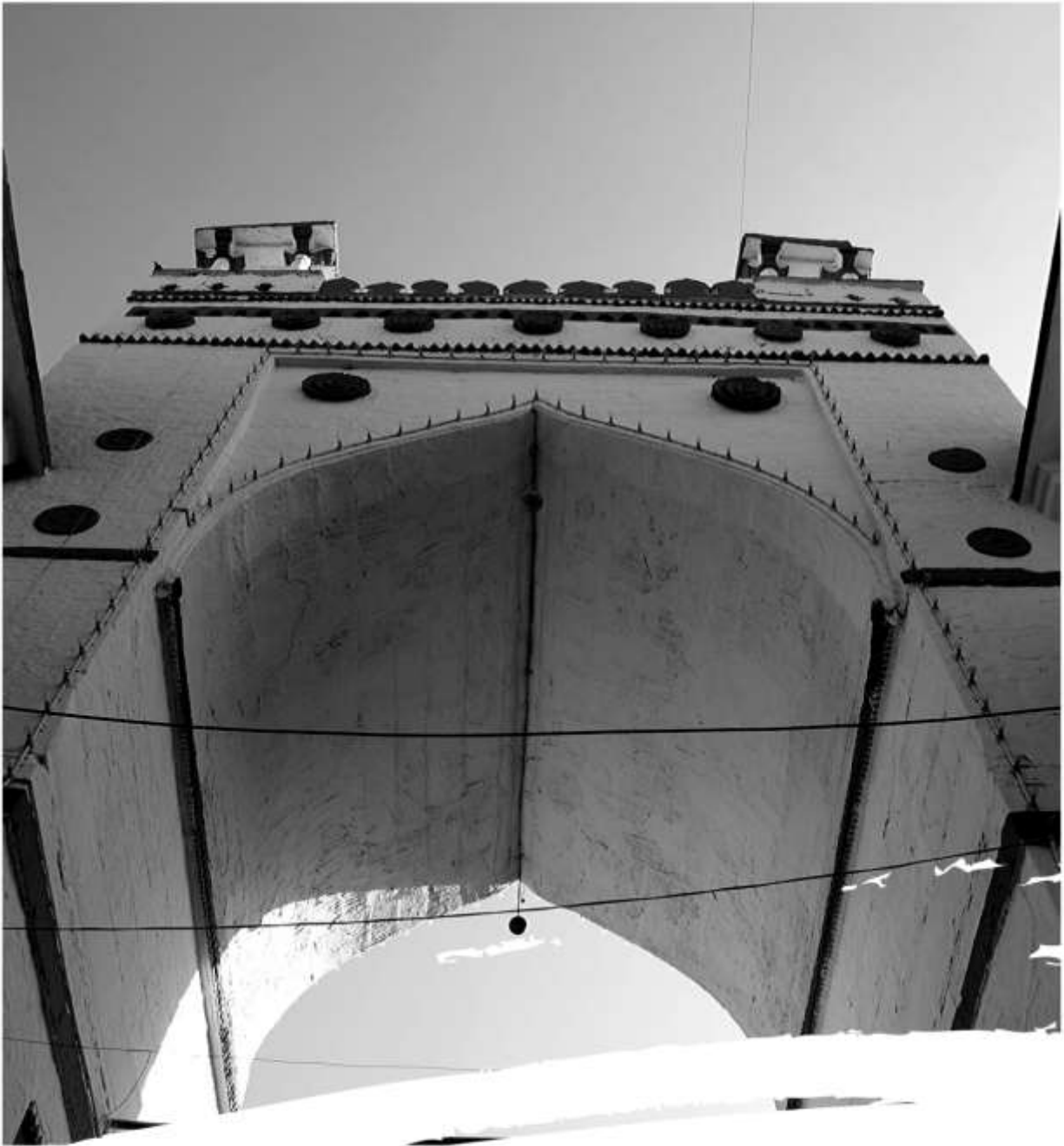
Located in Ajmer, Rajasthan, the Ajmer Sharif Dargah is the final resting place of Khawaja Moinuddin Chishti. Attracting millions of people every year, it is the second largest Muslim pilgrimage site in the world. However, its beauty exceeds far beyond that. This Dargah is a symbol of peace and harmony in today's troubled times. It acts as a space that is free from discrimination of any caste, creed or gender.

The teachings of the Khwaja are widely preached across the Dargah. Apart from his teachings, this Dargah follows the Chishtiya Order of Sufism. Most devotees that visit the Dargah believe that Sufism is a faith that can be described as spreading love and happiness to others.

Our research paper studies the concept of Sufism, particularly in the city of Ajmer. It talks about the history of Sufism, particularly about the women in Sufism. Moving further, it looks into The Ajmer Sharif Dargah's structure and space, the important parties related to the dargah, along with sentiments and beliefs of the devotees and vendors in Ajmer. It also looks at the cultural integration of different religions that Sufism embodies. Lastly, it looks into the contemporary times of Sufism, new developments that have come about in recent times, and the commercialization that has been discovered.

List of Images

Topics	Page Numbers
Image 1 : Blueprint of the Dargah	26
Image 2: Devotees with their offerings in front of the Victoria Tank	30
Image 3 & 4 : The decorations for Jumma and Bibi Fatima's Birthday. Another generation of qawaal performing.	33
Image 5 : A woman asking for Mannat	37
Image 6 : Locks signifying people in trance	39
Image 7 & 8 : Gendered spaces inside the Dargah	41
Image 9 & 10 : Jain langar being cooked in the badi degh. Non-vegetarian langar being cooked in the Langar Khana.	45
Image 11 & 12 : The members of AAP offering a Chaddar. A shop inside the Dargah.	47
Image 13 : Offerings of money and jewelry inside the degh.	50



INTRODUCTION

CHAPTER 1

‘Eshq âmad-o shod chu khunam andar rag-o pust

Tâ kard marâ tahi-o por kard ze dust

Ajzâ’-ye-wojudam hamagi dust gereft

Nâmist marâ bar man baqi hama ust.’ – *Amir Khusrau*

(Love came and spread like blood in my veins and the skin of me, It filled me with the Friend and completely emptied me. The Friend has taken over all parts of my existence, Only my name remains, as all is He.)

The understanding of religion in India is as charming as it is baffling. Likely there is no other nation under the sun where one can watch such vast numbers of religions and factions working one next to the other. Hinduism is omnipresent and has most likely remained so since time immemorial. Buddhism continues to spread undisturbed, generally dynamic in North-East India. Jainism has never been forced or spread to a large following, yet there is a good network keeping up its conventions. Islam guarantees an enormous and ground-breaking segment of the populace with fluctuating degrees of progressivism and conservatism. Where such vast numbers of periods of strict life and thought are brought into such close contact, something will undoubtedly occur. (Woodburne, 1923)

However, it has not been quite this serene. Communal riots, enormous scale massacres and progressively persistent bomb assaults have shaken India in the most recent decades. Uproars, killings, and bombings have been deciphered as examples of an ever-rising pattern of discord among Hindus and Muslims in the nation ever since independence. The changing reality in India has highlighted worries about religion's developing role in the geopolitics of the nation.

There is an urgent requirement for syncretism in the Indian subcontinent. This can't be accomplished by going the method for colonialists who separated the locale based on religion or ethnicity - this isn't the correct method to achieve long term co-existence. It is commonly accepted that unless India can rise above the need for

a dominant religion and construct the establishment of an advanced mainstream secular state, solidarity would be difficult.

In the midst of such an environment is the religion of Sufism. Dr. Tara Chand, the Indian archeologist and historian, in an article called 'Sufism: Meaning, Origin and Main Features of Sufism', called it, "A religion of intense devotion; Love is its manifestation, poetry, music and dance are the instruments of its worship and attaining oneness with God is its ideal." Sufism, the mystical or esoteric aspect of Islam, is seen primarily as devoted to the spiritual dimension of one's life.

Scholars have characterized and clarified the significance and remarkable highlights of Sufism in different manners. As indicated by Murray Titus, for example, Sufism is "an attitude of mind and heart toward God and the problems of life", Spencer Trimingham characterizes mystery as a particular strategy to deal with reality by utilizing instinctive and enthusiastic otherworldly resources, Annemarie Schimmel characterizes the profound current from a more extensive perspective and holds that it is the awareness of the one reality that can be called Wisdom, Light, Love or nothing (Anjum, 2006).

The underlying theme in every one of these definitions is by all accounts finding the dormant divine supposition in one's heart or conscience. It is a disposition of the mind, heart and soul that involves a person's direct relationship with God with a significant perception of the Real and Absolute Truth. The technique engaged with this journey for profound advancement is thoughtful instead of scholastic. The core acts of Sufism lead to the purification of the self, which tries to manage and coordinate the spiritual existence of individuals. A Sufi focuses on a bi-dimensional advancement of himself; first, the reinforcing of his spiritual and individual association with God, and second, idealizing his relational connections (Anjum 2006).

In times where religion is exploited to create boundaries and political discord, there is a religion that knows no religion, just one's love and devotion towards God. The fundamental motive behind this topic is to further understand the dynamics and religious amalgamation within Sufism.

1.1. Our Calling:

Ajmer, Rajasthan, is known for Khwaja Moinuddin Chishti's Dargah, a world renowned Dargah, that for over 800 years has been open to people of all religions, communities and cultures around the world. We chose Sufism as our topic as we are interested in cultural studies and the concept of syncretism in the pluralistic culture of India. Sufism has facilitated a cultural amalgamation regardless of the political and social environment around it. In spite of the external political environment, Sufism has maintained a very inclusive and conducive feeling of spirituality. In a world that is often plagued by increasing communal discord, the Sufi order has always been a source of inspiration to us due to its standing as a practice that transcends boundaries of religion and other such denominations. Our University is a melting pot of students and teachers from different parts of the country, but we believe we have a lot to learn from the syncretic traditions of Ajmer Sharif, and teach us how to live and work together in our university and society despite our cultural and religious differences.

During the literature review, there was a lot of information on what the environment of the Dargah used to be and what calls devotees to the Dargah. However, there is not much literature on the contemporary environment of the Dargah. Additionally, there is little literature on how devotees submitted themselves or ingrained Sufism within themselves regardless of their gender. We discovered that a lot of the research previously done is based on historical accounts dating decades and centuries back. We also noticed that the research was done primarily focused on religious practices, or was from a theological point of view. Therefore, our aim is to study the space of the Dargah and observe and document its cultural importance. Thus, we are studying the Dargah from a sociological perspective, rather than a religious one.

This refers to both the Dargah's contribution to the city's culture and also the significance that Sufism holds outside of the religious sphere. We wish to look at the Dargah's relevance in today's era and more importantly, how it is thought of by the various groups that are connected to it - whether it be devotees, caretakers,

tourists or the Chishti foundation. We also want to delve into and document the tremendous impact that Sufism, mainly the Chishti order has had on the region it is based in. Out of all the dargahs in India, the Ajmer Dargah is the most influential one, to such an extent that it even acts as a tourist destination. Thus, we want to study Sufism exactly from where we can find out why it is so unique and what attracts people so much to it.

Our Project explores the practices of contemporary Sufism, specifically in Ajmer.

1.2. Research Statements:

1. What kind of an environment has Sufism created within and around the Ajmer Sharif Dargah in the contemporary times?
2. How does the idea of syncretism that is enshrined within the Chishti order translate into today's times?
3. To what extent are women involved in the cultural and religious practices of the Dargah?

Our study is descriptive and qualitative in nature, and thus, we will be going on the field without any theoretical or statistical assumptions. Hence, there is no hypothesis.

1.3. Research Objectives:

1. To gain a better understanding of the uniqueness of Sufism, in particular, Ajmer Sharif Dargah.
2. To observe the impact of Sufism in Ajmer.
3. To be able to observe and describe how women inhabit the space of a Sufi shrine.

1.4. Methodology:

A research methodology is a systematic way of collecting data and then analyzing it based on the research question or assumptions. The data collection can be qualitative or quantitative in nature. However, based on our research question, qualitative research methodology is used. This method mainly emphasizes the experiences, beliefs and lived realities of individuals. Under this, more often than not semi-structured methods such as interviews, observations and focus groups are used. The data produced from this type of research is descriptive and naturalistic, which is a result of the type of questions asked as it allows an individual to express themselves freely. The aim is defined clearly, further onto which the research is established. The qualitative research question identifies the phenomenon the researcher wants to investigate; steering us into the direction of our research without having to predict the results or outcomes.

There are different types of qualitative research methodologies that include case studies, observations, interviews and more. The research question is the underlying factor in deciding the method for data collection, and so for this project, field observation and interviews are identified as the primary data collection methods.

There are different types of observations and interviews used according to the aim and research question of the intended investigation. The observational research method is non-experimental wherein the researcher observed the behavior of the participants either covertly or overtly. For this research, naturalistic observation was deployed, that includes participating in the activities in and around the Ajmer Dargah, and then documenting the same, followed by interviews and reflection. Ethnographic observation is one such type of participant observation that examines individuals or groups in their naturally occurring environment or cultural communities. Hence, Sufism was looked at through an immersion in the lived environment of the Dargah and its surroundings.

An important aspect of adopting this method was the writing of on-field notes as they aid the reflection process towards the end of the investigation. These notes

were inclusive of the observations of Sufi Muslims as well as devotees from other communities, how the rituals are performed, the mannerisms of these groups, and how they co-exist. This observational method was used to answer the research question pertaining to gender segregation, that is, to see whether or not women are allowed to perform the rituals or whether they are side-lined and marginalized. To better understand and validate the observations, interviews of the participants regarding the same were conducted.

