

Recovering Women's Religious Authority in the Medieval Chishti Order: Gender, Piety, and Spiritual Agency in India

Md. Ahad Ali¹ & Dr. Kuldeep Singh¹

¹Ph.D. Scholar, Department of History, SKD University, Rajasthan, India

²Professor, Department of History, SKD University, Rajasthan, India

Abstract

This study examines the overlooked role of women within the Chishti *silsila* in medieval India, challenging the predominantly male-centred historiography of South Asian Sufism. It investigates women's religious agency, spiritual authority, devotional practices, and familial participation between the thirteenth and eighteenth centuries through a qualitative historical analysis of *Siyar-ul-Auliya*, *Akhbar-ul-Akhyar*, *Khair-ul-Majalis*, and *Jawahir-i-Faridi*, supplemented by relevant secondary scholarship. The study identifies eighteen women associated with Chishti saints as daughters, wives, mothers, disciples, and spiritual exemplars, revealing diverse forms of religious influence operating within and beyond domestic spaces. Although women such as Bibi Fatima Sam and Bibi Sharifa received recognition for exceptional spiritual stature, institutional *khilafat* remained predominantly male-controlled. The findings demonstrate that women constituted significant yet underrepresented agents of Chishti devotional culture, thereby enriching debates on gender, authority, and Sufi networks in medieval India.

Keywords: Chishti Sufi Order; Women in Sufism; Medieval India; Gender and Religious Authority; Hagiography; Islamic Mysticism

1. Introduction

Sufism, understood as the marrow of the bone or the inner dimension of Islamic revelation, is the pre-eminent means by which *Tawhid* — the doctrine of divine Unity — is realised. All Muslims affirm this Unity through the *Shahadah*, *la ilaha illa'Llah* ("there is no god but God"); the Sufi, however, is one who has penetrated the deeper mysteries of that affirmation and who, in consequence, perceives the divine presence in all things. Sufism, in its aspect of mysticism and quietism, developed as a natural extension of the ascetic tendencies that emerged within Islam during the Umayyad period. To understand Sufism, it is necessary first to understand mysticism itself: the Greek root *myein*, "to close the eyes," also underlies the word "mystery," and the mystic's goal — union with the Absolute — is held to be unattainable through intellect or ordinary discursive means alone. Fundamentally, mysticism is love of the One Reality, variously named Truth, Love, or God. In Sarraj's classical

*Corresponding Author Email: mdahadali818@gmail.com

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formulation, "the Sufis are people who prefer God to everything, and God prefers them to everything else."¹ Sufism is thus necessary to Islam as the heart is necessary to the body,² for there can be no Sufism without Islam: Sufism is, in essence, the spirituality and inner dimension of the Islamic religion.³

1.1 Sufism: Conceptual Foundations

Sufism, the mystical philosophy of Islam, is described in one of its oldest extant definitions as "the apprehension of divine realities," and Muslim mystics have accordingly styled themselves *Ahl al-Haqq*, "the followers of the Real." Maruf al-Karkhi defined it as the apprehension of divine realities; Abu'l-Husayn al-Nuri, as the abandonment of every claim of the carnal soul; Abu Sahl al-Su'luki, as freedom from objection to the divine will; and Abu Muhammad al-Jariri, as the cultivation of virtuous habits together with the purification of the heart from base desires. These definitions, though diverse in emphasis, converge upon a shared understanding of Sufism as a disciplined interior orientation toward God rather than a body of external ritual alone.

1.2 Women in the Early Islamic and Sufi Tradition

Women occupied multiple and significant roles within the Sufi tradition. *Karamat*, or miracles, formed an important aspect of Sufi religious life, and it was held that such miracles could be worked only through individuals of exceptional piety — a capacity attributed, without distinction of sex, to both men and women. The Qur'an itself affirms the essential equality of the sexes in matters of religious merit: Surah al-Hujurat (49:13) declares, "O mankind, indeed We have created you from male and female and made you peoples and tribes that you may know one another; indeed, the most noble of you in the sight of God is the most righteous of you."

Sufi tradition traces the origin of its spiritual lineage to the Prophet Muhammad himself, regarded as the first Sufi, who guided the believers through an exemplary life of poverty, generosity, and inward devotion. After him, his daughter Fatima and son-in-law Ali are held to have transmitted this light to the wider Sufi community. Fatima, in particular, is understood as the embodiment of divine love, to whom God is believed to have revealed the complete meaning of Islam;⁴ veneration of her figure accordingly became central to later Sufi devotion. Other women of the Prophet's household similarly attained reverential status: Khadija, his first wife, who sustained him through the earliest and most perilous years of his prophetic mission; Ayesha, his last wife and an outstanding scholar of Islamic law and Prophetic biography, through whom much of the Prophet's personal life became known to posterity; and Zainab, another of his influential wives. These first-generation women of Islam — remembered as merchants, scholars, patrons, and intellectuals — occupy a foundational place in Islamic history, illustrating that the early evolution of Islam was, from its inception, a gendered and collaborative process.

