International Journal of Social Science Research (IJSSR)
Volume- 3, Issue- 6 | November - December 2026 ISSN: 3048-9490

Sacred Space and Social Order: The Institutional Role of the Chishti Jama'atkhana in Medieval India

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Abstract

This paper examines the Chishti jama'atkhana as an institution that joined devotional practice to everyday social relations in medieval India. Focusing chiefly on Ajodhan and Ghiyaspur in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, it asks how a communal religious space organized belonging, material support, instruction, and authority. The study uses close reading of the English translation of the Fawa'id al-Fu'ad and a critical review of scholarship on Chishti hagiography, khanqah life, and Sufi authority. It identifies five connected practices: co-residence, shared hospitality, regulated access to the shaykh, ethical teaching, and ties between the hospice and the city. These practices could bring people of different occupations and ranks into repeated contact and could make generosity and service visible measures of moral standing. They did not abolish social distinctions or the shaykh's authority. Because the sources are prescriptive and commemorative, the paper treats them as evidence for institutional ideals and remembered practices rather than as complete records of daily life. It argues that the jama'atkhana made sacred space socially consequential through recurring material and relational practices.

Keywords: Chishti order; jama'atkhana; khanqah; medieval India; Nizamuddin Auliya; sacred space

1. Introduction

Studies of medieval South Asian Sufism have examined saints, lineages, devotional ideas, poetry, and the growth of shrines. These subjects remain essential, but they do not by themselves explain how spiritual authority became part of ordinary social life. The Chishti hospice offers a way to ask that question at the scale of repeated practice. In and around a jama'atkhana, people gathered, received food, listened to instruction, waited for access to a shaykh, and took part in routines that joined devotion to service. Khaliq Ahmad Nizami's study of khanqah life remains an important account of such institutional settings, while later scholarship has considered the social and political authority of Sufi shaykhs (Nizami 1957; Digby 1986, 1990).

This paper asks: how did the Chishti communal space turn religious ideals into a workable social order, and what limits did that order retain? Its focus is chiefly the Chishti networks associated with Ajodhan, identified with the teaching of Baba Farid, and Ghiyaspur near

Published: 24 November 2026
DOI: https://doi.org/10.70558/IJSSR.2026.v3.i6.301435
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Delhi, associated with Nizamuddin Auliya, during the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries. The paper uses jama'atkhana to mean the assembly hall at the centre of a hospice and, where the evidence describes an interdependent set of rooms and routines, the wider communal institution organized around that hall. It does not claim that medieval writers always used the word with this precise, uniform meaning. The term is an analytical focus for examining common space, not a claim to reconstruct a building plan.

The argument is that the jama'atkhana made sacred space socially consequential through a connected set of practices: co-residence, food and hospitality, controlled access to the shaykh, ethical instruction, and interaction with the surrounding city. These practices could suspend or soften some distinctions in particular encounters. They could also create obligations of service and make the shaykh's moral authority visible. Yet they did not produce a socially equal community. The shaykh remained the spiritual centre; access was selective; and the sources do not show that differences of gender, status, or occupation disappeared. The claim is therefore about a bounded moral order that worked within, and sometimes revalued, existing hierarchies.

The paper brings together strands of scholarship that are often discussed separately: the material routines of khanqah life, the genres through which Chishti memory was recorded, and the relationship between spiritual and political authority. It does not assume that these subjects have been ignored by earlier historians. Rather, it asks what becomes visible when they are considered as parts of one institution. This approach helps explain how a hospice could remain distinct from the formal apparatus of the Delhi Sultanate while still mattering to people living in the city and its hinterland. The sections that follow discuss the sources and method, the organization of shared space, hospitality and redistribution, pedagogy and sama', and the hospice's relationship with urban and political life.