Interviews are formal or informal conversations held between the researcher and participant, addressing important questions about the research to help understand and validate the observations. The data collected through these interviews support the research question by either confirming or disproving the assumptions made. There are various different types of interviews such as structured, semi-structured, and unstructured. Structured interviews are formal in nature, with close ended questions whereas narrative interviews are informal in nature and comprise open ended questions, with no structure to them. The data collected through these narrative interviews can steer in different directions making the analysis difficult. However, semi-structured interviews are a mix of both types of questions. This interview type has a structure - for example, the nature of questions and the order of the questions are pre-decided. Referring to one of the research questions, “How Sufism has created an environment that draws people to the Dargah”; to answer this question, the interview has a structure or pattern of questions incorporating short and long answer questions. For example, a ‘yes or no’ question pertaining to whether or not they practice Sufism is followed by “If yes, how do you think it influences the environment at the Dargah?” – an open-ended question. As there are open-ended questions as well, the participants have an opportunity to elaborate and express themselves clearly. Another advantage of semi-structured interviews is the liberty to improvise and devise questions according to the responses received for further clarifications. Therefore, based on the research question, the main methodological tools were ethnographic observations and semi-structured interviews.

The sample population were the devotees, residents, vendors, and people practicing or preaching Sufism at the Dargah. This population was representative of the population of Ajmer and other Dargahs practicing Sufism. However, the number of interviewees the team got an opportunity to interact with, was not anticipated. Hence, non-probability was adopted for assembling the sample. Under non-probability sampling, purposive and convenience sampling was used. Homogeneous sampling is covered under purposive sampling; the sample is likely to share similar traits and characteristics which was investigated in accordance with the research question pertaining to syncretism. However, convenience sampling was used for interviewing people at the Dargah. It was used because visitors to Ajmer were the easiest to access at the Dargah and were interviewed according to their availability.

Field-work has certain ethical guidelines that are mandatory to abide by. While conducting this research, no physical or mental harm was caused to the participants; they were allowed to withdraw or refrain from answering any question at any point of time. Their values and beliefs were respected by wearing culturally acceptable clothes. The first step before beginning the interview and observation is consent: the consent of the chairman of the Ajmer Sharif Dargah to observe and conduct research was taken, along with consent of participants before interviewing and recording them. None of the questions or the mannerisms offended them. Language barriers were looked into in terms of interaction wherein the effort to understand them is greater than their attempt to understand the team. Hence, in order to make them feel comfortable, the consent forms and interview sheets were prepared in Hindi and English. In addition, the information sheet was also in both Hindi and English, to ensure that people understand the motive of the team for being at the Dargah and what the research concerned. Most importantly, the participants were assured of their confidentiality and anonymity; no information will be used without their consent. Lastly, amongst the researchers, debriefing occurred regularly. The biases both during and after the phase of data collection was kept in mind, to ensure that the data analysis was not hampered by the biases.

The research methodologies and sampling techniques consist of certain limitations. In participant observation, the possibility of researcher and participant biases exists. Researcher bias occurs when the researcher observes and interprets data as per their expectations which can hamper the data analysis. More so, there is a possibility that the participants behave a certain way, negative or positive, if they infer the motive of this research, which could hamper the data analysis.

In order to gain a wider understanding, the team visited two Dargahs in Pune - Shadal Baba Dargah and Babajan Dargah. This helped us draw comparisons and analyze the information gathered at Ajmer Sharif Dargah.

The on-field research was being conducted in two groups - Group A and B. The two locations in which the team was researching largely were inside the dargah and the market lanes close to the dargah. The two groups were conducting research in different ways. Group A and B were simultaneously working in the market and the dargah, with morning and evening shifts. However, the distribution of work among both teams was similar. Both teams had two observers, two interviewers and two students handling the visuals. Only Group A had an extra interviewer and thus an odd-numbered team. The reason the two groups were assigned two observers and two interviewers was in order to increase inter-rater reliability so the probability of researcher bias occurring minimizes. Both teams were using purposive and convenience sampling for collecting data. The management and devotees inside the dargah were chosen with the purpose of understanding their reasons for visiting the dargah and to understand how the spaces inside were being used. The investigation also included how men and women were participating in daily life. The market spaces were being researched with the purpose of understanding how the surroundings around the dargah have evolved in the current times. The team was using convenience sampling because according to the availability and willingness of the devotees and vendors, the interviews were being conducted. In our pre-field data, the team had anticipated using purposive sampling and convenience sampling, however, the on-field research incorporated snowball sampling as well. When we were interviewing Khadims inside the dargah, they

suggested other Khadims for interviews and in a similar fashion our sample snowballed and increased.

The interviews were being recorded in the form of audios and videos. For recording, equipment such as microphones and DSLR cameras were used by the documentary team. They recorded the markets, the interviews and the interiors of the dargah. For the team to shoot inside the dargah, permission was taken by the management inside the dargah. The security inside the dargah was high which interrupted the flow of the shooting and restricted the movements. However, the team was visually recording the aesthetics and important rituals for the documentary.

Group A was conducting interviews inside the dargah more frequently than the market. They were conducting structured interviews on the field. When they were conducting research in the market, they prepared a list of questions, which they asked in a chronological order. They gave the interviewee enough time to finish their answer and moved on to the next question on the list. There was no improvisation or questions prompted from the answers given by the participant. On the other hand, Group B conducted semi-structured interviews. Their approach towards the interview was building a rapport with the interviewee and making them comfortable. They began asking questions, and prompting questions based on the answers of the interviewees. The participants were given time to elaborate on a question and based on their answer, the following questions were asked.

The two observers in each team were using non-participant and participant observation based on the location of the research. Inside the dargah, participant observation was employed. The observers were participating as a part of the crowd of devotees. They sat in different places and observed the people, their behaviors and contribution to the dargah. On the contrary, during research in the market areas, the observers were using non-participant observation during interviews. While the interviews were being conducted, the observers were studying the shop, the vendor, and the environment of the shop. An advantage of participant observation was the platform provided to be a part of the crowd which helped understanding their

behavior and atmosphere better. For example, the team participated in the ziyarat that took place inside the Sanctum Sanctorum, which is the Mazhaar of Khwaja Moinuddin Chishti. This experience gave the team an opportunity to get a sense of the bliss, peace and “sukoon” the devotees receive while praying.

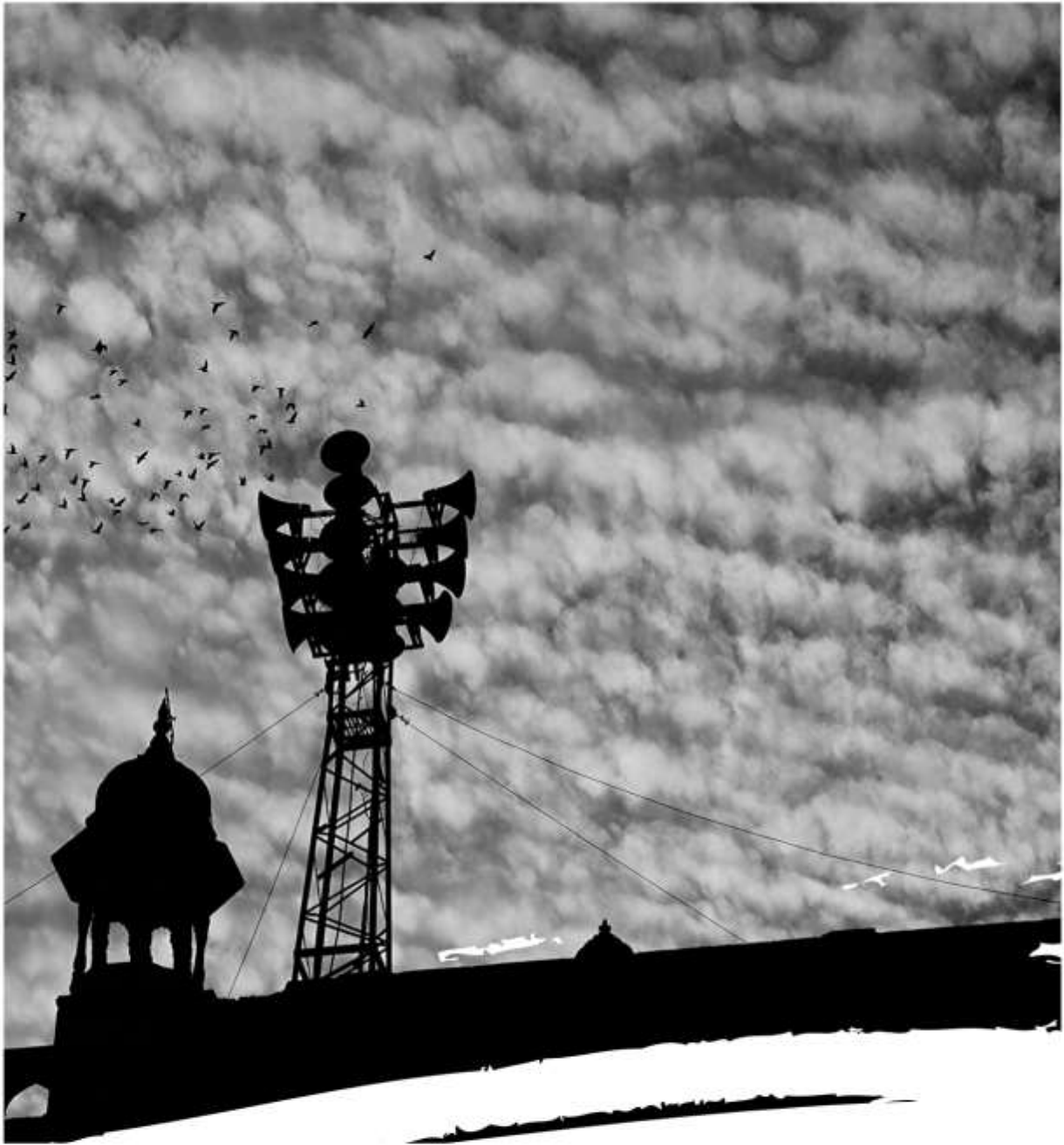
An important part of the observation was the journal maintained by the observation team. These observations were discussed during the debriefing session that took place every night after the on-field work. The two teams that were divided into morning and evening timings met at night and shared their notes. The interviews, the observations and the experiences of both teams were being discussed and put on a document. The debriefing session was playing an important role in keeping the group on the same page and eliminating any researcher bias during the interviews and observations that may have occurred.

The data collected from interviews was analyzed using Narrative Analysis. The interviews comprise personal experiences and stories of the participants based on their views, beliefs and visits to the dargah. The content of the interview was largely stories revealing their ideologies of syncretism, their reasons behind visiting the dargah, the role of women and men in the traditions inside the dargah and how the surroundings were changing in the current times. The analysis would include narrowing down of the content in the interview and analyzing the relevant information from their stories.

1.4.1. Limitations:

There were certain limitations in the study conducted. As the participants guessed the aim of this research, some vendors provided diplomatic answers which were not entirely honest. More so, their discomfort in front of the camera, even after their consent, resulted in partially honest answers only. One of the limitations faced by the team in data collection tools was that due to the limited timespan of the research, the sample size could only be a small percentage of the population. This sample size of the population was not representative of the entire population of Ajmer.

One of the limitations faced with data collection tools was that due to the limited timespan of our research, our sample size could only be a small percentage of the population. In order to overcome this, purposive sampling was employed with the aim that the people we interviewed although not 100% representative of the population, were fairly typical of the people that come to the dargah. The questions that were designed, were tailored according to the different communities and people that are involved with the dargah in any capacity.



LITERATURE REVIEW

CHAPTER 2

2.1. History of Sufism:

Sufism is a movement whose devotees try to discover divine truth and love through direct experiences with God. Sufism emerged in the eighth-ninth century C.E. as an off-shoot of the dominant sects of Sunni and Shia Islam. The word Sufi refers to one who wears a garment of wool or 'suf'; the ascetics of Kufa were called al-Sufiya as a result. It was not long before such garments became a symbol of the Sufis of Iran, of the rejection of worldly things. Thus, this term began to be used to refer to Muslim mystics. Sufi could also have been derived from the 'ahl-e-suffa' which means "The People of the Bench": a group of early Muslims living in the first mosque in Medina. (Baranwal et. al, n.d.)

It is said that Sufism emerged from near a place called Basra in Iraq. This religion had begun as a way 'to reach the divine'. Prophet Mohammed is referred to as the divine and the schools of Sufism 'consider the Prophet as the messenger of God'. 'This is one reason why Sufi is considered to have branched from Islam'. There is no mention of it in ancient Islamic scriptures. It can be said, according to some scholars, 'Sufism is the evolution of Islam in a more spiritual and mystic direction'. (Baranwal et. al, n.d.)

Sufis have generally taken promises of poverty and chastity. Sufism takes a shot at focusing on serious balance that enables both psychological and spiritual pieces of information. A lost self-connects with a complete target of a powerful relationship with God. The Sufi development comprises intimate requests in which pioneers train and educate on the preeminence of Sufism's philosophical standards and ceremonial practices. Such customs and traditions incorporate composition of devotional verse and songs; Sufis have composed the renowned and beautiful writing of the Islamic world. Sufis take part in an assortment of ceremonial practices expected to assist them with acknowledging communion with God, for example, unmistakable types of custom petition (Zikr truly signifies "recognition"), including the recitation of God's names, just as real ceremonies, for example, those rehearsed by the purported "Spinning Dervishes," a Turkish Sufi request that

rehearses reflection and consideration of God through turning. (Baranwal et. al, n.d.)