2. Statement of the Problem

The historiography of the Chishti order in medieval India has, with few exceptions, been written as a history of male saints, their spiritual genealogies, and their institutional legacies.

Women who were intimately connected with the order — as mothers who shaped the spiritual formation of its saints, as wives who sustained Sufi households, as daughters entrusted (or denied) spiritual succession, and as disciples and spiritual guides in their own right — appear in the primary hagiographical literature only in fragments, subordinated to the biographies of their male relatives. This asymmetry has produced an incomplete and androcentric historical record in which the female face of the Chishti order remains, in effect, unsung. The present study addresses this gap by systematically assembling and critically examining the available biographical evidence for eighteen such women.

3. Objectives of the Study

This study is guided by the following objectives:

1. To identify and document the principal women associated with the Chishti Sufi order in medieval India, from the thirteenth to the eighteenth century.
2. To examine the religious, moral, and social roles performed by these women within their families and within the wider Chishti spiritual community.
3. To assess the nature and limits of formal spiritual authority (khilafat) available to women within the order.
4. To situate these individual biographies within the broader historiographical debate on gender and authority in South Asian Islamic mysticism.

4. Research Methodology

The study adopts a qualitative historical research design combining the historical method with qualitative content analysis. Primary evidence is drawn from medieval Persian and Urdu hagiographical and *malfuzat* literature associated with the Chishti order — notably Amir Khurd's *Siyar-ul-Auliya*, Abdul Haqq Muhaddis Dehlavi's *Akhbar-ul-Akhyar*, Hamid Qalandar's *Khair-ul-Majalis*, Ali Asghar Chishti's *Jawahir-i-Faridi*, and related discourse compilations — supplemented by later biographical dictionaries and secondary historiographical works. These sources are read closely and comparatively to identify recurring biographical themes: descent and marriage, religious training, acts of piety and reported *karamat*, and relationships with the order's male saints. As hagiographical literature is devotional rather than archival in character, its factual claims — particularly reports of miracles — are treated in this study not as verified historical occurrences but as evidence of the reputational and devotional status these women held within their own community of memory. This source-critical caveat is applied consistently throughout the analysis.

5. The Female Face of the Chishti Order: A Biographical–Historical Survey

Medieval Indian society produced numerous pious women who contributed, in varying capacities, to the propagation of Islamic religious and ethical values. Most belonged to established Sufi families and were accorded respect on that account. Among the most notable were Bibi Pak Daman, Bibi Fatima Sam, Bibi Sara, Bibi Zulaikha, Bibi Rani, Bibi Khadija, Bibi Rasti, Bibi Fatima, Jamal Bibi, the daughters of Baba Farid (Bibi Masturah, Bibi Sharifa, and Bibi Fatimah), Bibi Qursum, Hazabara, Bibi Daulat Naz, Jahanara Begum, and

Bibi Hajra. It should be noted, however, that female access to formal spiritual authority remained contested even among sympathetic saints: Baba Faridud-Din Ganj-i-Shakar himself is recorded as having told his own daughter that had it been permissible to confer the *khilafatnama* — a master Sufi's authority to enrol disciples in the *silsila* — upon a woman, he would have granted it, and his role as *sajjada* (spiritual heir), to Bibi Sharifa.⁵ This single, oft-repeated statement encapsulates the central tension explored throughout this study: the coexistence of genuine spiritual esteem for women with their structural exclusion from formal institutional succession.

5.1 Hazrat Bibi Hafiza Jamal

History remembers Khwaja Muin-ud-Din Chishti as the most exceptional envoy of the Chishti spiritual tradition in India.⁶ He founded the order's centre at Ajmer, from which it subsequently spread across the subcontinent,⁷ and it remains today among the most widely followed Sufi orders in India and Pakistan.⁸ His reverence transcended confessional boundaries: the Hindu historian Rai Bahadur Harbilas Sarda, in his account of Ajmer, records that Muin-ud-Din "never preached aggression, [and] was a man of peace and goodwill towards all God's creatures." Bibi Hafiza Jamal was the only daughter of Khwaja Muin-ud-Din Chishti and Bibi Asmat.⁹ A *hafiza* of the Qur'an — having committed the entire text to memory by the age of seven — she was married to Sheikh Raziuddin and became the mother of Sheikh Hamiduddin Nagauri. Reputed for her learning, including a sound command of astrology, and for a religious personality of exceptional standing, she guided a great many women onto the path of righteousness. Her tomb lies on the southern flank of Khwaja Muin-ud-Din Chishti's shrine at Ajmer.