2. Sources, Method, and the Jama'atkhana as an Institution

2.1 Sources and their limits

The principal narrative source used here is the Fawa'id al-Fu'ad, available in Bruce B. Lawrence's English translation as Morals for the Heart. The work preserves conversations associated with Nizamuddin Auliya and recorded by Amir Hasan Sijzi. Its dated entries include questions from visitors, recollections of earlier masters, comments on conduct, and accounts of devotional practice. It is therefore useful for examining how teaching was represented in social settings. It should not, however, be treated as an unmediated transcript. The conversations were selected, recorded, arranged, translated, and transmitted; their literary and commemorative form shapes what they can establish (Nizamuddin Auliya 1992).

A second relevant text is Amir Khurd Kirmani's Siyar al-Auliya, a fourteenth-century work combining biographies and remembered sayings associated with Chishti masters. This paper draws on the genre analysis by Tanvir Anjum and Adeela Ghazanfar rather than claiming to have independently collated a Persian edition. Their study emphasizes that the work does not fit neatly into modern categories such as biography, memoir, or collection of conversations. That observation matters because a source may preserve social ideals and remembered practice while also shaping them for moral instruction (Anjum and Ghazanfar 2018).

The analysis also uses historical studies by Nizami, Saiyid Athar Abbas Rizvi, Simon Digby, and Carl Ernst and Bruce Lawrence. Nizami's work provides a foundational account of khanqah life and of Nizamuddin Auliya; Rizvi places Chishti practice within a broader history of Indian Sufism; and Digby examines the forms of authority claimed by shaykhs in relation to rulers. Ernst and Lawrence help situate Chishti identity and practice across South Asia and beyond (Nizami 1957, 1991, 2002; Rizvi 1978; Digby 1986, 1990; Ernst and Lawrence 2002). These secondary works are used to contextualize the textual evidence, not to imply that all regions or Chishti communities followed an identical pattern.

2.2 Analytical procedure and working definition

The method is qualitative and historical. It reads descriptions of gatherings and routines for recurring relationships among space, authority, resources, and instruction. Five categories guide the reading: who could reside or assemble; how food and gifts moved; how access to the shaykh was represented; how ethical teaching was enacted; and how the hospice was connected to urban society and political power. These are not variables measured across a complete archive. They are interpretive categories used to organize evidence from selected narrative sources and published scholarship.

For this paper, an institution is understood as a recurring arrangement of roles, routines, norms, and material practices. The jama'atkhana is therefore studied not only as a room or a symbol but as a setting in which people met under recognizable expectations. The term sacred space describes a place made meaningful through religious orientation and repeated practice. It does not mean that the site stood outside ordinary material life. On the contrary, eating, sleeping, waiting, listening, serving, and distributing gifts are central to the analysis because they show how religious values could be enacted in daily relations.

The evidence places limits on the argument. The sources do not provide a complete architectural survey, a roster of all residents, continuous accounts of meals, or a count of visitors by social group. Hagiographical and instructional works privilege exemplary conduct and memorable episodes. The paper therefore makes claims about ideals, remembered practices, and the institutional possibilities that the sources disclose. It does not treat a normative account of hospitality as proof that every visitor received equal treatment, or a story of shared scarcity as a statistical description of diet. Nor does it infer conversion, social equality, or a fixed spatial plan from the presence of people at a hospice. These distinctions are necessary to use the sources without asking them to answer questions they were not designed to record.

3. Making Sacred Space: Co-residence, Routine, and Embodied Discipline

Co-residence was one of the most direct ways in which a hospice could turn an idea of spiritual companionship into a lived arrangement. Nizami's account of khanqah life describes residents sharing communal space and basic conditions, with sleeping, prayer, study, and service organized around the institution (Nizami 1957). Such descriptions make poverty more than a doctrinal theme: it appears as dependence on shared provisions and as a routine in which residents had to live alongside one another. The historical significance lies not in an

assumption that every inmate possessed the same resources, but in the repeated proximity that common life made possible.

