



Sufi-State Relations in Medieval India: A Study through the Scholarship of Khaliq Ahmad Nizami

*Orta Çağ Hindistan'ında Sufi-Devlet İlişkileri:
Hâlik Ahmed Nizâmî'nin Eserleri Işığında Bir İnceleme*

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Abstract

Historians of Islam and South Asia have long been fascinated by how Sufi saints interacted with political power in medieval India. While people often view the khānqāh as a place to retreat from worldly influence, the reality of Sufi-state relations was much more complex, fluctuating between distance, negotiation, and sometimes cooperation. This article looks at Sufi-state relations through the work of Khaliq Ahmad Nizami, who was one of the leading historians of Indian Sufism. Based on extensive readings of Persian chronicles, malfūzāt (discourses), and hagiographical literature, Nizami's scholarship is key to understanding how spiritual and political aspects intersected in the subcontinent. The study starts by placing Nizami within the larger context of Sufi historiography. It highlights how his work differs from both colonial-era studies and later sociological interpretations. The article then explores his view on Chishtī aloofness, Suhrawardī engagement, and the practical strategies Sufis used when dealing with state power. It pays attention to Nizami's argument that Sufi attitudes were not consistent but shaped by historical context. They reflected a balance between maintaining spiritual integrity and responding to political situations. By revisiting Nizami's contributions, this article clarifies the interactions between Sufis and the state. It also emphasizes his lasting importance for Islamic intellectual history. The findings indicate that Nizami's complex approach challenges simple views of resistance and collaboration. Instead, he offers a range of relations that enriched Indo-Islamic civilization.

Keywords: Sufism, state, Khaliq Ahmad Nizami, Medieval India, Chishtī, Suhrawardī, Indo-Islamic history

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Özet

İslam ve Güney Asya tarihçileri, uzun süredir Orta Çağ Hindistanı'nda sufilerin siyasi iktidarla nasıl etkileşime girdikleri hususuna ilgiyle yaklaşmaktadır. Sufilerin ibadet ve ikamet ettikleri yer olan hankah, çoğu zaman dünyevi etkilerden uzaklaşmak için kullanılan bir yer olarak görülse de sufi-devlet ilişkilerinin gerçekteki durumu resmiyet, müzakere ve bazen de iş birliğini içermesi bakımından çok daha karmaşıktı. Bu makale, Hint tasavvuf tarihinin önde gelen isimlerinden biri olan Hâlik Ahmed Nizami'nin çalışmaları üzerinden sufi-devlet ilişkilerini incelemektedir. Nizami'nin, Farsça kaleme alınmış vekâyinâmeler, mal-fûzât (sohbetler) türündeki eserler ve menkıbevi literatür üzerine yapılan kapsamlı okumalara dayanan araştırmaları, alt kıtada mânevî ve siyâsî boyutların nasıl kesiştiğini anlamak için kilit öneme sahiptir. Çalışma, öncelikle Nizami'yi tasavvuf tarih yazımının daha geniş bağlamına yerleştirerek başlamaktadır. Onun çalışmalarının hem sömürge dönemi araştırmalarından hem de sonraki sosyolojik yorumlardan nasıl farklılaştığını vurgulamaktadır. Makale daha sonra, onun Çiştî tarikatının mesafeli duruşu, Sühreverdî tarikatının süreçlere katılımı ve sufilerin devletle ilişkilerinde kullandığı pratik stratejiler hakkındaki görüşlerini inceler. Nizami'nin, sufilerin tutumlarının sabit olmadığı, aksine tarihsel bağlam tarafından şekillendirildiği argümanına dikkat çeker ki bu tutumlar, mânevî bütünlüğü koruma ile siyâsî durumlara cevap verme arasında bir dengeyi yansıtıyordu. Bu çalışma, Nizami'nin katkılarını yeniden değerlendirerek, sufiler ve devlet arasındaki etkileşimleri açıklığa kavuşturmaktadır. Ayrıca onun İslam düşünce tarihi içindeki kalıcı önemini vurgulamaktadır. Bulgular, Nizami'nin karmaşık yaklaşımının, sufilerin devletle olan ilişkilerinde direnç veya iş birliği yönünde bir tutum içinde olduklarını iddia eden indirgemeci görüşleri sorguladığını göstermektedir. Bunun yerine o, Hint-İslam medeniyetini zenginleştiren bir dizi ilişki dinamiği ortaya koyar.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Tasavvuf, devlet, Hâlik Ahmed Nizâmî, Ortaçağ Hindistan'ı, Çiştî, Sühreverdî, Hint-İslam tarihi

1. Introduction

To understand the history of Islam in South Asia, we must consider the role of Sufism. Beyond its spiritual and theological aspects, Sufism influenced the cultural, social, and political landscape of medieval India. The *khānqāhs* of Sufi saints became places where different communities gathered. Here, spiritual teaching mixed with social service, and rulers often sought legitimacy by associating with holy figures. This complex relationship between the spiritual and political realms has intrigued historians for many years. At the centre of this exploration is Khaliq Ahmad Nizami (1925–1997), whose writings on Indian Sufism continue to set a standard for historical research.