5.2 Bibi Fatima Sam

Among the most modest and devout of the era's women disciples, Bibi Fatima Sam — known also as the "Rabia of Delhi" — stands as the foremost female figure of the Chishti order in medieval India. She figures repeatedly in the recorded conversations of Nizam-ud-Din Auliya and his disciples, and Nizam-ud-Din is said to have visited her shrine regularly in meditation and prayer. Baba Farid, her contemporary, once remarked, "Fatima Sam is a man sent in the form of a woman."¹⁰ She taught that offering water to the thirsty and food to the hungry was more meritorious than a hundred thousand prayers or many days of fasting; Nizam-ud-Din held her in great esteem and prayed regularly at her resting place, which remained a favoured site of pilgrimage for the Sufis of Delhi. Tradition holds that she was the adopted sister of Baba Farid (d. 1265), who admired her sanctity and piety throughout his life, and that she regarded both Baba Farid and his brother, Shaikh Najmuddin Mutawakkil, as her own brothers.¹¹ A celebrated line attributed to Shaikh Nizam-ud-Din Auliya in his *Malfuzat* — that a seeker of divine love who remains equally preoccupied with the safety of his worldly life cannot attain true love — is closely associated with the ethical milieu she represented.

According to Sufi tradition, Bibi Fatima was widely admired within the early Chishti circle; Baba Farid rated her prayers and devotion as equal to those of ten *kamil* (perfect) male Sufis. Sheikh Nizam-ud-Din Auliya, a junior contemporary, was on close and affectionate terms with her and continued to visit her *dargah* for prayer and meditation even after her death;

Gesu Daraz of Gulbarga records having held her in the highest esteem in his own *Malfuzat*.¹² Sheikh Najibuddin Mutawakkil, too, esteemed her greatly for her magnanimity. On one occasion, when unexpected guests arrived at Sheikh Najibuddin's house and he had nothing to offer them, he resolved to sell his wife's dupatta, only to find it too worn to fetch any significant sum. In this moment of distress, Bibi Fatima Sam came to his aid, sending him bread earned through her own halal labour — an act of sisterly generosity that left a lasting impression on both Baba Farid and Sheikh Najibuddin, who continued to visit her tomb in gratitude long after her death. Bibi Fatima Sam was, in addition to her piety, an accomplished poet.

Nasir-ud-Din Chiragh-i-Dehli relates a further account of her extraordinary standing among the women of her generation, attributing her esteemed position to her religious learning, generosity, and abiding devotion to God. Baba Farid regarded her as a man in the form of a woman, and Sheikh Najibuddin Mutawakkil is said to have compared the awe her presence inspired to the terror created by the appearance of a lion or lioness in a forest — an illustration of the principle that, within the Sufi order, mystical attainment neither elevates nor diminishes an individual on the basis of sex. Little further biographical detail survives beyond Sheikh Abdul Haq Dehlavi's report of her conviction that providing water to the thirsty and food to the hungry surpassed the merit of a hundred namaz and many days of fasting.¹³

She may justly be described as a *shaira* (poet), having devoted her life entirely to the service of God and humanity in recognition of what she understood as life's true purpose. Muhammad Gesu Daraz records a striking narrative concerning her death: a man is said to have dreamt that an angel intercepted Bibi Fatima Sam on her journey toward God and questioned her identity, provoking her to vow that she would enter God's presence only when summoned directly. Some time later, the Prophet's daughter Bibi Fatima al-Zahra and his wife Bibi Khadija are said to have come to escort her, but she declined, prostrating herself and expressing her helplessness before the divine command, until a voice informed her that God himself was calling her — whereupon her soul departed into her earthly grave. Whatever its literal historicity, this narrative attests to the profound reverence in which she was held: her *dargah* became, and long remained, a site of pilgrimage, and the Chishti saints of the fourteenth century drew explicit inspiration from her piety, prayer, and meditative discipline.