Various early Muslims looked for manners by which to convey their rigorous practice past the recognition of the law or daily ceremonies expected everything being equal. These early Muslims drew from the bottomless well of Near Eastern conventions, including Judaism and Christianity, to create practices and methods of reasoning that focused on developing their spirits. In the Near East, there was an established and long custom of austerity and meditative practices fixated on abstention from over the top nourishment, an accentuation on a petition, and the development of a coordinated method of dedication. Sufism has adhered to the mainstream practices of Islamic guidelines and beliefs, where it has enhanced the rules and practices with mindfulness to developing an adoration for God, exemplified by additional supplications, prayers, poems, dance, and songs devoted to that topic. (Baranwal et. al, n.d.)

There is a lot of history of Sufism “before the subsequent institutionalization of Sufi teachings into devotional orders (*tariqat*)” during the early Middle Ages. (Baranwal et. al, n.d.)

A *tariqa* is a path or Sufi school based on the teachings and practice of a sheikh or master. It can also be defined as a ‘confraternity’. It represents a spiritual method for the practice of Islam. (Baranwal et. al, n.d.)

In the Middle Ages, many people began to consider themselves as followers of Sufism and of a particular teacher; a sheikh is a link to a prophetic past. He represents “the authority of the past and the power to affect the present through his charisma and leadership”.

Tariqa is also a synonym for *silsila*, “a chain of authority and learning”

Tariqas became more organized and centered around a person and practice. At times, though it was not required, disciples would live communally. Some of the elements of Sufi life include ‘*zikr*’ and group reciting sessions generally called gatherings or “*majalis*”. Another important element is the *sama* or spiritual hearing

where poetry is recited. The members of a tariqa would meet in a designated building- “*zawiya*” - where such activities would take place. (Baranwal et. al, n.d.)

Sufism, by the 13th century, became increasingly present in urban settings. The 13th and 14th centuries saw the evolution of the Chishti tariqa into a significant and uniquely South Asian one, especially in the Indian Subcontinent. Amidst various Sufi groups established in northern India, the Chishti tariqa became the most distinguished order from the 13th through the 16th century. This is mainly thought to be due to the fact that the prominent Chishti saints were based in Delhi, the seat of political power at the time, especially in the 14th century. The Sultans of Malwa played a very important role in “creating the aura of importance around the grave of Moinuddin Chishti.” Before the Malwas the shrine of Moinuddin Chishti was very humble; however, it was the Sultan of Malwa who provided the shrine with a mosque and a (large) entrance gate in the mid-15th century (Cort et. al, 2007).

Texts surviving from that era also suggest how a pilgrimage to Ajmer to the shrine of Moinuddin Chishti could be an alternative to a pilgrimage to the Hajj, indicating just how prominent the shrine (and mosque) was. Because Akbar as a child had been exposed to qawaalis (holy songs devoted to adoration of God) about Moinuddin Chishti, he developed an interest in Sufism and took upon himself a seventeen-year long devotion to Moinuddin Chishti’s shrine in Ajmer specifically, but also to the Chishti order in general. This brought in the evolution of a new form of religion, one that was considered unorthodox, into India. (Cort et. al, 2007)

2.2. Moinuddin Chishti and His Teachings:

Moinuddin Chishti is one of the most known historical figures in Islamic Culture with respect to spirituality and mysticism. Chishti was born in 1141-42 CE in Sijistan (which is now known as Sistan), Iran. He received ‘khilafat’, which is the primary authority with respect to spirituality which was passed from Sheikh Usman Harawani. After receiving khilafat, Chishti went on a Hajj, which is an Islamic pilgrimage to Mecca, as well as Medina. Many Muslims are required to go on this pilgrimage at least once in their lives. While Chishti was praying in a

mosque in Medina, he sensed the prophet was directing him to go visit Ajmer, a city in, at the time, Hindustan. Despite not knowing where Ajmer was, Chishti decided to go ahead with this instinct. Through Baghdad and Herat, he reached Lahore, from where he went to Delhi, and finally reached Ajmer. During this time, Prithviraj Chauhan was defeated by Muizzuddin Muhammad bin Sam of Ghor, and the latter was ruling over Delhi. Moinuddin Chishti decided to live in Ajmer and began preaching in the city. His discussion and beliefs have many spiritual components that drew the local people as well as kings and nobles toward him. (Safvi, 2019)

He is the founder of the Chishti order, also known as the Chishti Silsila, or Tariqa, of Sufism in India.

He was buried in the Chishti Dargah, which is visited by people all around the world who come together to celebrate the man he was. The Dargah itself is a very large establishment which consists of many other tombs, gates, residences, langars, and many other components. (Safvi, 2019)

The achievement of a silsila, to a great extent, relies on the Sheik's capacity to alter and adjust in the psychological and political milieu of the individuals of a specific locale. The purpose of the Chishti accomplishment in the nation was the equivalent. They comprehended the Indian condition and the strict yearnings of the individuals. They embraced numerous Hindu traditions and Buddhist practices like bowing before the Sheik, introducing water to the guests, flowing *zanbil*, shaving the head of new participants to the spiritualist circle, tryout parties (Sama), the *chillah-I-makus* (Nizami, 1978:178). It might be brought up that due to these neighborhood adjustments, the intrigue of the Chishti's in a non-Muslim condition was colossal. The Chishti Order is known for its accentuation on love, tolerance, and transparency.

All of Khwaja Moinuddin Chishti's teachings were translated and given in English, and 12 volumes of his talks on themes identified in a profound way are as yet accessible from American, European, and Indian sources. Starts of his type of Sufi practice currently number in the few thousand everywhere throughout the world.

A segment of Sufis under Chishtiya's request was in philosophical agreement with the Bhakti tradition, and utilized even Hindi, Punjabi, and Urdu language for Islamic reverential melodies. Nonetheless, the conventional Ulama with imperial help constrained the Sufis to raise the trademark of "back to Shariat".

A great extent of the spread of Sufism was built on the unique Pir-Murid (teacher-student) relation. As the leader of the silsila, a Pir used to send his khalifas to different areas, which were known as the wilayats. These khalifas, thus, delegated the subordinate khalifas to *kasbahs* and the urban regions, with a distinction that occasionally the second or third stage khalifa may come back to the spot of his focal power or the Pir (leader of the silsila). Here the dissemination or the development isn't based on the physical qualities of that zone; however, the profound impact or fascination of the Pir towards that specific region (Nizami, 1978:175). In any case, at times, it might likewise be discovered that the circulation of Dargahs is focused around the Dargahs of peerless Sufis, for example, various Khwaja Gharib Nawaz's followers are covered in Ajmer region.

Sufism practices sulh-e-kul (Peace to all) to encourage an understanding between Muslims and non- Muslims.

2.3. Relation to Mughal rulers:

Dargah of Khwaja Muinuddin Chishti at Ajmer is the most loved dargah in Indian subcontinent. Hundreds of devotees for the most part Muslims and Hindus crowd each year at the hour of the urs to the Dargah. Many come here for satisfying their promises after the award of their 'wish', or *mannat*, though others go to the Dargah for profound comfort. The Dargah has been a wellspring of alleviation for not just poor people, but also promoted 'harmony' between political elites and the majority. Mohammad Tughlaq was the main ruler whose visit in A.D. 1325 to the Dargah was recorded by Isami in the same year. The Khaljis of Mandu controlled Ajmer for an impressive time and gave broad support to the Dargah and raised a fantastic door, Buland Darwaza and a mosque at the complex. He additionally says that the Dargah directed a great number of guests and blessings to the *mujawirs* from Hindus too. When Akbar made his first visit to the dargah, alongside the customs

of the Chishti spiritualist conventions, the Dargah had developed as a mainstream pilgrimage spot. The site was so venerated that despite the threats, the forces would not obstruct any visits to it. In the event that Abul Fazl was trusted, Akbar's first visit to the altar was because of its fame among the individuals (Khan, 2010).

Akbar was the first Mughal ruler to visit the Dargah in A.D. 1562 where he gave presents and charities to the individuals who joined with the Dargah. After the fall of Chittor [A.D. 1568] he again visited the Dargah, this time by walking to satisfy his promise which he had made before and again expanded his 'favours' to the orderlies of the dargah. Chishti silsila was respected in India among Muslims and Hindus. Significance of the Dargah was for otherworldly addition to Akbar as well as aided in encouraging the agreeableness of the Mughal rule in India. Dargah of Khwaja Moinuddin Chishti was respected equally by the Hindus and Muslims from the hour of its commencement. It can be argued that the region was well-known for the main Brahma sanctuary at Pushkar for Hindus when Moinuddin Chishti picked the spot for his khanqah. Taking a look at the practices and belief systems of Chishtiya request of Sufism it very well may be said that Khwaja Moinuddin Chishti profited by picking a spot which was at that point a focal point of journey for the Hindus (Vishwakarma, 2017).

Akbar was an avid supporter and patron of architecture, as were the sultans before him, and he believed strongly in the Islamic notion "that architecture was the direct visual reflection of any dynamic ruler's authority". Following the same ideology, Shah Jahan, Akbar's grandson, also commissioned his own structure to be erected at the Ajmer Sharif Dargah, known as the Shahjahani Gate (pg 131). Paintings commissioned in Akbar's reign also depict him in white, the color of Chishti shrines, thus also linking him with the shrine of Moinuddin Chishti; in other words, proclaiming Akbar being as great a saint as Moinuddin Chishti (Cort et. al, 2007).

Akbar was said to be a seeker of the truth and was portrayed as someone seeking enlightenment. Dedicating himself to the Dargah and to the Chishti silsilah, he portrayed support of both the Hindu and the Muslim practices and showed that he

was a benevolent leader. By taking control of the Dargah, he established control over Ajmer politically and religiously. Akbar was the first Mughal ruler to visit the Dargah. This dargah played an important role in developing the political scenario in Ajmer by giving Akbar an image of being a righteous and just ruler. Associating himself with a strict substance that permitted as well as a supported syncretism between the Hindus and Muslims permitted him to take political activities that didn't get restricted by both of the networks as he was destroying them the name of Moinuddin Chishti who was venerated by the two Hindus and Muslims. Due to Akbar's acceptance of the Dargah and everything Sufism stands for, the Dargah got immensely popularized and this increased the income of the Dargah. This also led to clashes within the Dargah to attain a power position which was the spiritual and temporal head of the Dargah. This led the fighting members to turn to Akbar to guide them through this which gave him the power to remove and elect religious authorities in the Dargah. Akbar contributed to the wealth and development of the Dargah.

The importance of the Dargah was not only for spiritual gain to Akbar, but it also helped in facilitating the acceptability of the Mughal rule in India. Akbar even changed his war cry from "Allahu Akbar," (meaning, 'God is the Greatest') which had been a war cry of Muslims throughout the world, to "Ya Mu 'in" (meaning, 'Oh Khwaja', where he asked for the blessing of Khwaja Moinuddin Chishti). The display of devotion to the Dargah of Ajmer complied with the view of the love of 'ordinary man' in the Dargah since the emperor's spiritual abilities were much higher, and he was not a mere 'formalist' who considered the worship of God in its external form. The Dargah of Ajmer commanded a good deal of devotion to the general masses. It drew a number of pilgrims who poured nazr (gifts) for the Dargah, and this increased many folds with the royal patronage, which became a source of disputes between the functionaries of the Dargah. The controversy mainly arose between the superintendent and the attendants of the Dargah. The superintendent claimed to be a descendant of Khwaja Moinuddin Chishti and was the spiritual and temporal head of the Dargah affairs. During the Akbar's visit to the Dargah in A.D. 1750, a group of khadim represented before the emperor that

the superintendent of the Dargah had said falsehood of his descent and misappropriated all the funds coming to the Dargah. After dismissing Shaikh Husain from his position, an inquiry was ordered, and he was imprisoned and sent to Bhakkar. By this act, Akbar not only assumed complete charge of the Dargah in his hands but made a statement that he was above any authority and could even punish a well-established spiritual figure (Khan, 2010).

These divine offerings have still been seen in the Dargah, even after 2 and a half centuries. It is maintained by the Chishti Foundation and treated with utmost respect, such that it has also become a factor attracting tourists to its understanding.

2.4. Women in Sufism:

The presence of women in Sufism is one that can be traced back through the centuries. Their involvement consisted not just in the capacity of them being Sufis themselves but also of them supporting Sufi saints by helping them as benefactresses, spreading stories of their miraculous deeds, etc. While there have been negative assertions about women in some early ascetic Sufi accounts, for the most part Sufism is considered as a progressive mystical discipline that accepts those who are devoted regardless of their gender. There have been works dated as early as the 10th century which contain accounts of numerous Sufi female saints, thus showing that their presence even if not as evident has been there very early on. Rather than being written by them, the words of these female saints have been chronicled through others' accounts or through poems that include their sayings. There are however few works written by Sufi women such as *Risala-i Sahibiyya*, written by Jahan-ara, (also known as Fatimah), daughter of Shah Jahan (Helminski, 2003). There are also various accounts of Sufi saints' encounters with women that show us how women also influenced them in their mystical journeys. Many of these women who were related to Sufi saints went on to become mystical figures themselves.