Shared space could place residents within common routines, but it did not remove distinctions of role. A shaykh, senior disciples, attendants, family members, and temporary visitors did not occupy interchangeable positions. Authority over instruction and admission remained unequal. The communal hall should thus be read as a setting where hierarchy was reorganized and made visible, not as evidence that hierarchy had been abolished. The shaykh's authority acquired practical force through the conduct expected of others, while service and proximity could mark the standing of disciples within the community (Nizami 1957; Nizami 1991).

The hospice associated with Nizamuddin at Ghiyaspur is especially useful for thinking about degrees of access. The narrative tradition describes a setting in which visitors could assemble and receive hospitality, while encounters with the shaykh were shaped by time, circumstance, and relationship. Such accounts suggest a spatial and temporal distinction between public gathering and more restricted conversation. They do not amount to architectural plans, but they indicate that openness and selectivity could operate together. A person might enter a shared area without thereby gaining unrestricted access to the shaykh or to every part of the institution (Nizamuddin Auliya 1992; Nizami 1991).

Routine gave shared space a temporal structure. Prayer, remembrance, recitation, listening, conversation, and service appear in the sources as recurring practices, although the record does not supply a universal daily timetable. Repetition matters because it turns ethical instruction into something enacted among others. A lesson about humility, patience, or generosity could be tested in the ordinary circumstances of waiting, receiving food, responding to correction, or performing a task. In this sense, the jama'atkhana functioned as a place of formation without resembling a formal school with a fixed curriculum. Its pedagogy was relational: it depended on the presence of a teacher, the example of senior disciples, and the situations that arose in communal life.

Co-residence also made conduct observable. In a shared environment, the way a disciple served others, endured inconvenience, handled food, or responded to scarcity could become known to peers and seniors. The sources present these circumstances as morally significant. Stories about sharing food or bearing hunger together are best read as exemplary scripts that express desired conduct, not as comprehensive descriptions of every meal. This distinction preserves their value: even when a narrative is idealized, its emphasis on shared dependence reveals what the community wished to make honorable (Nizami 1957; Nizamuddin Auliya 1992).

The material arrangement of common life thus supported a particular account of faqr, or spiritual poverty. Poverty in this context was not simply a lack of possessions; it was represented as reliance on God, restraint in the use of resources, and obligation to companions. The body learned this ethic through sleeping, eating, serving, waiting, and listening in a common setting. These activities did not guarantee that every resident internalized the same values. They did, however, create repeated occasions on which the

values could be taught, observed, and affirmed as marks of Chishti conduct (Ernst and Lawrence 2002).

4. Hospitality, Langar, and the Redistribution of Status

If co-residence organized the hospice internally, hospitality connected it to people beyond its resident community. Accounts of Chishti practice emphasize the reception of visitors and the circulation of gifts. The term futuh is often used for gifts received without a formal demand; in the ideal represented by Chishti sources, resources were accepted and put to use rather than accumulated as private wealth. The importance of this practice was ethical as well as material. It allowed generosity to be seen in action and linked the shaykh's reputation to the care of residents and guests (Nizami 1957; Nizami 1991; Rizvi 1978).

The communal kitchen, or langar, made this ethic tangible. Food is a basic need, and its distribution can bring people into a shared encounter without requiring them first to share a level of learning or spiritual experience. The meal therefore carried social meaning: it could signal welcome, mark the institution's responsibility, and give practical form to the virtue of generosity. The sources portray food as part of a wider pattern that could include lodging, alms, counsel, and the reception of people seeking help. These practices support an interpretation of hospitality as an institutional routine rather than an occasional charitable gesture (Nizamuddin Auliya 1992; Nizami 1991).

This routine could temporarily recast status. A person of wealth or official standing and a poor traveller might both enter a setting where the shaykh's norms of giving and receiving shaped the encounter. Within that setting, service, humility, and closeness to the shaykh could carry moral weight that did not follow directly from wealth or office. The point is not that a meal made participants social equals in the wider city. Instead, the hospice made another scale of recognition available for a limited period and under particular rules. That scale could give the poor moral visibility without eliminating dependence or unequal authority (Digby 1986; Nizami 1991).