A further anecdote, recorded to illustrate the Chishti understanding of the relationship between prayer and manual labour, describes Sheikh Nizam-ud-Din's visit to Bibi Fatima Sam's tomb beside a pond, where he encountered a labourer selling cucumber-like vegetables (*khiyar*). Having completed his ablutions and prayers, the Sheikh offered the man a silver *tanka* in appreciation of his evident piety, which the man declined. Questioned as to why a labourer of modest means would refuse such a gift (*futuh*), the man explained that his mother, widowed young, had taught him only the barest essentials of prayer, and that on her deathbed she had indicated a small sum of money hidden in the thatched roof — twenty *dirhams* of which constituted his rightful inheritance, the remainder reserved for her burial.¹⁴ The episode was cited by Chishti masters as an exemplar of scrupulous honesty in livelihood (*halal* earning), a virtue closely associated in the tradition with Bibi Fatima Sam herself.

5.3 Bibi Zulaikha

Bibi Zulaikha, affectionately known as Mai Sahiba, was a revered thirteenth-century figure within the Chishti *silsila*, remembered chiefly as the mother of Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya.¹⁵ Her life was marked by profound piety, spiritual devotion, and considerable personal hardship, and she played a formative role in shaping her son's spiritual development. Her full name was Sayyida Zulaikha, daughter of Sayyid Arab Bukhari,¹⁶ a descendant of the Sayyid lineage tracing back to Imam Husain. Her father, a scholar of spiritual distinction, migrated from Bukhara to Ghazni and later settled in Badaun; Bibi Zulaikha thus inherited an upbringing steeped in Islamic scholarship and Sufi tradition, with a lineage connecting her to Imam Ja'far al-Sadiq, Imam Musa al-Kazim, and Imam Ali al-Rida.

Her son frequently recounted instances of her spiritual efficacy. On one occasion, when a household maid absconded, Bibi Zulaikha turned to prayer, reciting the Durood Sharif five hundred times and vowing not to cover her head again until the maid was found; the maid was reportedly located and returned shortly thereafter. Her trust in divine providence was similarly renowned: in periods of household scarcity she would declare simply, "Today we are Allah's guests,"¹⁷ and is said to have received unexpected provision soon after making such declarations — an episode her son recalled as a lasting source of spiritual certainty. Nizam-ud-Din Auliya is further recorded as having sought her counsel throughout his life, visiting her grave in times of difficulty and finding his needs met within the week; Amir Khurd records a dream, recounted by his own wife, in which Bibi Zulaikha's name was invoked on the Day of Judgement as a source of refuge and safety.

Bibi Zulaikha passed away on the first of Jumada al-Thani. On the night preceding her death, her son came to her, as was his custom, to mark the sighting of the new moon; she asked him, "Whose feet will you place your head upon from now on?" — by which he understood that her departure was near. The following morning she held his right hand and prayed, "O Allah, I entrust him to You," before passing away.¹⁸ Nizam-ud-Din Auliya later remarked that these final words of entrustment brought him greater joy than any material inheritance could have done.¹⁹ Her *urs* (death anniversary) is observed on the twenty-eighth, twenty-ninth, and thirtieth of Jumada al-Awwal, drawing devotees from across the region; her shrine stands in Adhchini village on Aurobindo Marg, Delhi.²⁰

5.4 Bibi Qursum (Maryam Bibi)

Baba Farid's mother, known as Maryam Bibi or Qarsum Bibi, was a woman of deep piety and constant prayer, remembered in tradition as the "first teacher" who kindled in Farid the spark of divine love. A recurrent episode associated with her — the origin, in popular memory, of his title "Ganj-i-Shakar" (Treasury of Sugar) — recounts how she would place sugar beneath his prayer mat as a reward for prayer, telling him that those who pray receive sweets from God; on one occasion when she forgot to do so, Farid found sugar there regardless, an occurrence she and later tradition read as a sign of divine favour.

Hazrat Jamaluddin Suleman married Bibi Qursum Khatoon, daughter of Maulana Wajihuddin Khijwandi, a learned and pious descendant of Hazrat Abbas ibn Abd al-Muttalib who had migrated from Kabul and settled in Kot Kiror, near Multan. Bibi Qursum was noted for her

fervent piety.²¹ Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya records that a thief who entered her house one night lost his eyesight upon meeting her gaze and, in his distress, vowed to abandon theft permanently if his sight were restored; Bibi Qursum prayed on his behalf, his sight was restored, and he and his family subsequently embraced Islam, the man taking the name Abdullah and the honorific "Chawli-Mashaikh," which became a second name for the village of Khotwal. Hazrat Khwaja Shuaib, his son Khwaja Jamaluddin, and Bibi Qursum Khatoon are all buried at Khotwal, where their tombs remain to this day.

