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GRACE AND CHARISMA IN THE LIVES OF FEMALE SAINTLY FIGURES: SOME ANECDOTES IN MEDIEVAL INDIAN SUFI LITERATURE*

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The institutions of Sufis have long been open for women to seek blessings and benediction. Despite patriarchal restrictions in society, some women themselves have gone on to distinguish themselves with charisma and power which they used for the benefit of the people. The medieval Indian Sufi literature has for long referred to women in respectful terms. The literature includes anecdotes related to saintly women, making them recognized in both popular perception and in Sufi fraternities as evolved and blessed souls in their own right. Some examples of episodes from the lives of some such charismatic personalities from the Delhi Sultanate will be analyzed in this article to illustrate how they were valued in their own times and celebrated as well as invoked in posterity. The shrines of some of them remain important for centuries after their death. Sufi tradition believes saints never die. They continue to function for general public weal even as they lay resting in their graves. Thus, their tombs attract large numbers of people, especially on Thursday nights and on the occasion of *'urs*, that is, their death anniversary. Central to all these are love for God and service to humanity.

Keywords: Sufism, female Sufis, *hikayat, karamat*, Persian literature, women in history, medieval India

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БЛАГОДАТЬ И ХАРИЗМА В ЖИЗНИ ЖЕНЩИН-СВЯТЫХ: ИСТОРИИ ИЗ СУФИЙСКОЙ ЛИТЕРАТУРЫ СРЕДНЕВЕКОВОЙ ИНДИИ

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Институты суфиев всегда были открыты для женщин, искавших благодати и благословения. Несмотря на патриархальные ограничения в обществе, некоторые женщины смогли проявить себя, используя харизму и власть на благо общества. Литература индийского средневековья издавна проявляла уважение к женщинам. Эта литература включает истории о святых женщинах, признанных возвышенными и благословенными душами как в обществе, так и в суфийских братствах. В статье рассматриваются эпизоды жизни этих харизматических личностей времён Делийского султаната, чтобы проанализировать, как этих женщин воспринимали современники и потомки. Усыпальницы некоторых из них сохраняют значение в течение многих веков, ибо, по мнению суфиев, святые не умирают и даже из могилы продолжают свою деятельность

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на благо общества. Эти усыпальницы привлекают множество верующих, особенно в ночь четверга и во время *'урса*, годовщины успения. Главными для них оставались любовь к Богу и служение людям.

Ключевые слова: суфизм, женщины-суфии, *хикаят, карамат*, литература на фарси, женщины в истории, средневековая Индия

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ham ishq talab kuni wa ham jaan khwahi
har dow talabi wali muyassar na-shawad!
You seek love, and life as well
Both desires can't be fulfilled!
[Bibi Fatima Sam of Delhi, thirteenth century, quoted in *Fawa'id-ul-Fu'ad*, p. 416].

I. Introduction

This article discusses some enchanting anecdotes (*hikayat*) from a large corpus of medieval Indian Sufi literature. The stories which will be analyzed here are recorded in Sufi texts in Persian, mainly from the period of the Delhi Sultanate. The stories of miracles and other anecdotes in Sufi texts frequently relate to a Sufi shaikh flying on a camel-back to Mecca for Hajj; walls floating in the air at the command of a Sufi; rivers getting dried up to let the Sufi shaikh cross; a river of molten silver flowing underneath the prayer carpet of the saint; soil, stone, firewood transformed into gold; revival of the dead; many cases of spiritual healing for which the people would crowd hospices and shrines; ability to see distant places and to foresee the good and the evil in future, etc. [for some relevant discussion, see Aquil, 2017; also see, for key features of Sufism in Indian history, Rizvi, 1978; Eaton, 1978; Digby, 1986; Alam, 2004 and 2021; Green, 2006; Kugle, 2016; and Viitamaki, 2016].