Claims of inclusivity therefore require precision. The evidence supports an image of hospitality across lines of rank and occupation, but it does not establish an unrestricted or universally accessible institution. Admission, discipleship, gender, and personal access remained structured. Nor does the presence of non-Muslim visitors, where reported in historical scholarship, by itself establish conversion or doctrinal blending. The social effect that can be argued more securely is repeated contact: people who otherwise occupied different positions could meet, receive service, make requests, or observe the conduct of the shaykh and disciples. The boundaries of that contact mattered as much as its openness.

The circulation of resources also connected local generosity to public reputation. Gifts brought into a hospice could support its residents and visitors; visible acts of distribution could strengthen confidence in the shaykh's care; and that confidence could in turn attract further visitors and resources. This is a plausible institutional cycle, but the surviving sources do not allow its scale to be quantified. It should not be described as a complete economy or a substitute for state provisioning. Rather, it shows how material circulation could reinforce a moral claim: the hospice was represented as a place where wealth was made socially useful

through giving and where the shaykh's authority was associated with care (Nizami 1957; Rizvi 1978).

Hospitality could also become important during insecurity. Narratives of people seeking refuge or assistance at a Chishti establishment express the remembered role of the hospice as a safe and responsive place. Such episodes should be treated as evidence of the institution's public image, not as proof that it could guarantee protection in every crisis. Their importance is that they link sacred space to practical urban needs. The hospice was not represented only as an escape from society; it could be imagined as a place from which people sought support while remaining connected to the city around it (Nizami 1991; Nizamuddin Auliya 1992).

5. Pedagogy, Sama', and the Production of Moral Authority

The jama'atkhana was also a place of learning, but its educational work was not organized around bureaucratic credentials. In the Fawa'id al-Fu'ad, questions and conversations are represented as occasions for instruction. A response might connect an immediate concern to humility, poverty, companionship, remembrance, or service. The form matters: teaching is shown as an interpretation of circumstances, not only as the delivery of abstract doctrine. This record permits the historian to ask how authority was enacted in conversation, while its literary form requires caution about treating each exchange as an exact transcript (Nizamuddin Auliya 1992).

Narratives of earlier masters extended instruction across generations. Nizamuddin's association with Baba Farid and the broader Chishti lineage placed local practice within a remembered chain of authorization and example. Such recollection did institutional work: it made the conduct of earlier teachers available as a standard for present disciples and gave local gatherings a connection to a wider silsila. The lineage did not make every Chishti community identical, but it offered a shared language for legitimacy and ethical continuity (Rizvi 1978; Ernst and Lawrence 2002).

Sama', the audition of devotional poetry and music, illustrates how emotional experience could be joined to discipline. Chishti traditions valued listening as a possible aid to remembrance and love of God, while debates over its permissibility made intention and supervision important. In an institutional setting, sama' was not simply an unregulated expression of feeling. Its meaning depended on who convened it, how participants understood it, and whether the practice was framed as spiritually appropriate. This helps show how the hospice could permit intense devotional experience while locating its interpretation within the authority of the shaykh (Ernst and Lawrence 2002; Rizvi 1978).

Moral authority was therefore neither only spontaneous charisma nor only formal office. It was sustained through repeated encounters in which the shaykh taught, judged conduct, received visitors, and was remembered by disciples. The institution provided recognizable settings for these interactions. Service obligations, patterns of access, hospitality, and the circulation of stories helped make authority durable beyond a single meeting. This does not mean the hospice had a bureaucratic structure comparable to the state. It means that charisma was supported by routines and relationships that could be repeated and recalled (Digby 1986; Nizami 1991).