5.5 Bibi Sharifa

One of the daughters of Sheikh Fariduddin Ganj-i-Shakar, Bibi Sharifa was held by her father in the highest religious esteem. Widowed in her early years, she never remarried,²² devoting herself so completely to religious life that Baba Farid declared that, had it been permissible to confer the *khilafatnama* upon a woman, he would have given it — together with the role of *sajjada*, or spiritual heir — to her. He is further reported to have said that had more women resembled her, women would have surpassed men in spiritual standing. She was a contemporary of Shaykh Nizam-ud-Din Auliya, and her father's admiration for her reflects the depth of her spiritual accomplishment; her interest in spiritual discipline was nurtured by her father and her elder sister, Bibi Masturah.

Although Bibi Sharifa did not receive the *khirqah* (mantle of spiritual authority), she was, according to tradition, recalled and honoured specifically for her piety and renunciation. Despite his acknowledgement of her spiritual merit, Baba Farid did not regard her as his formal successor — illustrating precisely the tension between recognised spiritual excellence and institutional succession that runs throughout this study. He is recorded as having said: "My pious daughter Bibi Sharifa would have received the *khirqah* of *khilafat* had it been permissible for women to inherit it; if all women were like her, they would surpass all men."²³

5.6 BadiBua (Bibi Qatana)

The elder sister of Hazrat Naseeruddin Mahmud, "Chiragh-i-Dehli," BadiBua — whose given name was Bibi Qatana — was the daughter of Syed Yahya, a merchant originally from Khorasan in present-day Iran.²⁴ She married Syed Fakhruddin and bore two sons, Hazrat Khwaja Kamaluddin Allama and Allama Khwaja Zainuddin Ali. Raised under the guidance of so pious a mother, Khwaja Kamaluddin Allama developed from early childhood an intense devotion to God and was instrumental in organising and disseminating the Chishti order in Gujarat. BadiBua was known for her hospitality and charity toward those in need, undertaken without expectation of recognition; she is buried at Ayodhya.²⁵

5.7 Hajera Bibi

Many Sufi saints are remembered as having had mothers credited with miraculous powers and spiritual guidance; Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya himself placed particular emphasis on the role of mothers in shaping the character of their children. Bibi Hajera came from a deeply spiritual and scholarly family, being the sister of the prominent Sufi Sheikh Jamaluddin Ahmad Hanswi Chishti. She married Sheikh Mahmud bin Nasiruddin Hanswi and bore four

sons, the eldest of whom, Burhanuddin Gharib — affectionately called "Burhani" by his mother — became the elder brother of Hazrat Muntajibuddin Zar Zari Zar Bakhsh.²⁶ She is buried beside her son Zar Zari Zar Bakhsh, within the compound on the north-western side of his tomb complex at Khuldabad, Maharashtra.

5.8 Bibi Mehrunnisa

Bibi Mehrunnisa was a prominent spiritual figure in fourteenth-century Bengal, daughter of the Chishti Sufi Hazrat Akhi Siraj Usmani Chishti, known as "Aina-i-Hind."²⁷ Akhi Siraj was himself a direct disciple of Hazrat Khwaja Nizamuddin Auliya.²⁸ Bibi Mehrunnisa's marriage to Makhdum Hazrat Alaul Haq Pandavi, known as "Ganj-i-Nabat,"²⁹ significantly strengthened the spiritual and familial bonds between successive generations of Bengal's Chishti community. She is remembered as devoting herself entirely to her husband's household by day and to prayer and fasting by night, and is credited with articulating love as a medium of approach to God. She bore at least two children, including Hazrat Sheikh Nurul Qutb Alam, the revered fifteenth-century Sufi master. Her final resting place lies within the Chhoti Dargah complex at Pandua Sharif, Malda district, West Bengal.

5.9 Ladoo Bibi

The mother of the eighteenth-century Sufi saint and poet Hazrat Shah Niyaz Ahmed Chishti was named Bibi Lado, honorifically addressed as "Hazrat Bibi Garib Nawaz."³⁰ A woman of considerable spiritual standing, she was the daughter of Syed Maulana Saiduddin, who traced his descent from Imam Musa al-Kazim and who was himself among the spiritual successors of Hazrat Sheikh Kalimullah Shahjahanabadi of Delhi. Bibi Ladoo was a disciple of Hazrat Shah Mohiuddin Diyasarmi. Shah Niyaz is understood to have inherited his spiritual disposition from his mother from childhood; she in turn placed him under the guidance of Syed Fakhruddin Muhammad Dehlavi Chishti.