It is possible to think of these tales as important source through which one can enter Sufi fraternities and their worldview to write a more nuanced history. Recounting these anecdotes and seeing meanings in them will be an attempt towards the recommended practice of interdisciplinary research. Anecdotes involving women make the exercise intersectional as we shall see below. Some of the tales are of folkloric nature referring to tropes which can be part of folklore studies. These are narrated by highly educated Sufi masters and recorded in Persian by poets and writers associated with them. These are, thus, not merely transmitted in the public domain orally, but have a long history of recorded antecedents and versions. Many of these are related to men and women who were historically known to the narrators such as Khawja Hazrat Nizam-ud-Din Auliya, in *Fawa'id-ul-Fu'ad*, the famous collection of his spiritually soaked conversations, *malfuzat*, compiled by Amir Hasan Sijzi [for Nizam-ud-Din's life as a leading Sufi figure in Delhi, see Nizami, 1991b]. In such cases, these can be used as alternative source material of the kind conventional historians are comfortable with — in terms of the reliability of information derived from them. These are, thus, also important for the field of the history of religion and spirituality in the Sultanate period of Indian history [for the history of the Delhi Sultanate, see Jackson, 1999; Kumar, 2007].

The examples of the tales in which women are the main protagonists makes the exercise intersectional. This is important in a context in which prevailing patriarchal attitudes could demean women and question how could some of them behave like men. Rigorous demands of Sufi spirituality, excruciating meditational practices and distancing from this-worldly desires, made it a position that was beyond the usual traits of masculinity. Sometimes it bordered on madness of the kind Majnun

showed for Laila, or qualified appreciation of Rabiya Basari's fanatical love for God and all his creations, which included a stray she-dog which was fed at her door every night. Presence of resourceful women personalities such as Fatima Bin Sam and mothers of Sufi masters such as Shaikh Farid-ud-Din Ganj-i-Shakar and Nizam-ud-Din Auliya make the narratives compelling and authoritative in a community that was emotionally charged in its love for God and service to humanity [for details of the life of Shaikh Farid, the foremost Sufi of Punjab, see Nizami, 1991a]. These could include miracles as a source of benevolence through Sufis' graceful presence, *jamal*. Some stories could also reveal the wrathful feature of Sufis' credentials, *jalal*, especially when dealing with irritating antagonists. Some of the stories of conflict with opponents detail fantastic performance of miracles in which the supremacy of the Sufis was sought to be established. These are something which modern historians searching for hard facts in government files cannot handle. Indeed, they take readers some time to a world beyond the normal and this worldly to an imaginatively rich realm of the paranormal, explained in Sufi terms as *khirq-i-'adat*.

The *khanqah*s and *dargah*s of Sufis (*Sufiya* or *Auliya*) have long been open for women to seek blessings and benediction. Despite patriarchal restrictions in society, some women themselves have gone on to distinguish themselves with charisma and power which they used for the benefit of the people. The medieval Sufi literature — *malfuzat* and *tazkira*s, besides other genres — have for long referred to women in respectful terms. The literature includes *hikayat* and *karamat* attributed to saintly women, making them recognized in both popular perception and in Sufi fraternities as evolved and blessed souls in their own right. Some examples of episodes from the lives of some such charismatic personalities from the Delhi Sultanate will be given below to illustrate how they were valued in their own times and celebrated as well as invoked in posterity. The *dargah*s of some of them remain important for centuries after their departure from this perishable world. Sufi tradition believes saints never die. They continue to function for general public weal even as they lay resting in their graves (*mazar*s) and, thus, their tombs (*dargah*s) attract large numbers of people, especially on Thursday nights (*juma'rat*) and on the occasion of the *'urs*, that is, the death anniversary of the *buzurg* or saint buried there. Love for God and service to humanity remain central to all traditions of Sufism generally. These are conceptually articulated in Sufi traditions as *ishq-i-ilahi* (love for the divine), *tazkiya-i-nafs* (cleansing of the lower self), and *khidmat-i-khalq* (service and care for all the creations of God, which not only includes human beings, but also animals, plants and all objects). Sufis as evolved human beings are, thus, expected to represent what are identified as the best traditions of Islam in terms of grace and beauty of faith (*ihsan* and *iman*). Such persons are filled with thoughts of love for God and His creations [for more detailed explanations of the evolution of these features of Sufism, see Karamustafa, 2007; Chittick, 2007; *Kashf-ul-Mahjub* remains the oldest classic text on Sufi theory].