Despite it being more difficult and not so common, there were female Sufis that also undertook the tradition of penitence ("a sort of wandering aimed at acquiring

knowledge, which certain masters saw as an essential step on the spiritual path”). Women such as Umm alFaḍl travelled far and wide both collecting knowledge and distributing it, with great masters coming to listen to her in Nishapur. (Thibon, n.d.)

Rābi‘a al-‘Adawiyya, also known as Rabia Basri, was the first female Sufi saint and is also widely regarded as one of the first Sufi mystics and one of the greatest mystical figures of Islam. It is said that she was the “first person to clearly express the relationship with the divine in a language called *Sufic*, by referring to God as beloved.” (Helminski, 2003) Despite them being largely overlooked, there have been many women who served as *pirs* (spiritual masters) by providing spiritual guidance, even if they were not officially ordained to do so – even though there was opposition to them being designated as a *pir*, women still performed the roles assigned to such a position. However, there were certain conditions – they had to live up to cultural norms of respectability and not challenge men’s authority, and had to work mostly in private (Pemberton, 2006).

In certain communities such as the Bektashis, “women have always been integrated with men in ceremonies, many women have continued the tradition of composing sacred songs (*illahis*).” In countries around the world such as Turkey and Sudan, women have contributed to the order in various ways such as healing arts, and poems and songs (Helminski, 2003). The Mevlevi order, a Sufi order that is based on the renowned Sufi saint and poet Rumi that has also become popular in the west recently is one in which both men and women are allowed to participate in all aspects. Under Rumi “women were also encouraged to participate in *sema*, the musical whirling ceremony of the Mevlevis.” The feminine and qualities associated with the feminine are often praised in Sufi texts, and rather than shunning family and relationships they are recognized as being conducive with spiritual pursuits. In the end, both men and women are considered equal in that what matters the most is one’s capacity to love and their efforts to connect with God (Helminski, 2003).

Princess Jahan Ara, who was inducted into the Qadiriya order contributed a lot to the Garib Nawaz dargah both monetarily and otherwise. She added elements to the dargah such as the white-pillared porch which is today known as the Begumi Dalan, and wrote a biography of Khwaja Moinuddin Chishti (Asher, 1992).

2.5. Sufism - A Syncretic Tradition:

Syncretism is defined as “the combination of different forms of belief or practice” (Merriam-Webster, 2020), and the term is most often used in the context of religious syncretism. Some scholars have theorized that it comes to Indian academia regarding syncretism, rather than a general area of interest, it has been mentioned only in relation to minority religions, especially Islam (Fazalbhoy, 1997). Noted scholar Appadurai (as cited in Fazalbhoy, 1997) labels syncretism as a “gatekeeping concept” – i.e., ideas that looked to describe “the quintessential and dominant questions of interest in (a) region”. Such concepts can also “seem to drive out other ways of conceiving society”.

This idea is also sort of referred to in a talk by Professor Metcalf, who is an eminent academic specializing in South Asian history. She talks about how in papers elements in Islam are seen as more local and put in contrast with more traditional Islamic theological concepts. She says that there is apprehension amongst Indian scholars when it comes to covering Islam, and this contrasting of syncretic practices hints at Islam as having a “non-Indian”, negative image (Metcalf, 2005). In studies regarding syncretism in India, there were works written on the impact of Hinduism on Islam, but not vice-versa. Thus, the subject of syncretism it seems “is a problem of the minority religions” (Fazalbhoy, 1997). This view however may be contended by looking at work about syncretic traditions born from Hinduism such as the Bhakti movement.

Now let us look at why Sufism is considered to be an important syncretic tradition in India. From time immemorial, the Sufi movement and community have always been seen as working towards “securing unity and peaceful co-existence” amongst all sections of society by emphasizing upon concepts such as spiritual knowledge

and the belief that one attains the truth “through prayer and meditation” and by connecting with the divine above all else (Pandey, 2017).

Numerous scholars working on syncretism have studied Sufis and Sufi shrines as they are considered “the critical site of syncretism and assimilation.” Throughout the country, one can find traces of Sufis intermingling and drawing inspiration from other communities and their cultures. One example of this is Bijapur’s ruler, Ibrahim Adil Shah II, who took up wearing the Rudraksha necklace and sang songs that praised “Saraswati, the Prophet Muhammad, and the Sufi saint Gesudaraz of Gulbarga” (Metcalf, 2005).

It is however a misconception that Sufi practices were created exclusively due to influences from Hinduism and to co-exist with them – rather, they were sticking to their traditions from the past. When it comes to the 19th century, “much of colonial-period Islamic reform is intra-Muslim” (Metcalf, 2005).

Many have written about the similarities in the Bhakti and Sufi movements, both of which are considered syncretic traditions. They are both mystic traditions, began as a response to the rigid and orthodox ideologies in Hinduism and Islam and unlike them were also inclusive of all and spoke to the masses (Pandey, 2017). There are many parallels that can also be found in their practices – the devotional singing of the Bhaktas and the Qawwali tradition of the Sufis, and the devotional Bhakti dances along with the Dervish dance tradition. The concept of the divine light – known as Noor-e-ilahi in Sufism, can be found across all religions. It is

“what is said to be ‘many splendored light of the Atman’, what the bible calls a ‘light that lighteth every man that cometh into the world’, what the Sikhs call the ‘Ek Onkar’ and what the seers of the Upanishads say: I have seen that light shining like a thousand suns beyond the darkness.” (Pandey, 2017)

In fact, the Sufi and Bhakti movements were so intertwined that there were Sadgurus and Pirs who had both Hindu and Muslim followers, and neither forced any of them to convert. (Lokhandwalla as cited in Pandey, 2017) Similarly, there

have been accounts of Muslim poets in the Bhakti movement, thus showing us that these traditions transcended barriers such as religion.

There are also connections between Sufism and Sikhism, as Sikhism's inception itself was in the combination of various elements and teachings of various religions. Shaikh Fariddudin Ganj-i-Shankar (also known as Baba Farid), a Sufi saint based in Punjab wrote poems in various regional languages and dialects many of which are included in the holy book of the Sikhs, the Guru Grant Sahib. It is said that "Baba Farid adopted Punjabi, and vice versa, the Sikhs adopted Persian" (Pandey, 2017).

It is interesting to note that saints who are related to curing illnesses and various physical problems are visited by devotees of all faiths. One such example is that of the Gujarati Rifa'i tomb whose devotees are mainly Hindus. But they do not partake in any of the rituals or engage in Sufi discourse, and refer to the shrine as a Samadhi – "a Hindu saint in meditation" rather than a Dargah, therefore showing that their purposes for visiting are not out of real devotion but rather only for the curing power of the saint (Metcalf, 2005).

Moinuddin Chishti, the patron saint of the Ajmer Sharif Dargah is considered to be an important figure in the spreading of syncretism amongst different communities in the region of Ajmer. Chishti worked hard towards tackling problems such as caste inequality and creating harmony amongst Hindus and Muslims (Burman, 1996). Burman writes about the Husaini Brahmins, a Hindu community in the region who can be taken as an excellent example:

"They considered Muinuddin Chisti as a titular divinity. They honored Mohammad as one of the Hindu avatars, fasted like Muslims during the Ramjan and also buried their dead. They wore Brahminical caste-marks on their forehead but accepted alms from the Muslims alone."

In villages close to Ajmer, there is a complete blurring of religious lines and merging of practices as "Muslims celebrate all the Hindu festivals" and even

traditions such as the 'phera' during marriage, and Hindus "eat only 'halal' meat and bury their dead" (Burman, 1996).

A reading of Burman's paper reveals that religious syncretism can be seen through the ages all throughout the country from Kashmir to the tip of the south, and that Sufis have by and large played an extremely important role in the establishment of this (Burman, 1996).



INSIDE THE DARGAH

CHAPTER 3

3.1. Introduction:

Through our interactions with the khadims and the devotees in and around the dargah, the basic meaning of Sufism was the same for all; being respectful, loving all and never wishing ill upon others. These were some of the core values that they embodied. The devotees spoke about how having goodness and purity in one's heart is enough for god to fulfill whatever it is that they desire. They also spoke about the positivity that radiates when one comes to the dargah, and how it is a place where all the negative energy is pushed out, leaving behind peace and happiness. As said by Salman Chishti, "Khayalon ka khayal rakhna", this encapsulates the innate simplicity of Sufism. This simplicity could be seen in Khwaja Moinuddin Chishti's teachings then, and it can be seen in the mindset of the devotees now.

For the followers of Sufism, it is quite clear, all they need to do is to have that direct connection with their Khwaja. The devotees spoke about how by trusting Khwaja and by following his teachings, there will always be a solution to the problem. At the end of each interview, we asked if they have ever left empty-handed, the devotees always replied in the negative. Each one of the devotees believed that they have been called to the Dargah for a reason and they have never left without feeling satisfied; "Jo bhi Khwaja ke darbar me aate hai, wo kabhi khali haath nahi jaate hai!"

3.2. STRUCTURE AND ENVIRONMENT:

3.2.1. Map of the Dargah:

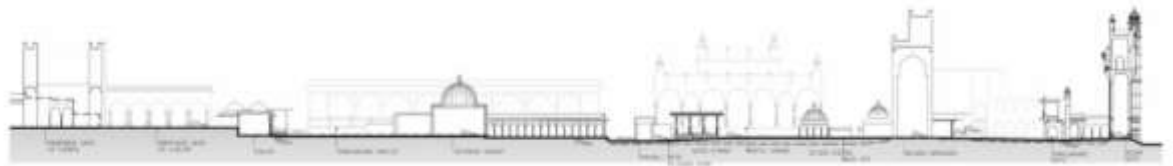
Inside the Nizam gate, we see two rows of vendors on either side of the space. This space leads to the Shah Jahani gate and the Buland Darwaza. In between the two, there is a silver chandelier gifted by the Golden Temple committee. These three gates constitute Gate one or the main gate to the dargah. Upon entering from Gate one we first see the badi degh (big cauldron) on the right-hand side and the chotti degh (small cauldron) on the left-hand side, as we move ahead and enter through the opening/gate on the left we see the Akbari mosque where we see people

counting date seeds. As we move past the Akbari masjid, we see some more vendors selling things similar to the ones outside. Then upon turning to the right, we enter the space of the Mazhaar or the actual resting space of Mouiniddin Chishti. In front of the Mazhaar is an open space where people often sit down for meditation or for qawaalis. Towards the right of the Mazhaar is Bibi Nallam which is an area for women to do Namaz every day. Behind the dargah is the lane (between Shah Jahani Mosque and Mazhaar) where we observed some people in trance and where people tie their threads. Most of these threads are tied onto the Jannati Darwaza which is on the back end of the Mazhaar. After this lane we see the chilla(Baba farid chilla). Next to the lane is the Shah Jahani mosque, perpendicular to which is another open area where we saw the fireworks on the day of Jumma.

In the main area next to the two deghs is a tank filled with water which is used by the devotees to wash up. This is called the Victoria Tank(Hauz) and was constructed by the British government in honor of Queen Victoria's visit to India.

Near the Shah Jahan Masjid is another water monument called the Jahalra which was once the main source of water for the Dargah. Today also it's used for all of the rituals inside the Dargah.

Between the badi degh and the Victoria tank (hauz), is the Mehfil-e-sama Mehfil khana.



Blueprint of the Dargah: Vision Document. (Image 1)

3.2.2. The Khadims:

Khadims serve the purpose of ensuring that the message that the Khwaja intended to send across is clearly and effectively communicated to the devotees. They can be compared to priests in Hindu temples. They are there to ensure that no one is left out or discriminated against. They help the devotees complete rituals inside the Mazhaar as devotees can't move past the railing surrounding the shrine. So, the Khadims chant prayers and place flowers and other offerings to the Khwaja by the shrine. They sit with troubled devotees and offer advice and blessings. They also bless inanimate objects like the red threads or the black tahveez (fabric locket). They are members of the extended Chishti Family and their purpose is to ensure the wellbeing of the Dargah and everyone inside it. They facilitate all rituals and give information and help to anyone and everyone inside the Dargah. The Khadims also are a part of the Chishti Foundation. It is to be noted that like other religious authorities, the Khadims are all men.

3.2.3. Security:

The security at the dargah is unbending. The rules at the Dargah regarding cameras and video shooting are very strict. There are five gates at the Dargah for entering and exiting. Every gate has very strict security that ensures no cameras are taken inside, and any item that seems suspicious is asked to be left behind. The police assigned at every gate comes from the Police Thana Dargah. Since the Ajmer Dargah bombing, the security increased for the safety of the Dargah and the devotees inside.

The police take rounds inside the Dargah as well to ensure no illegal activities take place; compromising the integrity of the Dargah. Thefts such as stealing take place inside as pick-pocketers swiftly take valuable items such as phones, watches and wallets. A similar incident happened with our faculty mentor. While she was distracted, a pick pocketer stole her phone without her knowledge, while she was surrounded by most of her students, without anybody noticing the theft. As these incidents are common and unfortunately frequent, the management has put up a list of pickpockets on the wall with their pictures to spread caution and awareness.

The Dargah welcomes everyone, and cannot refrain people from visiting. Therefore, incidents like these cannot be avoided entirely. This is why the security has increased and cautions such as “take care of your belongings” are put up on the walls to spread awareness. After they close the Dargah doors, and everyone leaves, there is another security check that occurs at one in the morning to ensure that the dargah is safe and there are no trespassers.