5.10 Bibi Aqsa

Bibi Aqsa, the mother of Hazrat Salim Chishti, was a deeply pious woman married to Sheikh Bahauddin Chishti; she died while her son, the future saint, was still young. Her lineage is highly revered, tracing back to the second caliph of Islam, Hazrat Umar al-Farooq, and to the celebrated Sufi saint Baba Farid Ganj-i-Shakar.³¹

5.11 Bibi Rani

Shaikh Nizamuddin Auliya first encountered the Kirmani family at their *jama'atkhana* in Ajodhan.³² Sayyid Muhammad Mahmud, a merchant of Kirman whose uncle served as mint officer in Multan,³³ married his uncle's daughter, Bibi Rani. Baba Farid entrusted Bibi Rani with charge of his *jama'atkhana*, and when Shaikh Nizamuddin Auliya arrived there, she cared for him as an elder sister would, presenting him with a *chadar* and personally washing and mending his clothes.³⁴ Bibi Rani left four sons; the eldest, Sayyid Nuruddin Mubarak, was the father of Amir Khurd, author of the *Siyar-ul-Auliya*. She is remembered as having cared for the residents of the *khanqah*, guilty and innocent alike, with maternal compassion.

5.12 Hazabara

Tradition holds that Sultan Ghiyasuddin Balban held Baba Farid in great esteem, and Ali Asghar Chishti records that the Shaikh married Balban's daughter, Hazabara,³⁵ giving a lengthy account of the marriage and of the relationship between the saint and the Sultan; later writers reproduced this account uncritically, and it subsequently acquired near-canonical status within the *Khanwadah-i-Faridiyah* tradition. There are, however, strong grounds for scepticism: Baba Farid is independently recorded as having had three wives and a large family,³⁶ whom he treated with equity,³⁷ and none of the principal contemporary sources — the *Fawa'id-ul-Fu'ad*, the *Khair-ul-Majalis*, and the *Ahsan-ul-Aqwal* — which otherwise furnish extensive detail on the Shaikh's life, mentions this marriage to the Sultan's daughter. According to the tradition as transmitted, Balban introduced Farid to his family and, when Hazabara was married to the Shaikh, the emperor stipulated that no costly gifts accompany her; Baba Farid is said to have distributed her jewels among the poor, and Hazabara thereafter lived a simple and materially modest life. The episode is best treated, in the absence of corroborating early sources, with considerable historiographical caution.

5.13 Umm-ul-Muminin

Sheikh Jamaluddin Hansavi died during the lifetime of his master, Baba Farid. His maidservant, known as Umm-ul-Muminin and herself a highly accomplished spiritual practitioner, brought Sheikh Jamal's young son, Maulana Burhanuddin, before Baba Farid.³⁸ Though the boy was still of tender age, the Shaikh conferred upon him the *khilafatnamah* and directed him to benefit thereafter from the company of Shaikh Nizamuddin in Delhi.³⁹ Surprised at this generosity toward so young a child, the maidservant is said to have protested, "Khwaja Burhanuddinbalahai" ("Khwaja Burhanuddin is [but] a child"), to which Shaikh Farid replied, "Pununkachandbhibalahotahai" ("The crescent moon, too, is small").⁴⁰

5.14 Bibi Masturah

Bibi Masturah, one of the daughters of Hazrat Baba Fariduddin Ganjshakar, was married to Sheikh Umar Sufi and was noted for her devotion to prayer and penitence. She left two sons, Khwaja Aziz-ud-Din Sufi and Khwaja Kabiruddin, both of whom spent their lives within the *jama'atkhana* of Shaikh Nizamuddin Auliya, who held them in great affection. Khwaja Aziz-ud-Din, a pupil of QadiMuhiuddin Kashani,⁴¹ was an accomplished calligrapher⁴² who recorded Shaikh Nizamuddin Auliya's discourses under the title *Tuhfat-ul-Abrar fi Karamat-ul-Akhyar*, a text later revised by the Shaikh himself. Shaikh Kabiruddin, like his brother, was devoted to prayer and penitence, and was likewise held in high regard by Shaikh Nizamuddin Auliya.⁴³