Majnun's madness for Laila epitomized the ideal of pain endured for seeking union with the beloved. A couple of interesting anecdotes illustrate the point further. Once people were busy in a congregational prayer. Majnun disrupted the prayers of the *namazi*s by wandering in their midst. Finishing the namaz quickly, they gheraoed and confronted Majnun, and accused him of acting like an uncultured infidel, or *kafir*. Majnun inquired what was his fault, had he said anything? He was told he was blindly roaming around in front of the rows of *namazi*s — a terrible violation of norms regarding proper conduct during prayers. Majnun responded that he was so engrossed in the thought of Laila that he never noticed anyone praying while walking across the corridor, but what sort of lovers of God you are that you were engaged in a conversation with Him and yet you noticed my presence? Sufis thought Majnun was better than the 'normal' people, and they were better than Majnun! Another anecdote relates to Majnun's reaction on hearing the news of Laila's death. Since Majnun lamented wasting his life for a perishable Laila, whereas Sufis devoted themselves in their love for eternal God [*Fawa'id-ul-Fu'ad*, p. 35].

II. Hikayat-i Sufiya: Anecdotes in Sufi literature

Rabiya of Basra

Generations of Sufi figures — male or female — were inspired by the extraordinary credentials of Rabiya of Basra in Iraq in her love for God (*ishq-i-Ilahi*), the principal obsession in the Sufi *tariqa* or path. Belonging to the early generation of the Sufis, Rabiya Basri set the agenda by example of what it means to be a Sufi lover of God. Of the many stories relating to Rabiya, who was feared and respected for her iconoclasm, one is particularly instructive. It is the anecdote about her madly rushing around with a bucket full of water in one hand and a bucket carrying fire in the other. When the people stopped and inquired about her intention, she replied that she was going to set the paradise on fire and she will also extinguish the hell-fire. She was protesting that people worship God either out of fear of hell or for the rewards of heaven. Few people worship God just for the love of Him!

Alarmed by the cynical approach of the conservative custodians of religious practices, some of her followers feared that she will be punished by God for her deviance and disrespect for traditional norms of Islam. Happily for them, one of the disciples later saw her in a dream, to his assurance and to the satisfaction of the larger fraternity of devotional Islam of the Sufi kind, that Allah had forgiven all her acts of omission or commission, *gunah*, just for the fact that she used to feed a stray dog outside her home every night.

Sufis have always faced with the challenge of complete dependence on God to the extent that they would not seek help from Him for even a mere creature comfort. They would endure embarrassing poverty both as a test in their faith in all-knowing God's wisdom and as excruciating sacrifice in their love for him. The advice in the Qur'an is not to plead for help from people, nor to turn down any request from them for some favour. The Prophet explained that those seeking help should not be humiliated, nor any help sought from people. If at all, one should seek help from the beneficent God. Elaborating on this, 'Ali Hujwiri has related an anecdote to the effect that a prosperous man (*ahl-i-duniya*) once told Rabiya that she could ask for any help from him whenever needed; he will give whatever she required (*chizi bekhwah az man ta muradat haasil kunam*). Surprised at the audacity of the man, Rabiya retorted: she was ashamed to ask for anything from God, the creator of the world, how could she shamelessly ask for help from the God's creature, someone like her only (*sharm na daram keh az chun khwishtani khwaham*) [*Kashf-ul-Mahjub*, p. 526]?

Dargah of Bibi Fatima Sam

Several references to the spiritual excellence of Bibi Fatima Sam of thirteenth-century Delhi are recorded in Sufi discourses related to Nizam-ud-Din Auliya and his successors in the Chishti order (*silsila*). Later, during the Mughal era, Shaikh Abdul Haqq Muhaddis Dehlawi brought together some of the details from the life of Bibi Fatima Sam in his *Akhbar-ul-Akhyar*, which is the finest collection of biographies of Indian Sufi figures from the Sultanate period onwards [*Akhbar-ul-Akhyar*, pp. 582–585; *Fawa'id-ul-Fu'ad*, pp. 35–36, 416–418].

Bibi Fatima Sam was like a sister to Shaikh Farid-ud-Din Ganj-i-Shakar (Baba Farid of Pak Patan, in Punjab, now in Pakistan) and his brother who was based in Delhi, Shaikh Najib-ud-Din Mutawwakil. Nizam-ud-Din Auliya is quoted by Abdul Haqq Muhaddis as saying that for Bibi Fatima Sam feeding the poor was the most meritorious of all the pious activities. According to her, offering a loaf of bread with a glass of water in the name of God would accrue such blessings from the latter that was not possible to elicit even from lakhs of days of fasting and praying. This was in conformity with the Prophetic tradition, according to which people visiting Prophet Muhammad would not leave before eating things such as

bread and dates. Even if the Prophet is known to have proclaimed, "my poverty is my pride", there was a lot of emphasis in early Islamic sources, Qur'an and Hadith, on feeding the poor and the needy [for a brief overview of the evolution of Muslim philosophical thinking on poverty from the medieval era to contemporary times, see Khan and Khan, 2023].