Besides the literal security at the Dargah, it also serves as a figurative security blanket for individuals who are lost or in search of a home. Some cases require the help of police when girls fight at home, run away and begin living at the Dargah. The police have to forcefully evacuate the women as they refuse to leave. After incidents requiring female security occurred, the management hired several female securities to avoid controversial and uncomfortable encounters.

3.2.4. Qawaali:

Qawaali is a Muslim devotional song tradition associated with Sufis. In the Dargah, the qawaalis take place all day long. There is a ten to fifteen-minute gap between the two sets, only when the whole group of singers is changing. The important aspect of this devotional singing is the commitment and religious zeal they possess while praying to the shrine. An important observation about the singers suggests that only males participate in singing qawaali, women do not. In the case of family qawaals, they work collaboratively and all members are well equipped with every instrument and the songs. All family members circulate between playing and singing. The children of the families also participate in singing and playing the instruments. All the sets last from 15-30 minutes. The qawaals in the background who play the instruments remain the same, however, the main singers keep changing and pray with their individual sets of qawaali. In the case of families, the whole set of people change. An interesting fact about the whole set of singers is the difference in their contribution to the qawaali. All singers contribute a different pitch to the qawaali. No two singers will sing at the same scale or key unless they are singing the chorus. One fun fact about the qawaalis is that their melodies are used for Bollywood songs such as “mere piya ghar aaye” and “bhar do jholi meri”.

The qawaals have certain rules while singing. The devotees sitting around the singers and praying with them are not allowed to contribute to the music or melodies in any way. There were certain instances where the devotees were asked not to clap along. Only the qawaals are allowed to sing the devotional song or add melody to it. This is seen as disrespecting the act of praying to the shrine in the form of a song. According to the devotees, singing clapping along to the qawaali indicates that they are treating qawaali as an entertainment song and not as a prayer. Qawaali is the devotion of love known as ibadat for Khwaja. In addition to that, the qawaals sing directly to the shrine also known as Sanctum Santorum. No one is allowed to block the view of the qawaals while they pray to face the shrine directly; the devotees are asked to move away and refrain from facing the back towards the shrine or in front of the qawaals.

Qawaali took place throughout the day. However, the locations differed. There were two locations at which the qawaali was set up - in front of Mazhaar from two different sides. as the qawaals pray directly to the shrines, the qawaali was set up right outside the two shrines wherein people would sit and pray alongside the qawaals.

3.2.5. The Mazhaar and its Rituals:

Inside the Dargah, the spiritual caretaker and head of the Chishti foundation, Haji Syed Salman Chishti, led the group through the Dargah and explained locations in the Dargah along with their significance. Salman Chishti also performed rituals which we were a part of, which helped us understand the rituals and their symbolisms. The rituals took place inside the Mazhaar, which is the tomb of Khwaja Mounidin Chishti. Here devotees enter with the offerings. Salman Chishti himself conducted the rituals for us. The procedure of the rituals is known as Ziyarath. First the offerings are taken and some of the flowers offered are given back to the devotees following the recitation of some prayers. These flowers are offered to the tomb by the devotees who throw the flowers. Following this the chaddar, a cloth, is put over the tomb and more Urdu prayers are recited after which the chaddar is removed and held over the devotees' head. If the devotees are

in a group everyone is asked to stand under the chaddar. Once the devotees are under the chaddar, more prayers are recited. Ayyats from the Quran are also recited while under the Quran. Once the recitation ends, devotees are allowed to stand under the chaddar in silence and ask for what they desire from the Khwaja, following which the chaddar is removed. Following the removal devotees are given a rose petal each, from their offerings, to eat. Once the petal has been eaten, devotees are given a thread to symbolise the mannat which is tied to the shrine. This is said to ensure that the desires of the devotees are fulfilled. Before leaving the shrine, devotees bow down and touch their heads to the step of the shrine as a mark of respect. While in the shrine it was observed that there were several devotees who were in deep prayer with some crying in devotion. While we were under the chaddar, Salman Chishti prayed for our education and future as we were students.



Devotees with their offerings in front of Victoria Hauz (Image 2)

Once we left Mounidin Chishti's shrine, we were led to his daughter's mazhaar, Bibi Hafiza Jamal where her significance was explained. She was a Hafiz, who is a person born knowing the Quran by heart. Here the red thread was tied onto the hands of the devotees while excerpts from the Quran were recited. Devotees also touched their head to the steps of the shrine. It was observed that the people coming in to offer their prayers were of other religions apart from Sufism. It was observed

that some people coming in to offer in their prayers were there as tourists who wanted to experience the rituals of the Dargah. Some people in the Dargah were there to pray despite their different faith. This was mentioned by Salman Chishti, who emphasized on the syncretic aspect of Sufism which welcomed all faiths into the dargah.

3.2.6. A Divine Space:

The Dargah is a beautiful and a very emotionally stimulating space where we experienced some really positive things. Being under the chaddar during the first ritual we performed in the Dargah was a very intense but positive experience. Collectively, all of us felt at peace and felt very calm and like we were right where we were supposed to be. All of us felt like the sudden change of topics and all the twists and turns we faced all lead us to the Dargah as a Bulava had come our way. It was a beautiful feeling and all of us felt part of something beautiful and so much bigger than us. After this experience we were thrilled to be talking to the devotees and experiencing everything the Dargah had to offer. So many of the devotees we spoke to inside the Dargah spoke about their immense love for Khwaja Mouinnudin Chishti. They spoke about their Bulavas and how they believe with all their heart that anything they ask for in the Dargah will be granted as long as they do it with a pure heart and good intentions. The dedication and love all of them had for the Khwaja moved us. The entire space of the Dargah gave off such a positive feeling.

The mosques inside this mesmerizing place have their own energy. It was as if each brick used in constructing everything inside the Dargah had its own voice, its own beauty. The Shah Jahani Masjid, made out of white marble, radiated a kind of positivity and calm that no other place in the Dargah did. This area was used by devotees for namaz and meditation and just quiet conversations with friends and family. Being in the general area of the Masjid made us feel calmer and more at peace.

3.2.7. A Facade?:

Along with some of the aforementioned positive spaces we came across some negative spaces too. Shoes inside the dargah weren't allowed, hence, we kept our shoes with the vendors selling flowers and other ritual items like chaddar and mauli. Our team encountered a bad experience with the vendors where they tried to blackmail us into paying them. Taking money for storing our shoes is not allowed as it is considered a service - however, when we refused to buy flowers in exchange for keeping our shoes, they refused to be responsible for taking care of our shoes. We were expected to buy things from their shop to ensure the safety of our shoes. This experience really put us in a foul mood and made us all extremely uncomfortable. This interaction made a very beautiful act of performing rituals to honor the teachings of the Khwaja for oneself feel like more of a business.

Another incident occurred inside the Dargah with the Khadims. One evening, the group was approached by one Khadim who forcefully made the group sit down and aggressively insisted the group give them money to pay respect to the shrine. He pretended to pray and perform a ritual; pretended to write our names and aggressively demanded money. This incident made the team realize that all the beautiful things that Salman Chishti exclaimed, weren't all completely followed in the Dargah. Money was more important than the feelings involved. This disappointment was beyond belief as this behavior was unexpected from a priest of a religion that preaches kindness, compassion and following what one feels is right. The entire ritual and every aspect of it seemed to have become a business transaction rather than the spiritually moving experience that it was supposed to be.

During the ziyarat, the way the money was taken by the khadim made some girls in the group even feel physically uncomfortable which shouldn't have happened at all considering that the entire practice of Sufism preaches about gender equality. A few of the vendors outside the Dargah seemed to hold negative feelings towards the Dargah. When we spoke to them, they expressed that during the building of the Dargah, several communities were displaced to somewhere outside pre-

independence Ajmer. More so, they added supporting views regarding the money-making business inside the Dargah.

3.2.8. Jumma ki Raat:

Jumma, the Urdu word for Friday, is considered to be an auspicious day in Islam. It begins the evening before, at sunset, that is, on Thursday evening and it is called Jumme-raat. Jumme-raat is also known as “Barkat ka din”. According to one of our interviewees, on this auspicious day, the souls of the dead return to their families. The souls cross the *barzakh*, which is a veil between the two worlds of the living and the dead. They visit their families for blessings in different forms. If their families have fed the poor in the name of their deceased loved one, the soul will obtain the blessings and return back to their world. Some families also visit the graveyard to pay their respects and blessings. They recite “Quran ki ayat” or lines from the Quran. After reading the Quran, the food that the families serve reaches the soul of the dead, directly.

On the day of the Jumma, the dargah was decorated with flowers hanging from threads across the dargah. The Dargah is overflowing with people, barely sparing sufficient place for an individual to stand. During the namaaz, the devotees are gathered outside of the Dargah due to inadequate space inside. The scarcity of space does not disrupt the dedication of devotees to offer their prayers. Throughout the day, there is qawaali taking place in the main area located near the shrine. For the Jumma, food is prepared in large quantities for the several hundreds of devotees that come to the dargah on the auspicious day. However, unlike other days, the food was not only made in the main large Degh but also prepared near the lake on the space located on top of the stairs. Here, there were multiple smaller Deghs which were preparing food. At the base of the stairs there were wherein they were holding onto the grills of the lake wall and chanting into the lake. A tent was set up in the area for serving food which was set to take place following the last namaaz of the day. As the sun set there were evening prayers offered wherein everyone faced Mecca. This was interesting as, in order to face Mecca, men in the main praying area had their backs facing the shrine as everyone faced west. This

is not allowed except in this case as facing the backs to the shrine is considered disrespectful. However, during Namaaz, an exception is made. Following the namaaz, the men turned to the shrine to offer prayers to the shrine. Once the prayers had concluded there were a series of fireworks which were set from the top of the stairs to conclude the day.



The decorations for Jumma and Bibi Fatima's birth anniversary (up)



Another generation of qawwal performing (down).

(Images 3 & 4)



SUKOON

CHAPTER 4

4.1. Sentiments:

Khwaja Moinuddin Chishti was known to preach love and mutual co-existence throughout the years he lived and then after for time immemorial. This was meant to inspire everyone associated with Sufism through all vicissitudes of life. Most definitely, this was very clear among most of the people that were spoken to regarding Sufism or the Ajmer Sharif Dargah. Looking at the devotees we were able to speak with, each of them had one faith in common, they were all there because they were “called” by “Khwaja Sahab”. The word “Bulava”, meaning “Calling”, seems to be deeply ingrained in the roots of people’s beliefs. They were fixated on the fact that they had a “Bulava” to the Ajmer Sharif Dargah, and that is why they were there.

Most people come to the Daragah to feel at peace because they believe that whatever they ask for from the Khwaja, it comes true as long as it’s done with good intentions and a pure heart. People going through some troubles come here to talk to the khadims about it and seek solutions through prayer and meditation. This is the concept of *sukoon*. A common reason for visitation amongst devotees.

We encountered a family of 3 women, sitting in the open area outside the Mazhaar. These women were from Aurangabad, Maharashtra. When we asked them about the Bulava, they stated that “a person does not move from his/her home unless the call comes. Without His permission a person cannot come here.” On a similar note, Muskaan from Delhi, who came with her family (parents and siblings), stated that “When the call comes it is irresistible” and her father added that, “The call comes from Khwaja”. Additionally, once someone comes here, they feel the urge to go there consistently. Whichever devotee we spoke with, be it from different states or even shopkeepers who visit the Dargah, do so whenever they feel like there is a Bulava. “For those who love with their heart, the call is not necessary” (second devotee from Aurangabad), “We can’t say how many times we have come since childhood”. It is clear after talking to them that people come to the Dargah and believe in the power of the Khwaja himself. People come to the Dargah by

forgetting all their woes and problems, they forget about all other factors and come only for 'Sukoon', or Inner Peace, which also seems to be the main theme present in everyone we had spoken to.

There seems to be no inhibitions or discrimination on any basis at the Darbaar of Gareeb Nawaz, or Khwaja Moinuddin Chishti. Whether it be caste, creed, social status, or even gender, people come inside by first leaving all these inhibitions aside. At the Dargah of Gareeb Nawaz, the first rule is that nobody is allowed to ask anyone which religion they belong to or why they came to the Dargah, everyone is entitled to their beliefs and it doesn't matter where they come from as long as they have love for God. "When Khwaja Sahab has no objection why should we have any inhibitions? In his Durbar all are equal" (second Devotee from Aurangabad), after stating that, "There is no bar on anybody coming here. A cobbler can come, so can a thief. Good people and bad people both can come". This can also be seen in the fact that the Dargah, like any other crowded area, has thieves frequently roaming the area. However, we were also made to understand and were told that Khwaja Sahab has never stopped anyone from coming into his Darbaar and they would not stop anyone from coming in. Even amongst the people around, there is a feeling of acceptance and a want to be better. The Dargah doesn't see gender either, all genders are observed within the Dargah alike. The biggest chaddar, or offering, usually comes from the Kinnars (or the transgender community), which people come to see from all over the country.

This way of co-existence is prevalent mostly because, at the end of the day, people come for the purpose of their love and belief for the man who had given his life to all others. Khwaja Gareeb Nawaz got his name from his deeds. He was known to have immense love for everyone and more importantly, he devoted his life to the poor. Incidentally, that is also where people's belief in him came about for the one who fulfils all wishes, or whatever one asks for (Mannat), he will fulfil it. "Whoever comes here does not go empty-handed" (Muskaan's Father, Delhi), "The Khwaja gives to everybody without discrimination" (Second Devotee, Aurangabad), "There is no one more than him. No one has suffered like him and

no one has offered such succor to the poor. That is why he is called the Gareeb Nawaaz” (Second and Third Devotee, Aurangabad), “I have an interest. Because, whoever comes here and asks for something from their heart, allaham-dullah, they will get it” (Devotee, Kashmir).