Text extended this pedagogy beyond the physical presence of the teacher. A conversation recorded in the Fawa'id al-Fu'ad could be read later by people who had not attended the original gathering. Biographical and memorial writing could likewise present exemplary conduct to distant audiences. Anjum and Ghazanfar's analysis of the Siyar al-Auliya is useful here because it shows that such texts combine several functions rather than belonging to a single modern genre. Textual memory did not simply reproduce the social order of a hospice, but it could carry an image of proper conduct, authority, and lineage into other settings (Anjum and Ghazanfar 2018; Nizamuddin Auliya 1992).

The interaction between embodied practice and textual memory helps explain why the jama'atkhana mattered beyond its rooms. Residents and visitors encountered teaching through speech and service; readers encountered related ideals through recorded conversations and hagiographic narrative. In both cases, authority depended on interpretation: which stories were repeated, what conduct they praised, and how a lesson was related to a current situation. The institution and the text should not be collapsed into one another, but they can be understood as connected media through which Chishti norms were performed, remembered, and transmitted.

6. The Jama'atkhana, the City, and Political Power

The Chishti jama'atkhana operated in a political world shaped by the Delhi Sultanate, not outside it. Shaykhs could cultivate distance from official office while remaining connected to people who served in administration or the military, to rulers and nobles who knew their reputations, and to visitors who sought counsel or intercession. The distinction between holding state office and exercising social influence is central. A shaykh's authority could be moral, relational, and reputational even when it was not backed by coercive power (Nizami 2002; Digby 1986, 1990).

Digby's studies frame the relationship between Sufi shaykhs and sultans as a contest over claims to authority, while also warning against reducing that relationship to a simple opposition (Digby 1986, 1990). A shaykh could value distance from rulers yet become a point of reference in matters that affected political life. Visitors might include people with official roles, and the distribution of gifts could raise questions about dependence. Such contact did not erase the Chishti emphasis on moral independence, but it shows that separation from formal office was not the same as isolation from political society.

Ghiyaspur is often described as lying beyond the central urban core of Delhi, and its location has been interpreted as a form of productive distance. This should not be turned into a precise claim about a fixed boundary without additional topographical evidence. Analytically, the relevant point is that proximity and separation could coexist: a hospice might be near enough for urban residents and officials to visit while remaining symbolically distinct from the court. The shaykh's location could thus support a public identity based on access to the city without direct incorporation into state administration (Nizami 1991; Nizami 2002).

People could bring needs, disputes, petitions, and requests for prayer or advice to a hospice. The sources and scholarship suggest that such interactions formed part of the public role associated with a shaykh. They do not justify describing the jama'atkhana as an alternative

state. It lacked the state's coercive and administrative capacities. Its possible contribution was different: it provided a setting in which problems could be heard, moral judgment could be offered, and relationships of trust could be formed. The institution's public significance therefore lay in mediation and recognition, not in replacing formal government (Digby 1990; Nizami 2002).

This perspective also clarifies why material hospitality and political authority belong in the same analysis. Feeding visitors, hearing requests, and maintaining a reputation for restraint could reinforce the shaykh's standing among people outside the resident community. At the same time, the dependence of a hospice on incoming gifts made its relationship to wealth and patronage a continuing concern. Chishti ideals of distribution and distance from courtly favor were not proof that resources never came from elites. They were norms through which the use of resources could be evaluated. The tension between material need and moral independence is part of the institution's history, not a detail that can be resolved by calling it either apolitical or oppositional (Nizami 2002; Rizvi 1978).

7. Discussion: Sacred Space as a Social Institution

The evidence supports an institutional reading of sacred space. The jama'atkhana did not become socially important through symbolism alone. Its meaning was reinforced by practical arrangements: who could gather, how residents lived together, how food and gifts circulated, when visitors met the shaykh, and which forms of conduct were praised. These activities linked belief to recurring social situations. The space could therefore shape relations without being understood as a neutral container or as a complete model of society.