Returning to Bibi Fatima Sam, whose *mazar* is located in a small but conspicuous tomb, in Delhi, was a formidable character and commanded a lot of respect in the Sufi circle of her time (thirteenth century). Her charitable endeavours, reputation as someone who had performed the pilgrimage of *hajj* in Mecca, in Arabia, and maintained the sanctity of the ritual purification all her life, as well as ability to dabble in extempore poetry were a source of a lot of popularity [for the arduous, but spiritually blissful journey for *hajj* even three centuries later, see Kugle, 2021]. Fatima Sam could definitely ward off the fakes, pretending love for God and simultaneously seeking pleasures of the body, contradiction in terms, with a rhetorical composition. Enchanted by her personality, Hazrat Nizam-ud-Din, who considered mysticism as an act of *mardangi*, that is, an exercise in masculinity, famously commented that when a lion comes out of its den, no one dares ask whether it was male or female [*Fawa'id-ul-Fu'ad*, pp. 35–36]! In another anecdote, Nizam-ud-Din narrated how he was able to hedge her advice to get married to the daughter of a person known to her, as he was already a dedicated disciple of Shaikh Farid and committed to lead the life of a Sufi renunciant, distancing from the materialism of the world. This renunciation of the Sufis (*tark-i-duniya*) called for an austere lifestyle, not running away for meditation in the jungle, but living with people and serving them in ways possible, which included charitable endeavours and praying for their well-being [*Fawa'id-ul-Fu'ad*, pp. 417–418].

Karamat by Baba Farid's mother

Farid-ud-Din Ganj-i-Shakar had informed his disciples that his mother was known for her mystical attainments. Once a thief broke into their house when all the inmates had retired for the night except for his mother who was engrossed in her prayers. The moment the thief entered the house, he lost his sight. Not knowing how to escape from there, the thief exclaimed that the inmates of that house were like his family members. Whoever is there in the house it can be said with certainty that the terror created by their very presence has blinded him (*az mahabat-i u kur shudam*). He sought forgiveness and intercession: 'Pray that my sight is restored. I repent and swear that I will not commit theft for the rest of my life'. On hearing the thief's invocations, the shaikh's mother prayed for the restoration of his sight. Having got his vision back the thief left the house. His mother kept silent about the incident. Later, in the morning, the thief returned along with his family, narrated the account of the previous night's encounter and converted to Islam at the hands of the shaikh's mother (*amadeh-am ba-ahl-i bait-i khwud ta musalman shawam*) [*Siyar-ul-Auliya*, p. 98; for a report on how the family lost her in a jungle on way from Delhi to Ajodhan, see *Akhbar-ul-Akhyar*, pp. 585–586].

Bibi Zulaikha's blessings

Hazrat Nizam-ud-Din Auliya used to refer to his mother, Bibi Zulaikha, as a saintly woman who was wholly dedicated in her devotion to God. During their days of penury when there was nothing to cook at home, she used to tell the children that they were guests of God, even if she would be pretending to be seen cooking something. For Nizam-ud-Din as a child, the very idea of being a guest of God was a matter of great pleasure and satisfaction.

Later in life whenever Nizam-ud-Din was in trouble, he would visit her grave, in Delhi, and seek her blessings as was the case during the struggle with Sultan Qutb-ud-Din Mubarak-Shah Khalji (ruled 1316–1320), who was continuously harassing him. Though his own close associate Khusrau Khan

assassinated the Sultan, Nizam-ud-Din believed he was eliminated due to his mother's curse. He had visited her grave and placed the matter of Sultan's harassment, which needed to be settled else he would not be able to visit her grave fearing his own death at the hands of the tyrant [for a detailed biographical sketch of Bibi Zulaikha, see *Akhbar-ul-Akhyar*, pp. 586–588].