A woman asking for Mannat (Image 5)

Each of these people believe their own ways of following Sufism, there is no rigidity on what one has to follow or is not allowed to do.

Some people come to the Dargah and follow each and every ritual that takes place. Starting from taking the chaddar and the flowers from a shopkeeper inside or outside that Dargah, to praying inside the Mazhaar, to meditation or reading the Namaz, to gather for the Roshni, burning of the Loban, or even just sit and listen to the Qawaalis outside. They go for the entire and full experience. However, there is no rigidity or necessity to follow each of these rituals.

Some people believe in a higher power and just come to the Dargah to give their respects, or Salaam, but not to do Sajdaa, or bow down before Khwaja, “We are devotees but we do not do Sajda (prostrate) before Dargah. In our faith, we only bow before Khuda (God). We believe in Sufism and the Ajmer Dargah. But for us,

Masjid is a higher authority and reading namaz is a bigger thing” (Muskaan and her family, Delhi), “For Khwaja, we can salute him (Salam) and we can read Durood Sharif (praise for the enlightened one)”.

On the contrary, the family from Aurangabad have their own Asthana (Dargah for Moinuddin Chishti). This Dargah has not only been open to their own family, but also to the rest of their city. The devotee’s husband has been following Sufism since childhood and they have various other rituals that they follow on their own, for example they showed us a video of him dancing in circles with a boiling hot coal-filled utensil. When we asked them about the heat and whether it could hurt him, they just said that it was his devotion that kept him going and does not hurt him, “Here they carry mud pots containing fire and go round and round chanting his name. We cannot even touch it. But you see, they are in a state of utter devotion (basharat) i.e. they are in a spell.” This feeling is almost like when people go into a trance for a few minutes and almost forget everything else, just get in a flow of a connection with Khwaja.

There are different forms of peace people look for as well, this includes peace from the supernatural – like possessions or trance. People believe in a form of black magic, or a saya, a supernatural power can enter a person's body, it may be demonic or just momentary as a connection. Where there is a demonic supernatural involved, people believe that someone might have put a bad influence on them. People go to the Dargah to get ‘healed’ from this demon and find their peace. On talking with Sana, a worker in a shop, she discussed her experience of trance with us.

Sana is a lady in her late 20s. She shared her life experience with us where she told us that as a child, her father had left her and her mother alone. Later when she was married, she had a drunkard for a husband who she divorced later, but he got full custody of her children, and now they refuse to see her.

“Two months ago, someone did me wrong, I had gone to the Dargah just to pray during Bakri Eid. After I was done, I stood up and fell off the stairs, my money was stolen with my phone and my jewelry. When I regained consciousness, I was

at the hospital. I was told that I had a lot of tension that's why my blood pressure decreased, but I had no diseases and I was completely fine. We also got a few tests done, all seemed normal. But I had dark circles and I couldn't open my eyes, for one month I was on bed rest and I would see very strange things, hallucinations, like some on is trying to choke me, someone took me to a burial ground, someone left me in the dark for 20 days, I could see all of this. Then someone said to take me to the Unjha Dargah in Gujarat (also known as the Mira Datar Dargah, people who experience trance usually go there to get healed). I went there and someone told us that I had a Saya on my hair and my clothes, so treatment should be looked at. Even though I finished my treatment, I still feel scared of the dark, if I stay alone, I keep the entire house lit up, and I don't go anywhere after 12am. I used to cry every day and used to be unsettled, but when I came to the Dargah I found peace. I thought that I should go out, because as a woman, I'm told not to go out, but once I came to Ajmer I realized that there is a world outside, we aren't doing something wrong if we are just going to Gareeb Nawaz."



Locks signifying people in trance (Image 6)

Like Sana, there have been many more women who go to Dargahs to find peace and a treatment for the trance they go to. Most of them spin their heads around and

don't seem to be aware of others around them, rocking back and forth, screaming things like “Jaane do khwaja. Chala jaoonga khwaja, pareshaan nahi karoonga”. They tend to hold on to the walls or gates when they go in trance. This was observed near the main shrine where those in trance would scream into the shrine. People tend to slip in and out of trance, aware of what's happening for a while and then go back into trance. All of this seems to be a very emotional experience for a lot of people as we observed several men and women sobbing inside the Dargah (near the degg, outside the Mazhaar etc.).

Random people gather and start reciting a poem like a song. This happens right outside the Mazhaar as well near the gates where we observed people in trance. One person started singing and so many joined in. It seemed like it was a song they all knew by heart. (The people gathered near the Mazhaar and as they sang the people in trance remained oblivious) There seemed to be specific places in the Dargah where several people were in trance. The two prime places observed were near the Mazhaar and near the lake. People near the lake were with other people with them who were reading out chants to them while they were in trance. Here, it was also observed that people were crying and praying holding onto the fence around the lake. One of the people in trance here was doing somersaults and another was constantly running herself into a wall. One thing observed throughout was that most of the people in trance were predominantly women. These women had their hair let open while they swayed and went in and out of trance. During the namaz there were few people who were in a state of trance. Here in particular one man seemed to be unconscious and holding on to the shrine as he prayed. He appeared to be in a state of trance when he got up a few times as he was screaming into the shrine and was swaying when he was upright.

These people come to the Dargah to just find their peace and solidarity, to rise from the troubles they experienced and to relieve themselves of their pain. Their belief in Khwaja Gareeb Nawaz is what shows their love for him and what this Dargah stands for. People may come to the Dargah for all the various reasons, but it is clear that it holds a very important part in their lives.

4.2. Syncretism in Every Aspect:

The Ajmer Sharif Dargah truly adopts the idea of syncretism. There was no discrimination between religions or the roles of women and men. There was almost an equal ratio of individuals and families of the two religions. We observed and interviewed people from different states in India. More so, even though there were spaces where we observed a huge difference in the ratio of men to women, it was revealed that it was a choice made by the devotees for their comfort. Women who have come alone tend to be around women and men tend to be around each other. However, it is different for couples and families as they do not worry about this segregation. The spaces in the dargah are open to all. However, it was observed that women and men weren't allowed to stand or sit on the steps leading to the prayer area. Men pray in an open area facing west towards Mecca.



Gendered spaces inside the Dargah (Images 7 & 8)

There are certain rituals followed at the Dargah that indicate syncretism. The roses laid at the Mazhaar are from Pushkar which is a well-known Hindu and Sikh pilgrimage site. This shows us the connection between Ajmer and Pushkar. Pushkar is very popularly known for its Brahma temple. From what we learned through research, a lot of the temples in Pushkar were destroyed in the past during Muslim conquests and were later rebuilt. It is interesting that despite the history there is a connection between the Sufi dargah and Pushkar. This goes on to show how the syncretic nature is reflected in the practices of the Dargah to an extent

where it is accepted by other religions too. The fact that the flowers come from Pushkar was confirmed by Anand Bhatnagar, the principal of the school we visited in Pushkar.

Similarly, other instances that reflected the syncretism and derivations from Sikhism was the Chilla of Baba Farid. There is a silver chandelier between the Shah Jahani gate and the Buland Darwazawhich was gifted by the Golden Temple committee. This shows the connection of Sikh with Sufism. It was a beautiful gesture to show communal brotherhood. Adding to this there is another monument called Baba Farid Chilla, it is an underground structure where Baba Farid, a Punjabi-Muslim preacher and mystic spent some time in seclusion. The gates of the chilla remain closed on all days except for three holy days when it is opened for Ziarat to all in the Ajmer Sharif Dargah, from the fourth Moharram Sharif to sixth Moharram Sharif every year. It is considered to be very important and sacred for both Sufism and Sikhism. Baba Farid's verses have been put down in Guru Granth Sahib in the chapter Farid's Sayings by Guru Nanak Dev Ji (Tapasaya, n.d.). During our visit to the Dargah, we interacted with people following Sikhism. They were dressed in their religious dress from head to toe. The comfort with which they roamed the dargah shows that there really is no segregation based on religion. The degh inside the Dargah serves the primary purpose of making food in large quantities for all those inside the Dargah. This concept is seen very popularly in Gurudwaras in the form of Langar. The two main degs cook large quantities of food for people of all religions and even make the food such that it can be consumed by people who follow Jainism. The degh and the langar play an important role in illustrating syncretism. The food cooked is pure vegetarian. Its ingredients are such that it can be had even by Jains. There are certain requirements such as no onions, potatoes or garlic. This implies, the food can be eaten not only by vegetarians but by Jains also. As the langar cooked serves people of all castes and religions, this denotes that the dargah welcomes people from all over the world and makes sure everyone's needs are attended to. In addition, the concept of langar is adopted from Sikhs as is done in the Sikh religious space, Gurudwara.

Roshni is a daily ceremony that involves the lighting of lights that takes place 20 minutes prior to Maghrib (evening prayer). It includes a recitation of Persian couplets, as also documented by Syedzadgan (n.d). The unlighted candles are brought by the khadims, from the Hujras (cells) placed near the small degh. They begin to walk towards the shrine, with drum rolls and people gathering. The khadims place the unlighted candles in the lamps inside the shrine. These lamps are then held in the hands of the Khadims, above their heads, as they recite the Persian couplet (Sufi-poetry) in the praise of Khwaja Garib Nawaz. The lamps are placed in four different corners inside the holy shrine. In Christianity, a ritual similar to Roshni is performed by Christians when they visit the church and pray before Jesus. The candle is lit as an accompaniment to the prayer; the candle serves as a symbol of light of Christ. This demonstrates syncretism as there is an overlap of rituals of the two religions; the mode of praying may be different, but the hope and sanctity of their devotion remains kindred.

There are certain gestures that overlap with other rituals in Hindu and Jain temples with the rituals in the Dargah. After ziyarat in Mazhaar, we were asked to bend on our knees and touch our forehead to Moinuddin's shrine. Then, we were taken to Hazrat Bibi Hafiza Jamal's shrine, Moinuddin's daughter's Mazhaar. We were asked to repeat the gesture again. This is practiced in Hindu temples and Jain temples where the devotees bend before the sculpture of the Gods and well as the entrance of the Mandirs. Another ritual involves the red thread tied on the right hand. This is also practiced in Hindu temples where the priest or Pandit prays and blesses the mauli or dhaaga (red thread), and ties it on the hands of the devotees. This exact ritual was performed by the khadims at the dargah where they would bless the mauli and tie it around the devotees' wrists. Lobaan is a gum resin mixed with oil, thrown on hot coals to create a huge cloud of fragrant smoke. This vessel is then carried all around the Dargah to "protect the Dargah from evil spirits". This is very similar to the concept of using Agarbattis in Hinduism. According to old stories, Khwaja Mouinnudin Chishti ensured this kind of fluidity and commonism between so many other religions of India so that his teachings could be made more

relatable and his message of love amongst all would be better received amongst the largely Hindu population of India.

However, a common factor between the Ajmer Sharif Dargah, and the Shadal Baba Dargah in Pune - to pay their respect and love for the dargah and Khwaja, they would kiss the pillars at the entrance of the shrines. The overlapping traditions show the syncretic nature of Sufism and is a true embodiment of the preaching of the Khwaja that states equality and love amongst everyone regardless of the god they believe in.

4.3. Positive Space:

There were people of all religions, there was no segregation and no discrimination in any place inside the Dargah. Everything we read on the Dargah and its syncretic nature unfolded in front of us in real life too. We saw and interacted with people of several religions including Sikhism, Hinduism, Islam, and Christianity. We met people who came all the way to Ajmer just to visit the Dargah from extremes of India like Kashmir. Everyone sat together in the same space and performed the same rituals together without any problems or hatred and negativity. A practice we witnessed inside was the qawaali. Everywhere the qaawals sat, a positive energy radiated and people from all over the dargah got drawn to them. The qawaals are very dedicated to the Dargah, the shrine and Khwaja Mouinuddin Chishti himself. This fact was very evident in their voices and words used during the qawaali.

4.4. Langar ka Khana:

This is also known as the free kitchen that serves as a public kitchen. This is located right opposite the Mehfil Khana. Besides sweet rice, a barley meal called daliya is cooked inside this kitchen as langar for the poor. The recipe of the daliya belongs to Akbar known as Badshah Akbar ki degh. Daliya is healthy as it helps patients suffering from typhoid. Daliya serves nutrients of a whole meal twice a day. Langar Khana is open to everyone, especially the poor who come to Khwaja's darbar. As daliya serves as a whole meal, it serves as a two-time food for the devotees who come to the Dargah to belong, and who may not have access to

nutritious meals. The Dargah presents itself as a home for all, and holds a candle to this expectation.

4.5. The Degh :

Degh is a huge iron pot in which the langar for the devotees is cooked. There are two deghs known as “choti deggh” and “badi deggh”. The badi deggh was donated by Akbar. The deggh holds rice, pulses, money ranging from 100-2000, gold bangles are tied from the mannat threads to a rod placed above the badi deggh. This deggh had more money and other offerings as compared to the choti deggh. In the badi deggh there were several wedding invitations too. The badi deggh is big enough to cook 4800 kgs of rice at one time, that serves approximately 5000 people. The choti deggh, however, was presented by Jehangir which can cook up to 2400 kgs of rice at one time. The food in both the degghs are cooked in a similar fashion.