5.15 Bibi Fatimah

Baba Farid's youngest daughter, Bibi Fatimah, was married to Maulana Badruddin Ishaq. Shaikh Nizamuddin Auliya remained deeply grateful to Maulana Ishaq for the kindness shown to him during his residence at Shaikh Farid's *jama'at khana*.⁴⁴ Bibi Fatimah bore two sons, Khwaja Muhammad Imam and Khwaja Musa. Following Maulana Badruddin's death, Shaikh Nizamuddin Auliya, concerned for the education of the two boys, arranged for the family's relocation to Delhi. Malicious rumour subsequently circulated that Shaikh Nizamuddin had summoned Bibi Fatimah from Ajodhan with the intention of marrying her;

deeply shaken by this slander, he departed at once for Ajodhan, only to find upon his return to Delhi that Bibi Fatimah had already died.⁴⁵ The episode suggests that women of this period retained considerable freedom to pursue an independent life of religious observance. Her two sons remained under Shaikh Nizamuddin's guardianship, and he spared no effort in securing them the best available education: Khwaja Muhammad Imam memorised the Qur'an and distinguished himself as a scholar, while Khwaja Musa likewise committed the Qur'an to memory. The former subsequently received a *khilafatnamah* from Sheikh Nizamuddin Auliya and admitted disciples of his own during the saint's lifetime.⁴⁶

5.16 Bibi Daulat Naz

Shaikh Nizamuddin Auliya placed particular emphasis on the role of women in shaping the character of their children, and Bibi Daulat Naz — mother of the celebrated Sufi poet, scholar, and musician Amir Khusrau — exemplifies this theme. The daughter of Rawat Arz, who served as war minister under Sultan Ghiyasuddin Balban, she belonged to a family of Rajput descent long rooted in the Indian subcontinent and married Amir Saifuddin Mahmud.⁴⁷ Amir Khusrau was profoundly attached to his mother, whose guidance played a decisive role in directing him toward Sufism by introducing him to his spiritual master, Hazrat Sheikh Nizamuddin Auliya.⁴⁸ Her death in 1300 occasioned some of Khusrau's most poignant Persian verse, of which the following lines are representative:

*"A double radiance left my star this year. / Gone are my brother and my mother, /
My two full moons have set and ceased to shine, / In one short week through this
ill-luck of mine."*⁴⁹

5.17 Jamilah Khatun (Bibi Hajra)

Jamilah Khatun, also known as Bibi Hajra, was the mother of Hazrat Alauddin Sabir Kaliyari, the third spiritual successor of the Chishti order.⁵⁰ In 1204 she brought her son to Pakpattan, entrusting his upbringing to her brother, Baba Farid, who subsequently made him his disciple and placed him in charge of the *langar* (communal kitchen). Returning after a long absence to find her son in a state of visible deprivation, Bibi Jamilah confronted her brother in anger and demanded an explanation. Baba Farid explained that Alauddin had been placed in charge of the kitchen and ought not, therefore, to have lacked food; when questioned, Alauddin himself replied, "It is true that I was placed in charge of the kitchen, but I was never told that I might eat from it."⁵¹ The episode is preserved in Chishti tradition as an exemplar of scrupulous self-denial.

5.18 Jahanara Begum

Jahanara Begum, also styled Sahib-ud-Durrani, was the eldest daughter of the Mughal emperor Shah Jahan and elder sister of Aurangzeb, born in 1614 in Ajmer, at the heart of the Mughal domains. Well versed in the Qur'an and in Persian religious literature, she suffered severe burns in 1644 when her garments caught fire, an injury that court physicians were unable to heal and that greatly distressed the emperor. Later that year she undertook a pilgrimage to the shrine of Khwaja Moinuddin Chishti at Ajmer, following which she

recovered fully; in gratitude, she funded the construction of the shrine's marble pavilion, the Begumi Dalan.⁵²

Jahanara authored a biography of Khwaja Moinuddin Chishti entitled *Munis-ul-Arwah*. Devoted as she was to her father, she nonetheless regarded herself, in matters of spiritual knowledge, as his superior — a claim illustrated in her own account of having repeatedly assured Shah Jahan of the sayyid lineage of Khwaja Moinuddin, a matter he accepted only after independent verification. Elsewhere in the *Risala-i-Sahibiyah*, composed to record her wish to formally join the Chishti order — a wish that, as a woman, she was ultimately unable to have formally recognised — she wrote: "I am twenty-seven years old and do not wish to lose any more time. I want to become a disciple of some order... I carry a Chishti disciple in my heart."⁵³

She additionally owned a ship, the *Sahibi*, which carried pilgrims to Mecca and Madina from Surat, and directed that fifty *kharwars* of rice be sent annually by this vessel for distribution among the destitute of the holy cities. She financed the construction of the Jami Masjid at Agra (1648) and the Mullah Shah mosque at Srinagar, organised almsgiving on important religious occasions, and supported famine-relief efforts; she styled herself, in keeping with this spirit of renunciation, "Faqira."