Bibi Sarah

Bibi Sarah was a saintly mother of another early Sufi in Delhi, Shaikh Nizam-ud-Din Abul Mu'ayyad. There is an anecdote about how Delhi was facing a long period of drought, and prayers of people for rain did not help. Nizamuddin took out a thread from the lower end of his mother's skirt (*daaman*). He then waved it looking at the sky and pleading to God: This thread is from the skirt of this pious woman, who has remained protected from the gaze of a stranger (*na-mahram*, who is not allowed to enter a woman's apartment in a purdah culture). Send rain on account of her chastity. Even when the sentence was not completed, it started raining. This anecdote is narrated by Abdul Haq Muhaddis Dehlawi [*Akhbar-ul-Akhyar*, 582].

In the older version of this miracle, which was narrated by Nizam-ud-Din Auliya, a piece of cloth from Bibi Sarah's skirt was used by her son in his prayers, though her name is not mentioned. A group of distressed people came to Shaikh Nizam-ud-Din Abul Mu'ayyad and asked to lead a congregational prayer for rain. Agreed to give a sermon, the Shaikh ascended the pulpit in front of a large gathering. The people noticed that he had stopped his speech to bring out a cloth from his arms and waved it in the sky, reciting something (which was understood through his lip movement). Soon, it started drizzling. The Shaikh then got busy with his sermon. As the drizzle seemed stopping, the Shaikh took out the cloth and waved again. This time the rain came pouring down! On returning home, when inquired about the garment used by him, he replied: it was his mother's skirt, *guft daaman-i walidah-i man bood* [*Fawa'id-ul-Fu'ad*, p. 438]. Her grave is in south Delhi, not far from the tomb of Khwaja Qutb-ud-Din Bakhtiyar Kaki (died 1235). The latter was the successor (*khalifa*) of Khwaja Mu'in-ud-Din Sijzi Ajmeri (died 1236), in the Chishti order of Sufism in medieval India [for a long history of Chishti Sufism, see Ernst and Lawrence, 2002].

Bibi Auliya and her spiritual dedication

In the section on female saintly personalities in his *Akhbar-ul-Akhyar*, Abdul Haqq Muhaddis has also written a short biographical note on Bibi Auliya of Delhi. The despotic Sultan Muhammad bin Tughlaq (ruled 1325–1351) was devoted to her. She was known for enduring all the excruciating pain in spiritual exercises which the most accomplished Sufis were known for practicing. According to reports, she would shut herself in the inner chamber (*hujra*) for meditation for forty days (*chilla*). During this period, she would keep forty pieces of cloves with her. When she would come out after completing the forty-day *chilla*, people would notice that she had taken only a few pieces of cloves, the remaining ones would be lying there. Eating very little or not eating at all is a much recommended act in Sufi discourses. Bibi Auliya had shown it was possible and necessary to overpower hunger [*Akhbar-ul-Akhyar*, p. 588].

III. Concluding Remarks

To sum up, these evolved human beings, saintly women in this case, dedicated their lives in pursuit of ethical and moral conduct in Sufi spirituality, which brought them near to God. This, in turn, helped them acquire some paranormal powers, perceived ability to perform miracles, *karamat*, for which they became popular in their own life and in times to come. The blessed atmosphere of the Sufi *dargah*s guides people for becoming better human beings and also helps resolve their spiritual and material

concerns — some mercy and kindness. These are particularly relevant in times of so much intolerance, hate and violence in the name of religion. The Sufis would have wondered: God has made everything; did He make a mistake by making someone a woman?

It is possible to understand the anecdotes in Sufi literature from the vantage points of disciplinary practices of folklore studies, history of religion, literary history, and gender and intersectionality. The stories involving women particularly highlight the powers of ethical and moral precepts stressed by those charismatic personalities; women who commanded respect in a society and fraternity that was clearly patriarchal and homosocial. The Sufis took a position that was different from the usual male dismissal of women as problematic, including maintaining ambiguities on participation of women in *mahfil-i sama'*, musical assemblies. Anecdotes of the kind narrated above testify to the major presence of women in Sufi fraternities, sometimes performing miracles of the kind generally attributed to male saints. Some boundaries were certainly being broken.