The langar served to the devotees is sweet rice as it is edible by vegetarians and non-vegetarians. It can be prepared by the men of five families associated with the Chishti Dargah. They begin to cook the rice at 7pm in the evenings. The recipe of the sweet rice includes - turmeric and wheat flour added at the beginning, then water which is left for an hour and a half so it heats. Sugar, rice, dry fruits and nuts are then added (kaju, badam, coconut). The only spices used in this dish are saffron and turmeric.

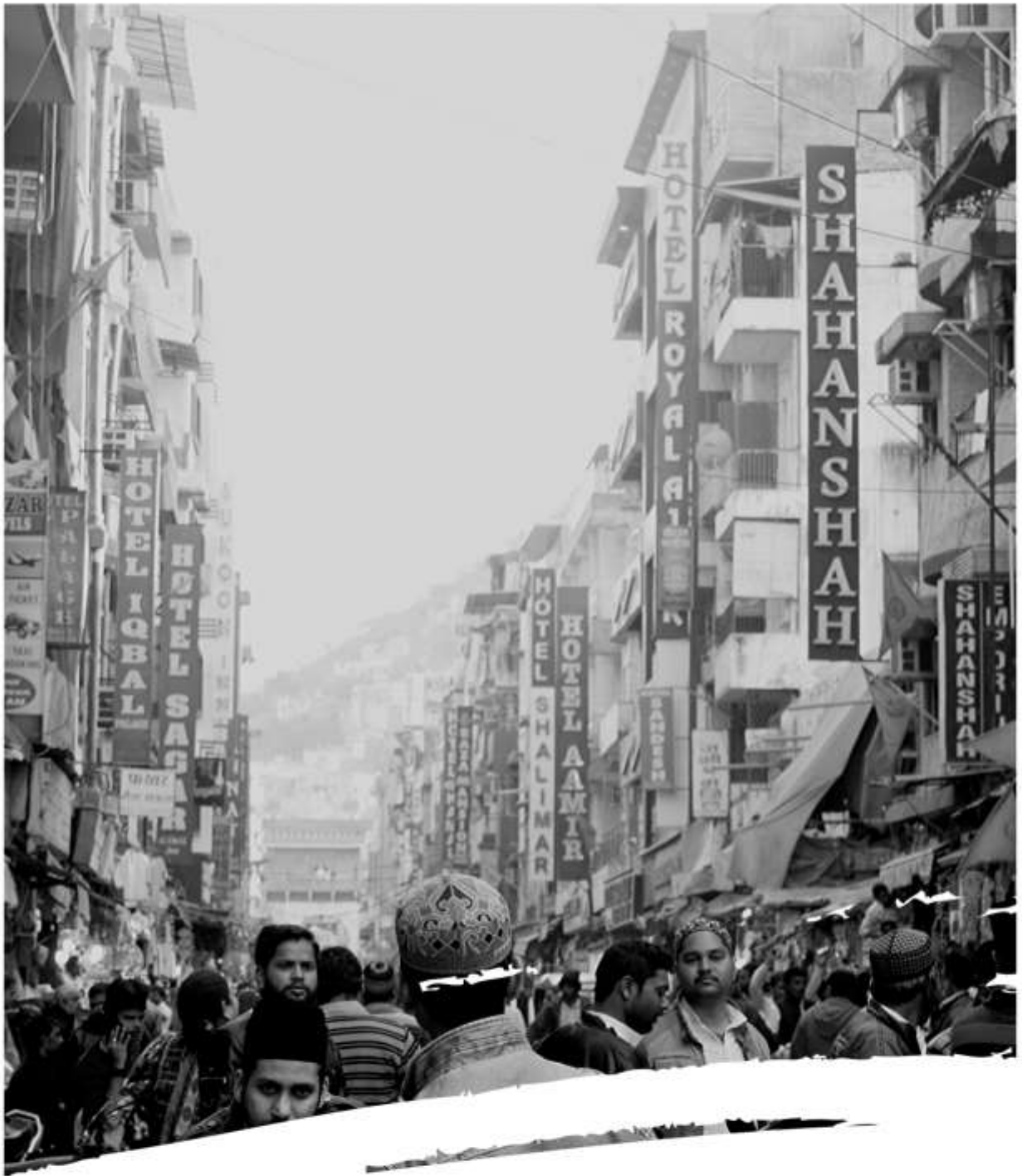
They have cooked the same food for years so everyone can enjoy the langar. A white cloth is put over the vessel to allow the water to cook the rice. An interesting fact about the vessel is that after constant heat and food being cooked at a very high temperature, the iron vessel still does not heat up. The fire is set using 30 logs of wood creating a lot of heat. However, the vessel still doesn't heat up. One of the five cooks explained their theory of the iron vessel sustaining at room temperature. This was explained in comparison to friends. Friends look alike, however their qualities are different. These qualities are adopted in terms of the person they are serving (speaking to, or are friends with). Likewise, this iron vessel resembles regular iron but it serves the dargah. Hence, according to the need of the service, this iron has adopted different qualities. In this case, the iron does not heat up so it

allows the cooks to prepare the langar, allowing devotees to experience the whole procedure without the risk of getting burnt. Our team was allowed to use the big spoon made of wood to mix the ingredients inside the degh. As the vessel was not hot, or dangerous, it was easier to experience the enriching process of cooking langar. As the food inside was of a large quantity it was difficult for one person to stir. Therefore, the spoon was operated from two ends - one person would stir the food holding the tail of the spoon and the second would handle the beck of the spoon using a rope attached to it. This is an opportunity given to the devotees to cook the food in order to fulfill their vows. The langar is fed to the khadims, devotees and the poor.

All of the food made in the two deghs is served to everyone in the Dargah without any kind of discrimination or questions. It is even made such that it can be consumed by Jain devotees. The whole concept is so intricately tied with everything the Dargah stands for, syncretism and love for all regardless of gender, religion or caste.



Jain langar being cooked in the badi degh (left). Non-vegetarian langar being cooked in the Langar Khana (right). (Images 9 & 10)



PRESENT DAY

CHAPTER 5

5.1. In Contemporary Times:

The Ajmer Sharif Dargah is over 800 years old, however, there is not much literature that talks about the Dargah or any of its aspects with regards to recent times. Over the last few decades, the Dargah has evolved in various ways in order to accommodate the changes that have come up in our world - and one can see that an ecosystem has been built around the Dargah with many people's livelihoods intertwined with the existence of the Dargah.



The members of AAP offering a Chaddar (left). A shop inside the Dargah (right). (Images 11 & 12)

5.1.1. Politics:

The Ajmer Sharif Dargah plays an extremely important role in the Sufi world – we were told that the Dargah is almost like the headquarters of the Asian Sufi community, as it is globally renowned and also the origin point for Sufism in India. The Chairman of the Chishti Foundation, Haji Syed Salman Chishti, has for the last few years served as the face of the Dargah. He is widely regarded as a spiritual leader and as the 26th century Gaddi-Nashin (spiritual caretakers who are descendants of Khwaja Moinuddin Chishti) has represented the Dargah in various Sufi conferences and other cultural events worldwide.

In conversation with Salman Chishti, we were told that every year a chaddar is sent by the Prime Minister of our country to the Dargah. While the Dargah has received chaddars from state leaders of some Asian countries in the past, in 2015 even then US President Barack Obama sent over a chaddar to the Dargah, which is an indicator of how the Dargah's reputation has only increased in recent years (NDTV, 2015).

While at the Dargah, one surprising encounter we had was with a group of AAP (Aam Aadmi Party) members, who we got to know had come to the Dargah in order to raise a chaddar after winning the recent Delhi elections, as they had come there beforehand too to pray for a win. This development also seemed like another example of the importance that the Dargah holds in the political sphere too as a representation of both a religious community and a symbol of syncretic existence.

5.2. Technology:

The Ajmer Sharif Dargah and its happenings also have a considerable presence online. The Dargah committee has now opened social media pages, and along with that numerous videos of the Dargah are also available online. These online videos which mainly showcase miracles that have happened at the Dargah or rituals such as the making of food in the Degh, rack up millions of views. There are websites online connected to the Dargah that not only provide information about it but also offer a virtual tour in video form and a 360-degree virtual tour using the maps feature. Nowadays, one can also send in money in order to remotely perform rituals and receive *Tabbaruqat* (devotional offerings) through various ways such as postal order, money order, net banking, online payment, etc., with some khadims even attaching QR codes for mobile payment apps.

5.3. Commercialization:

The commercialization of religion has always been a controversial topic that has been debated over for centuries, and even more so in recent times. The Ajmer Sharif Dargah being one of the major Sufi landmarks in the world receives a huge

number of visitors daily and just like any other major religious site, has also turned into a tourist attraction. Just a simple google search provides one with numerous websites linked to the Dargah which talk about different khadims and the spiritual treatments that they offer. The role of the khadims is extensive, and one of their main responsibilities is that of conducting rituals within the Dargah and providing spiritual treatment. As outlined previously, there are many devotees that do not participate in any of the rituals performed at the Dargah. In conversation with them, they had also warned us to stay away from the khadims “for your sake.” This opinion was also echoed by some of the shopkeepers in the nearby lanes leading to the Dargah. However, while most devotees agreed that some aspects of the Dargah did feel like they had been turned into a sort of business, they also said that this did not take away from the teachings of the Khwaja or the *sukoon* that one gets from visiting the Dargah.

5.4. Tourism:

As has been mentioned before, in recent times the Dargah has also become quite a famous tourist attraction. Over the years, means of transportation and communication have developed, which have facilitated an ease in access for people in Ajmer to visit the Dargah. Recently, an airport has also been built in Ajmer, which has made it easier for people from different parts of India and the world to visit the Dargah. As a result of these developments the number of pilgrimages, not just in Ajmer, but all-around India have also increased. Earlier, people would visit pilgrimages by foot, but with the new modes of transportation, more people are able to visit more pilgrimages as the obstacle of distance is no longer there. Through our interactions with the devotees and vendors, we gained insight into the chain of developments that had taken place in Ajmer, from the abundance of stores, restaurants, public transport, etc. that transformed the city, and made the Ajmer Sharif Dargah an international tourist attraction.

There are multiple websites available online that offer tours of the Dargah, along with travel agencies and hotels that have sprung up nearby. The Dargah itself has also provided services for tourists and visitors such as a guest house complex to stay in. During our time there, we noticed foreign tourists visiting the Dargah

however we noted that most of the Dargah visitors consisted of devotees marking their religious visits. We learned that those who could not afford making the pilgrimage to Mecca instead come to the Ajmer Sharif Dargah.



Offerings of money and jewelry inside the degh. (Image 13)

5.5. Relationship with the City

5.5.1. Vendors Outside the Dargah:

The shops outside the Dargah had houses above them like house structures. The shops closer to the Dargah had more Muslim owners, while the shops further from the Dargah had more Hindu or Jain owners.

There were very few female vendors. They were hesitant to interact on camera or answer the interview questions. They felt they lacked the education and knowledge to answer our questions, especially on camera as it made them feel conscious. There was a pattern that we deciphered while interviewing the females. They sought comfort in passing on the interview to their husband or a male relative in the house. This runs parallel to the observation of female interviewees inside the Dargah as well. While interviewing the female devotees, their hesitancy was rather apparent. When the women were approached, they would answer certain questions,

immediately after which their husbands would approach us, disapproving of the interview. If couples were approached, the husband would usually not let the woman speak and take over the whole conversation.

Other than the gender roles, we also observed that the vendors immediately outside the Dargah were very attached to the Dargah and sold items to be used in rituals inside the Dargah but as we moved farther away, the relationship of vendors with the Dargah weakened. Most vendors farther away from the Dargah never visited it and did not really care much about it or its teachings and impact. Some vendors even found the Dargah a negative space because of the heavy crowd it brought. It was their opinion that they stopped getting customers as the crowds that came to Ajmer came solely for the Dargah and not to shop. Some other vendors thought that the Dargah was a negative space because it had uprooted other communities to expand.

5.5.2. Market Architecture:

The shops in the market were two to three storied buildings. Right above the shops were the houses of the vendors. The market is really old, hence with growing tourism and changing times, the vendors changed and evolved with time. We observed how their houses were old, and rusted from the outside but the shops were clean, fancied and decorated for the tourists. More so, certain buildings were converted into Inns and restaurants, with the aim of modernizing the setting. Some shops that were in narrow lanes, close to the Dargah were still old, rusted; however, shops far from the Dargah and in broader lanes had modified their shops and buildings.

5.5.3. Ajmer as its People Know it:

In an interview with Dr. Anand Bhatnagar, the principal of Turning Point Public School, Ajmer. Along with this, as an active member of the Human Rights Movement and the state general of the People's Union for Civil Liberties (PUCL), he had certain views about the significance of the Dargah to the city. The Dargah of Khwaja Gharib Nawaz derives its name from the behavior of Moinuddin Chishti.

He never discriminated between those who came to his Dargah. Every person who came to the Dargah, regardless of which section of the society they came from, was treated the same. This practice has remained constant for the past 800 years. Even now, whoever visits the Dargah, gets the same treatment and experience as everyone else. Currently, at a time where there is uncertainty at every point, the Dargah maintains some sort of consistency in a devotee's life. The kind of relationship that exists between the devotee and the higher power is not considered to be unattainable. The devotees do not view the Khwaja as someone who is far away from them. Rather, the relationship between the two looked at through the perspective of a friendship. Here, it is a relationship in which the devotee can share their sadness and their happiness with the Khwaja. It is believed that through this journey of friendship, the power of the Khwaja will alleviate the devotee's sadness and increase their happiness. If this is seen from the psychological angle, every person needs some sort of emotional support in their life. The Khwaja acts as an outlet for the devotees, allowing them to feel relieved after spending time at the Dargah. On asking around in the Dargah, the general consensus received was that the devotees feel at peace in the Dargah after their 'darshan'. In times where there is constant political and communal discord in the nation, this Dargah acts as an escape for the individuals.