Five mechanisms stand out, but they worked together rather than as separate services. Co-residence made companionship and discipline part of daily life. Hospitality connected internal routines to visitors and to the city's needs. Regulated access made the shaykh available while preserving spiritual hierarchy. Pedagogy linked instruction to stories, questions, ritual, and example. Urban mediation gave the hospice a public presence without making it an arm of the state. Each mechanism helped make the others credible: generosity could strengthen moral reputation, reputation could draw visitors and gifts, and instruction could define how those gifts and relationships ought to be used.

The table summarizes these relationships and the limits of the available evidence. It is a synthesis of the paper's argument, not a claim that each mechanism operated identically in every Chishti centre or at every moment.

Table 1. Institutional mechanisms and their historical limits

Mechanism	Practice represented in sources	Possible institutional effect	Limit of inference
Co-residence	Shared living and routine	Discipline, visibility, companionship	Does not establish equal rank or uniform conditions

Hospitality	Food, gifts, lodging, alms	Publicly visible generosity and contact	Does not prove universal access or measured provision
Access	Assembly and selective meetings	Balances welcome with spiritual hierarchy	Narratives do not provide a complete access map
Pedagogy	Conversation, recollection, prayer, sama'	Transmits ethical norms through practice	Malfuzat and tadhkira are mediated sources
Urban mediation	Requests, counsel, and visits	Connects the hospice to public life	Does not make the hospice a substitute for the state

This model does not describe a social revolution. It shows a process of selective revaluation: service, restraint, and closeness to a shaykh could become morally valuable without erasing inherited distinctions or the authority of the shaykh. The distinction is important because modern descriptions sometimes turn hospitality into evidence of a fully classless or caste-free institution. The sources support a narrower and historically more defensible claim: the hospice created repeated moments of contact and reciprocity within boundaries that remained structured.

The institutional approach also shifts attention from the later shrine alone to the relationships formed during a saint's lifetime. The posthumous shrine and pilgrimage tradition became important subjects in their own right, but the remembered authority of a saint was connected to living practices of teaching, receiving guests, sharing resources, and making judgments. The jama'atkhana is therefore not simply an earlier version of the dargah. It is a distinct setting whose routines helped establish reputations and forms of affiliation that could later be remembered in shrine-centred traditions (Nizami 1991; Ernst and Lawrence 2002).

Finally, the argument is deliberately bounded by the nature of the evidence. It concerns selected Chishti narratives and the contexts of Ajodhan and Ghiyaspur, not every hospice in medieval India. The sources privilege exemplary male teachers and disciples, and they say less about the experiences of women, casual laborers, or visitors who left no written record. Further work could compare additional Chishti centres, examine Persian editions alongside translations, and bring textual accounts into conversation with inscriptions, endowment records, and archaeological evidence. Such work could test how far the institutional patterns identified here travelled across regions and periods.

8. Conclusion

The Chishti jama'atkhana of medieval India was more than a devotional hall or a charitable shelter. It was an institution in which religious ideals were tied to repeated practices of

dwelling, eating, serving, listening, teaching, and meeting visitors. Through these practices, the hospice could form a bounded community and make generosity, discipline, and service visible measures of moral standing. Its authority was sustained through relationships and routines as well as through the reputation of the shaykh. The answer to the paper's central question is therefore qualified. The communal space made sacred ideals workable by organizing contact, access, resources, and instruction. It could soften selected status distinctions in particular encounters and provide a public source of moral mediation. It did not abolish social hierarchy, guarantee equal access, or replace the state. The shaykh's position remained central, and the evidence is shaped by texts that preserve ideals and memories rather than complete records of daily life. Reading the jama'atkhana institutionally makes it possible to connect the history of religion with the social history of the city and the history of authority under the Delhi Sultanate. It shows that sacred space was produced through material and relational practice, not only through belief or later commemoration. A fuller account will require comparison across sites and closer engagement with Persian source editions and material evidence. Even within the limits of the available sources, the Chishti case demonstrates how everyday organization could give religious authority a durable social presence without formal political office.

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