As in most attempts at achieving excellence in Islamic societies, the practices of the Prophet were considered as the ideal to follow. In this case, respect for women and appreciation of their excellence are reiterated in Sufi conversations and writings with reference to the Prophet. The famous *hadith* on the relief and pleasure in *namaz*, presence of wife Ayesha, and daughter Fatima was discussed in detail in one of the assemblies (*majlis*) of Nizam-ud-Din Auliya. This was done with added emphasis on how noble men pray to God with reference to the extraordinary credentials of women around them. Men with several daughters were also considered to be blessed as God was supposed to have ensured that the latter were born with means for their bread and butter already arranged. Women were also continuously praised for their fine abilities.

Sufis have also struggled to deal with the women's question. As human beings, they needed to deal with bodily desires, for which they could marry a woman (*nikah*), which would mean maintaining a family and siring children, which will in turn be difficult to manage with self-inflicted poverty. Complete devotion and love for God would also mean a life spent in His service to the extent of neglecting the family, which is not an advisable proposition. The wife will expect both physical intimacy and material comfort. In Qur'anic terms, addressing the man, God advises: wives are like a garment to you, and you are a garment for the wives. Thus, marriage was a recommended practice, but some Sufis wanted to remain bachelors (*mujarrad*). This would mean they were deprived of women companions with all their beautiful charm and excellent conduct. The exemplar Prophet Muhammad was clear in his understanding. Marry women for benefiting from four virtuous reasons: their property, pedigree, beauty, and faith (*maal*, *hasab*, *husn*, and *din*). He especially recommended women with faith in Islam, as this would lead to the satisfaction of being in the company of an agreeable fellow believer. The man likes the company of such a wife, the faith of Islam is strengthened without discord, and both love each other. This was better than leading a lonely life and falling in the trap of a vicious Satan as company, which could lead to disgrace. Yet a man completely devoted to God and, therefore, remaining single can be better placed than those who carry the burden of maintaining a family [*Kashf-ul-Mahjub*, p. 530]. Inspired, a leading early Sufi Hasan Basri had humorously commented: light people got salvation, heavy ones were ruined (*naja al-mukhiffuna wa halaka al-muthqiluna*) [*Kashf-ul-Mahjub*, p. 531].

On what pious women themselves thought what was good for them, it will be appropriate to refer to a fine treatise on Sufism by a female Sufi, 'A'ishah al-Ba'uniyyah (died 1517), of medieval Damascus, Syria. *The Principles of Sufism* is an authoritative and elegant guide to Sufism by the female Sufi master. The book was originally written in Arabic: *al-Muntakhab fi usul al-rutab fi 'ilm al-tasawwuf* (Selections on the Principles of the Stations in the Science of Sufism). In short, *The Principles of Sufism*, emphasises on repentance (*tauba*), sincerity (*ikhlas*), remembrance (*zikr*), and love (*muhabbat*) as key elements in the

Sufi path for mystical union with God — central features of Sufism worldwide. The author has drawn on important and interesting insights from selections of teachings and anecdotes from the Qur'an, traditions relating to the Prophet, and lives of Sufi masters of previous generations. Daughter of the chief judge of Damascus, Shafi'i jurist Yusuf al-Ba'uni (died 1475), whose family was related to an important branch of Qadiri *silsila* (spiritual genealogy), 'A'ishah was trained as a Sufi master in her own right and was much respected for not only her mystical compositions, but also for piety and charisma [Homerin, 2018]. That a woman mystic could express her spiritual experiences in writing and command respect as an accomplished Sufi practitioner and scholar in the fifteenth- and early-sixteenth-century once again indicates the value of the graceful and charismatic presence of women in Sufi fraternities historically.

The gates of hospices of Sufi shaikhs such as that of Nizam-ud-Din Auliya were open for everyone, and women were not barred from his presence. They were as much entitled to partake in spiritual conversations and poetry as men and other gendered beings did. Patriarchal discriminations apart, the circle of the Sufis showed a remarkable acceptance of women in their midst. Persian Sufi poetry was certainly aimed at transcending all differences. Much of it was about love, and pain and sorrows attached with it. Nizam-ud-Din Auliya liked to quote one such couplet [*Fawa'id-ul-Fu'ad*, p. 323]:

Bar 'ishq tu wa bar tu nazar khwaham kard
Jaan dar gham-i tu zer-o-zabar khwaham kard
I will look at you and your love
I will destroy myself in your sorrow

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