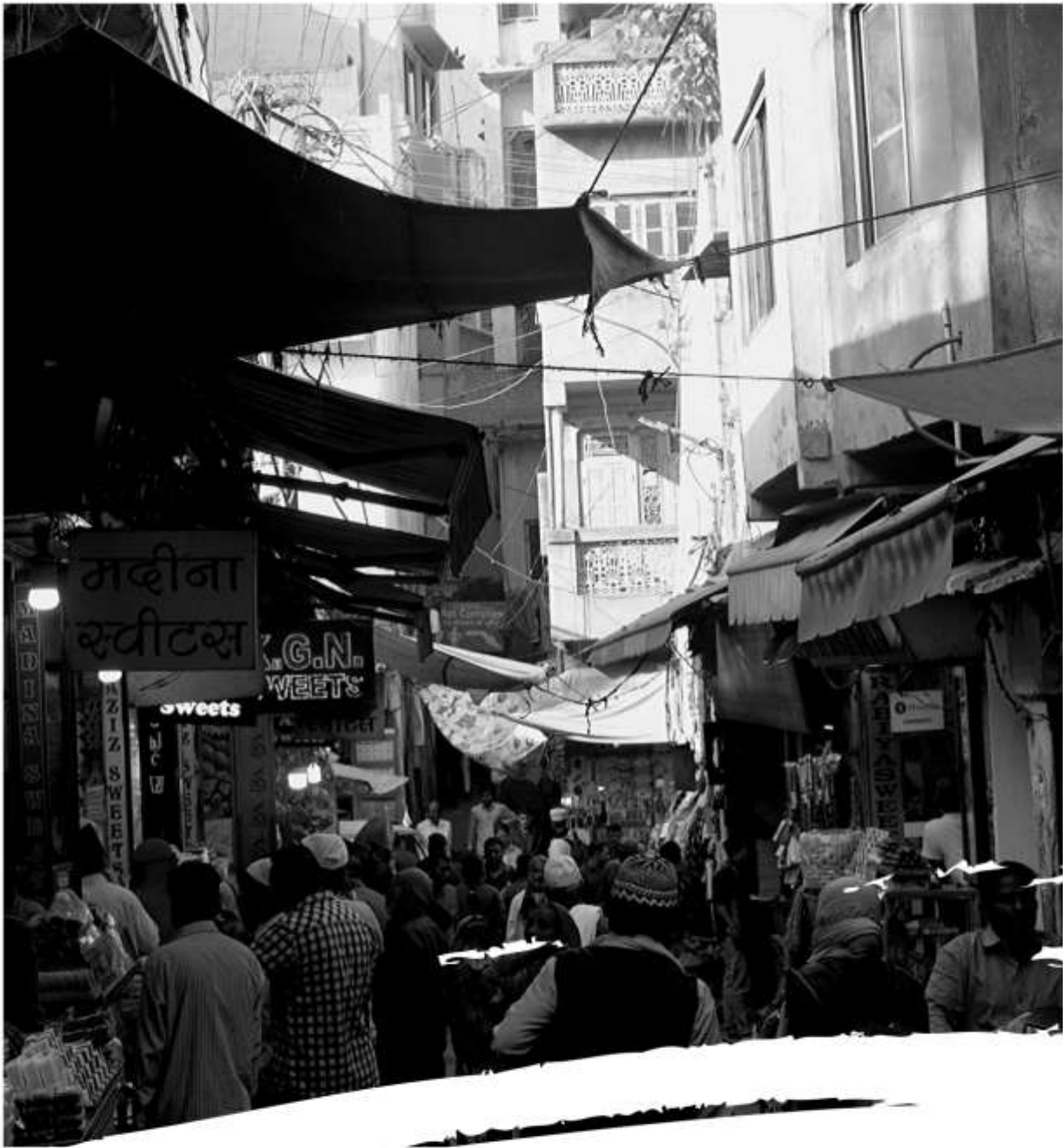
Right outside the Dargah, starts the Dargah Bazaar. Here, a majority of the shop owners come from Sindhi or Jain families. Although they are in such close proximity to the Dargah, they do not visit the Dargah much. This could largely be reasoned due to the fact that their faith lies elsewhere. This does not mean that they harbor negative feelings for the Dargah. After all, the Dargah and the shop owners are interdependent. They cannot function without each other. The Dargah attracts people to the city of Ajmer, while the Dargah Bazaar provides the devotees with all the apparel they need to go forward with their darshan. Currently, with the vast majority of people that visit the Dargah every year, it would be harder for either one to separate themselves from each other. Thus, when speaking economically, the Dargah plays a very important role in Ajmer.

While speaking about the trying times that we are facing in the society right now, Dr. Bhatnagar spoke about the basic foundations of Khwaja Gharib Nawaz's teachings. However, one of his very first teachings said that, 'If your neighbor is going to sleep hungry, you should not be able to sleep'. In the literal sense, this teaching tells us that we need to be considerate of the people around us and make sure that they are happy and satisfied, along with us. The ideology behind this simple teaching stems from the basic idea of caring for others. On expanding this teaching and applying it in a broader sense, we should be considerate of all the people around us and make sure that we are not intentionally doing harm to them. Dr. Bhatnagar feels that this is exactly what the Dargah embodies. The Dargah is known largely as a space where people of all religions come together under one roof, for spiritual guidance. In such a space, if a devotee only cares for other devotees of the same faith, then the whole purpose of the Dargah would seem unfulfilled. By extending the basic element of caring, to all the other religions, Dr. Bhatnagar feels that the pillar of hatred that is created in the media and in the real time, will vanish. It allows individuals to understand the importance of co-existence. However, this coexistence extends beyond the basic principle of 'live and let live', that is generally being followed currently. It is about creating an environment which is accepting and understanding, which is exactly the kind of environment being created and maintained in the Dargah. In certain areas around and outside the Dargah, we could see the creation of these kinds of environments. Allowing for more open conversations to take place with various people.

However, not all of the teachings of the Khwaja are applied outside the Dargah. On speaking to a female devotee, Sana, we found that there are many aspects in the daily life of those who practice Sufism, that go against the Khwaja's teachings. While speaking about the absence of gender discrimination in the Dargah, Sana brought up the fact that this does not extend outside the walls of the Dargah. She stated that in Ajmer, unless you are married or accompanied by a man, you are not expected to leave the house. There are no restrictions for women in the Dargah, however, outside there are many social expectations and roles that women are supposed to fulfill. Apart from going to the Dargah, the women are expected solely

to care for the household and the children. Even the aspect of working in order to earn more for the family was looked down upon. Sana, however, felt different about this. She felt that everyone deserves a chance to grow and to explore their own surroundings, regardless of their gender. Even while she is working, there are many people who object to the way she dresses and advises her to wear more appropriate clothing, such as a burkha. While talking about Sufism, she stated that there is nothing in this religion that stops women from pursuing what she truly desires, however this aspect of Sufism is not being applied. Despite working in the Dargah Bazaar, within such close proximity to the Dargah, there are many people with objections regarding her job and her freedom.

To delve deeper into Sufism, the Government Museum Ajmer was visited. It was surprising to find no association of the museum and Sufism as the museum is located very close to the Dargah. The museum contained information about the Hindu gods and the history of Ajmer, however, there was no mention of Sufism. The expected information was not available at the museum. The museum was relatively new and Dr. Anand Bhatnagar was unaware of the fact that it did not contain any information regarding Sufi or the Dargah. Our team brought this to his attention which was surprising for him as well as the team.



LOOKING BACK

CHAPTER 6

6.1. Conclusion:

In the last 800 years, the Ajmer Sharif Dargah has evolved and expanded exponentially with several new elements coming in – however the Khwaja along with his teachings and principles remain just as relevant and important today to his beloved devotees. Over the course of the one week of fieldwork spent there, we were able to observe the space of the Dargah and nearby areas and were able to interact with devotees, vendors and management both in those spaces and the greater area of the city.

Despite being one of the city's oldest and most well-known landmarks, the relationship that the Dargah has with the city is one that seems to be not so simple. We found out that for some of the city's residents and vendors the Dargah is not of much significance, and they do not visit it. However, for some others it serves as a symbol of the city showcasing the harmonious coexistence of different religions. The dargah markets are all segregated based on religion, with there being sets of Hindu, Muslim, Jain and Sindhi vendors.

Due to it being arguably the biggest site of worship for Sufis across the subcontinent and a famous tourist attraction, the Dargah's ecosystem has expanded considerably with there being extensive security, various auxiliary services, and several people employed in different departments by the Dargah. There have also sprung up various shops and commercial ventures such as hotels, guesthouses, various vendors in the tourist market, whose livelihoods are all dependent on the huge amounts of people that visit the Dargah all throughout the year. The khadims (priests or custodians) of the Dargah, who are part of the Chishti family are present everywhere and many have offices of their own set up throughout the Dargah.

When it comes to gender roles, we were able to infer both through observations and interviews that there are few restrictions for women, with many female devotees saying that there were none. All our interviewees felt that there was no gender discrimination that was practiced at the dargah, and that everyone was treated the same – whether they were men, women, or Kinnar. Unlike many other

religious places of worship, in the Dargah women are allowed into the Mazhaar and are allowed to undertake the rituals. Other than the inside of the mosques, there were no spaces where women were not allowed.

One can see that the principle of syncretism which is preached can also be seen enshrined in the traditions of the Dargah, such as the making of the food offerings, rituals such as *Roshni*, etc. Connections to other religions such as Sikhism can also be seen with areas such as Baba Farid's *chilla* (cave) and also with practices such as the Qawaali. The Dargah draws people from all over the country and abroad, both visiting devotees and tourists. Most of the people we spoke to were repeat visitors who kept coming back to the Dargah due to the sense of contentment and peace that it elicited in them, with many also displaying a deep sense of gratitude for all that the Khwaja had given them. With the ecosystem that has developed around the Dargah there has also sprung up a lot of commercialization which some feel is good as it brings in more prosperity to the city but others felt was detracting from the Dargah's teachings and principles.

The daily functioning of the Dargah is remarkable as it is able to receive hospitably thousands of visitors every day, and provide them with a refuge. Even today, everyone is welcomed without any questioning regardless of their religion, gender, region or caste. We also learned that the Dargah has a history of ensuring that people from marginalized sections such as lower castes were included. Thus, it feels as if the teachings of Garib Nawaz are embodied within the Dargah and its people even today.

6.2. Limitations:

There were certain limitations that we faced over the course of our fieldwork that hindered the course of our research:

1. While conducting semi-structured interviews, we realized later on that some of our questions, especially those that were framed upon experiences that we'd had on field seemed leading, which would have led to our answers not being entirely bias-free.
2. There were certain communities and people that we wished to meet and interview such as foreign tourists, the Kinnar community, the Bisht community and the qawaals due to various factors such as lack of time and being unable to approach them due to other extenuating factors.
3. While we were able to visit the school associated with the Dargah, we were not able to visit and observe certain other buildings managed by the Chishti foundation in the vicinity.
4. Due to a lack of time, we were also unable to visit other Dargahs in Ajmer, which would have allowed for a comparative study to be conducted.

6.3 Final comments

The months we have spent working on this project helped us learn about and delve deep into the history and realms of both Sufism and the Ajmer Sharif Dargah. Our study revolved around looking into the aspects of syncretism, gender and lived environments with regards to the Dargah and along the way of seeking answers to these questions we had the privilege of documenting what the Dargah means to various people, the way it has evolved and the place it holds in people's hearts.

The week that we spent at the Dargah was both an informative and transformative experience, as we were able to immerse ourselves into its atmosphere and understand what it feels like, and both witness and take part in the rituals there. To know that these are practices that have been shaped by centuries of the coming together of people from various communities in harmony, also made us understand

their significance better. The overall sentiment that was expressed to us was that when people visit the Dargah, they feel as if they belong, as if they are home, and that is why they keep coming back, and in our stay there we felt the same. Below is a poem written by Jalal al-Din Rumi, which espouses the principles that the Dargah holds dear.

There is a life-force within your soul, seek that life.

There is a gem in the mountain of your body, seek that mine.

O traveler, if you are in search of That

Don't look outside, look inside yourself and seek That. - (Rumi, n.d.)

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Glossary

Sr. No.	Term	Definition
1	Bibi Nallam	Area for women to do namaaz
2	Chaddhar	A sheet used to ceremonially cover the Mazhaar
3	Jumma	Friday, an auspicious day in Islam
4	Jumme-raat	Thursday evening, the start of Friday
5	Khadims	Caretakers of the dargah
6	Murid	Disciple of the saint (Pir)
7	Mauli	Red thread (in temples)
8	Mazhaar	Tombstone of a Pir
9	Pir	Saint
10	Qawaal	Performer of Qawaali
11	Qawaali	Muslim devotional song
12	Silsila	Spiritual lineage
13	Urs	Festival celebrating anniversary of Saint's death
14	Ziyarat	Praying in front of the Mazhaar

"Khushaamdeed mere dost tum yahan reh sakte ho.

*Darwaazey hamesha khulain hai
tum jab chaaho aa ya ja sakte ho."*

