

**SUFISM: A HISTORICAL CONTEXT**

**Dr. Sarita Rana**, Head, PG.Deptt. of History, Dasmesh Girls College, Mukerian, Distt, Hoshiarpur, Punjab, India

**Abstract:**

Sufism, rooted in early Islamic mysticism, emerged in the 8th century as a response to the rigidity of religious orthodoxy. Its origins trace back to figures like Rabia al-Basri and Hasan al-Basri, who emphasized the inner spiritual journey and the direct experience of the divine. Over time, Sufism diversified into various orders, such as the Qadiriyya and the Mevlevi, each with its unique practices and teachings. Sufi masters, known as "shaykhs," played a central role in transmitting spiritual knowledge and guiding disciples. Despite facing periods of persecution, Sufism spread across the Islamic world, influencing art, literature, and philosophy, and leaving a profound impact on Islamic spirituality.

**Key words:**

Mysticism, Sufism, Mahhafah, Bhakti, Zikr, Vedantic

Mysticism is the experience of achieving direct apprehension of a unity, a oneness<sup>1</sup>, between man and his God, not through the medium of the senses but through the inward perception of the mind.<sup>2</sup> As forms of mysticism are found in all major religion.<sup>3</sup> Mystical experience is not necessarily a religious phenomenon. Although, it may give mystic feeling of peace, joy and ecstasy, independent of religious framework, the followers of different religions can operate mystically within the laws of their own creed. Therefore we have Hindu mysticism, Jewish mysticism, Christian mysticism, Islamic mysticism and Buddhist mysticism.<sup>4</sup> Islamic Mysticism manifested itself as Sufism.<sup>5</sup>

By Sufism we mean 'interiorization' in the rites of worship and a deep and restless devotion to God, to the exclusion of all earthly ties. The germination of mystic spirit may be traced back to the days of the Prophet who himself used to retire to the cave of *hira* to meditate for certain period of time every year.<sup>6</sup> In this sense, Sufism is a purely Islamic discipline which builds up the character and inner life of the Muslims by imposing ordinances and duties, obligations and impositions which may not be abandoned in any way by any man. The prophet Muhammad was sent to "instruct" mankind, in Scripture and wisdom and to sanctify them. The Sufis keep these "instructions" before their eyes, strive their utmost to perform what has been prescribed for them to do, subsequent to that prescription.<sup>7</sup>

There are Mystic's – though few and far between in all religion and countries of the world. The try (1) to know, or as they say "experience" God (2) to feel, or "have the intuition of" God, and (3) to strive after or "try to approach" or "love". God in ways and manners particularly their own.<sup>8</sup> Their methods and practices called Mysticism are merely attempts "to experience God in oneself"- to know, feel and strive after the world- soul in one's own soul or rather in one's own body soul. When the mystics try to experience God by the way of intellect, are called as *Arifs* (by Muslims) and *Gnanis* (by Hindus).<sup>9</sup> Those who try to experience God by way of ecstasy, they are called *Ashiqs* (by Muslims) and '*Bhagats*' (by Hindus). But there is third class of mystics who are "the salt of the earth". They try to experience God, not only by the way of combined intellect and ecstasy i.e. by the way of worship, service and sacrifice, called as *Saliks* (by Muslims) *Radhaswami* or *Dayalis* ( may be by the Hindus).<sup>10</sup>

The Sufism is difficult to define because it had no dogma, and differed in some measure with each sufi both in principle and in practice. Some have traced it to the *suffa* or the verandah attached to the Apostle's mosque in Medina. Others find its origin in purity of *safa*, the essence of mysticism being purity of the heart of the spirit.<sup>11</sup> Some say that the term Sufi derived from the word 'soof' means wool i.e. wearer's of wool<sup>12</sup> (i.e. coarse garments of the ascetic).<sup>13</sup> Some believe that it has originated from 'Siya *Soofa*' (a Greek Word), which means divine knowledge.<sup>14</sup>

Moreover, the term Sufism is defined differently by different scholars. The sufi is he who has nothing bound to himself and who is not bound to anything.<sup>15</sup> The philosophy of the Sufis is the result of direct experience, they dug it out from their own being. A Sufi has a remarkable readiness to obey the dictates

of the Divine law. His life of worship is his mission and message. He beholds in high esteem the commandments of his beloved, the lord.<sup>16</sup> Sufism is that mode of the religious life in Islam in which the emphasis is placed, not so much on the performances of external rituals as on the activities of the inner self. In other words, it signifies Islamic mysticism.<sup>17</sup>