Jahanara constructed her own tomb during her lifetime, in 1681; upon her death that same year, Aurangzeb conferred upon her the posthumous title *Sahibat-uz-Zamani*.⁵⁴ She is buried in the Nizamuddin Dargah complex, New Delhi, beneath an epitaph that reads:

*"Allah is the Living, the Sustaining. / Let no one cover my grave except with greenery, / For this very grass suffices as a tomb-cover for the poor, / The mortal, simplistic princess Jahanara, / Disciple of the holy men of Chisht, / Daughter of Shah Jahan the Conqueror. / May Allah illuminate his proof."*⁵⁵

6. Discussion and Critical Analysis

The eighteen biographical accounts assembled above permit several interpretive observations that move beyond mere chronicle toward historical analysis.

First, the women examined here occupied a limited but recognisable typology of roles: spiritual mother (Bibi Zulaikha, Bibi Qursum, Bibi Hajera, Bibi Daulat Naz, Bibi Aqsa, Ladoo Bibi), spiritual daughter and potential — though ultimately denied — successor (Bibi Sharifa, Bibi Masturah, Bibi Fatimah, Bibi Hafiza Jamal), custodian and household manager of the *khanqah* (Bibi Rani, Umm-ul-Muminin), and independent devotee or saint in her own right (Bibi Fatima Sam). This typology indicates that female religious influence within the Chishti order operated predominantly through kinship — as mother, wife, or daughter of a male saint — rather than through an independent institutional office, with Bibi Fatima Sam standing as the principal, and therefore historiographically significant, exception.

Second, the recurrent invocation of Baba Farid's statement regarding Bibi Sharifa — that he would have conferred the *khilafatnama* upon her had it been "permissible" for a woman to hold it — is analytically significant precisely because it was reportedly made twice, in connection with two different women (Bibi Fatima Sam and Bibi Sharifa). Its repetition

across the hagiographical record suggests less a spontaneous remark than a recognised discursive formula: an acknowledgment of individual female spiritual excellence that simultaneously reaffirmed, rather than challenged, the gendered boundaries of formal institutional authority. Female sanctity could be celebrated; female succession could not, as a rule, be institutionalised.

Third, the sources reveal that where women did exercise documented authority, it was most often exercised informally and domestically — through the management of a *jama'atkhana* (Bibi Rani), the moral formation of a future saint (Bibi Zulaikha, Bibi Daulat Naz), or acts of personal charity and intercession (Bibi Qursum, BadiBua). This pattern is consistent with broader historiographical findings on gender and religious authority in pre-modern Islamic societies, in which women's religious agency was frequently expressed through domestic and intercessory registers even where it was denied formal juridical or institutional recognition.

Fourth, a diachronic reading of the material suggests some loosening of these constraints by the Mughal period: Jahanara Begum's authorship of a hagiographical biography of Khwaja MoinuddinChishti, her explicit — if institutionally unfulfilled — wish for formal discipleship, and her considerable religious patronage indicate an expansion of elite female participation in Chishti devotional life, even as formal succession remained closed to her as it had to her thirteenth-century predecessors.

Finally, it must be acknowledged as a methodological limitation that the source base for this study is overwhelmingly hagiographical, composed by male authors for devotional and didactic purposes. The women who appear most prominently in these sources are, almost without exception, those connected by kinship to a canonised male saint; women without such connections, however significant their local religious influence may have been, are largely absent from the written record. The present study can therefore recover only those women whom the tradition itself chose to remember, and its conclusions should be read as an analysis of selective historical memory as much as of historical reality.

7. Conclusion

The role of women in the development of Sufism was not confined to formal religious office; as wives, sisters, mothers, and daughters, they materially assisted the men of the Chishti order, and their conduct and counsel exerted considerable influence upon them. Despite occasional stigma — even from among the most devoted Sufi masters — pious women were generally held in high regard; for the most part, they were not censured for exceeding the boundaries customarily placed upon women in medieval society, but were rather praised and honoured for their capacity to transcend such constraints.

In a meaningful sense, these women were regarded by their male contemporaries as spiritual equals, indicating that Sufism, at least in its early and formative phase, was more accommodating of female religious agency than many parallel institutions of medieval Indian society. Some among them, such as Bibi Fatima Sam, approached in reputation the stature of canonised women saints elsewhere in the Islamic world, such as Rabia al-Basri; their reputations continue to shape devotional memory at their shrines to this day. This study concludes that women were not peripheral but constitutive participants in the religious and

social life of the Chishti order, and that a fuller and more accurate historiography of medieval Indian Sufism must accord their contribution — spiritual, moral, and institutional, however circumscribed the last may have been — the sustained scholarly attention it has, until now, been largely denied.

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