Early Sufism is not at all a philosophical or mystical system, but only an ethical one. It based on two main characteristics, asceticism and quietism.<sup>18</sup> Infact, the Sufis were not the followers of Islam in its strict sense. The Sufi movement was one of ascetism.<sup>19</sup> The early Sufis were orthodox Muslims, both theoretically and practically. Theoretically, they were ardent believers in the teachings of Quran and the tradition, only they over emphasized certain points in them to the exclusion of others. Practically too, they followed religiously, the rites and rituals of the Islam.<sup>20</sup>

Sufism is an “inward” path of union, which complements the Sharaih or “outward” law, namely, esoterism, the formal “clothing” of religion. Sufism is esoterism, the perception of the supra formal essence which is “seen” by the “eye of heart”.<sup>21</sup> The Sufi path called ‘tariqah’ is all important in Sufism just as in Yoga and Bhakti mysticism, the real emphasis is on the method and manner of approach to the spiritual problem. The Sufi path ‘Tariqat’ is corresponding to the Chinese Tao, the via Mystica of Christain theology, the Marg or Path of Sikh mysticism, the Dhamma pada of Budhism ; and the Yoga of Hindu theism. It embodies the old Greek idea of ‘Method’ i.e. ‘the way beyond’. This mystic path or method is actually a process of self-discipline.<sup>22</sup>

The Sufis divide the path into three movements: a) *Mahhafah* : “the way of fear” or “purification”, b) *Mahabbah* : “the way of love” or “sacrifice and conformity”, c) *Marifah* : “the way of knowledge”. The knowledge out here is not mere mental knowledge, but identity between the knower and the object of knowing. This is why the Sufi is highest or final degree is called the “knower of God”. The three fold division of Path into *mahhafah*, *mahabbah*, *marifah* is equivalent of vedantic *ternary karma* (action), *bhakti* (devotion) and *jnana* (knowledge).<sup>23</sup> The Sufis believed that in their journey to God or in God, *zikr* (remembrance) is the shortest route. So as such, they have always given preference to *zikr* over *salat* (prayer)<sup>24</sup>. In one of the authoritative texts of Sufism the *Kitab-al-luma*, Abu Nasr al-Sarraj enumerates seven *maqamat* that have become famous in later Sufism includes: repentance (*taubah*), abstinence (*wara*), renunciation (*zuhd*), poverty (*faqr*), patience (*sabr*), trust (*tawakkul*), and satisfaction (*rida*). In this context there was two kinds of repentance one is repentance of fear (fear of divine punishment), repentance of love (shame at Divine mercy), means *tauba* helps in raising the curtain between man and God. Repentance leads to abstinence and self-mortification. The essential requisite of a spiritual life is that the power soul must be purified, so that it may not act as a hindrance to the spiritual vision of the heart and the spirit. Abstinence goes hand in hand with renunciation, which implies not only “an empty hand, but also an empty heart”, not only lack of objects, but also lack of any desire for them.<sup>25</sup> The result of renunciation, is regarded as one of the pillars of Sufism. Abu Muhammad Rawaym- ibn Muhammad said: Poverty is the non-existence of every existent thing and the abandonment of every lost thing. The next is patience an auxiliary of poverty, means bearing all hardship for the sake of God. Trust is also God which is the other side of patience. It often led to a quietism of an extreme form, a do nothing attitude to life.<sup>26</sup> The result of trust, means relinquishing will in complete obedience to God. But these are preliminary stations/stages, only the beginning but not an end.

Thus, on the spiritual path of union with God the salik has to disentangle the roots of the soul from the psycho-physical world to which they are attached and plunging them in Divine. It means, therefore, a radical transformation of the soul, made through the grace of revelation and imitation, until the soul becomes worthy of becoming the bride of the spirit and entering into union with it. To reach God, the soul must become God like. For this, he needs a spiritual guide and has to pass through the spiritual stations and states. The soul must experience the spiritual virtues which it must acquire and which mark the degrees of the ascent of the soul towards God. Infact, each virtue is a station through which the soul must pass and which it must experience in a permanent way.<sup>27</sup>

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