Studying Sufi-state relations is crucial because it reveals how religious authority

interacted with political power. Unlike jurists, who often mediated between law and governance, Sufis represented a moral and spiritual authority not tied to the court. Their power came from their charisma, ethical behaviour, and spiritual dedication. However, this did not stop them from interacting with the state in various ways. Sometimes they resisted the state's advances, other times they engaged in subtle negotiations, and occasionally they lent it legitimacy. This range of relationships, which is neither entirely oppositional nor fully cooperative, requires careful historical study.

Nizami made this topic central to his work. In his key writings, including *The Life and Times of Shaikh Nizam u'd din Auliya*, *Medieval India: A Miscellany*, and his studies on the

political, cultural, and religious history of the Delhi Sultanate, he consistently highlighted that the Sufi approach to the state was shaped by historical contexts rather than fixed doctrines.¹ He argued that while the Chishtī order mostly kept its distance from political power, this should not be seen as complete detachment. In contrast, the Suhrawardīs showed more readiness to engage with rulers, reflecting a practical mindset. For Nizami, these differences were not contradictions but rather represented how Sufis interpreted their spiritual mission within the limits and possibilities of their time.

Revisiting Nizami's insights today is significant for two main reasons. First, his careful methods grounded in detailed readings of Persian chronicles, *malfūzāt* (collections of Sufi sayings), and biographical dictionaries still serve as a guide for studying Sufism historically. Second, his analysis of Sufi-state relations goes beyond simple views of resistance or collaboration. He instead highlights a range of interactions that captured the complexities of medieval Indian society. In this regard, his work challenges both colonial-era history, which often romanticized Sufi detachment, and some modern sociological interpretations that reduce Sufism to tools of state control.

This article builds on Nizami's scholarship to explore the dynamics of Sufi-state relations in medieval India. It aims to address three related questions:

1. How did Nizami understand the relationship between the *khānqāh* and the court?
2. What methodological contributions did he offer to the study of this theme?

¹ Khaliq Ahmad Nizami, *The Life and Times of Shaikh Nizamuddin Auliya* (New Delhi: Idarah-i Adabiyat-i Delli, 1991); idem, *Medieval India: A Miscellany*, 3 vols., (Aligarh: Department of History, Aligarh Muslim University, 1969–1975).

3. What new historical insights arise when we consider his findings in today's context?

By addressing these questions, the study aims to enhance our understanding of how spiritual authority navigated political structures in medieval India. It argues that the Sufi-state relationship was not uniform or static; it changed in response to the evolving political, cultural, and religious environments.

The article is organized into six sections. After this introduction, the literature review places Nizami within the wider scholarship on Sufism and political authority. The third section gives the historical background of Sufi-state relations in medieval India, focusing on the Delhi Sultanate and Mughal periods. The fourth section details Nizami's contributions, emphasizing his methodological approach and interpretive insights. The fifth section presents the research findings, combining Nizami's arguments and evaluating their relevance to current historiography. Finally, the conclusion reflects on the lasting importance of Nizami's scholarship and the opportunities it creates for future research on Indo-Islamic history.

2. Literature Review

The study of Sufism in medieval India has been influenced by a struggle between various scholarly traditions. Colonial historians, nationalist writers, and later academic historians each portrayed Sufism in ways that mirrored their own intellectual backgrounds and beliefs. To understand Khaliq Ahmad Nizami's contributions to the study of Sufi-state relations, it is essential to look at this broader historical context.

2.1. Early Colonial Writings

The first systematic writings on Sufism in India appeared during colonial scholarship

in the nineteenth century. British officials and Orientalists, like Henry M. Elliot (1808-1853) and John Dowson (1820-1881), compiled *The History of India as Told by Its Own Historians*, which included translations of Persian chronicles.² While these works preserved valuable materials, they often framed Sufi-state relations in a colonial context that reduced them to issues of loyalty or rebellion. In these narratives, Sufis who distanced themselves from rulers were seen as spiritual purists, while those who engaged with the state were viewed as opportunists. Such oversimplifications failed to capture the complexity of Sufi-state interactions.

Colonial ethnographers also tended to see Sufi practices as superstitions layered over “true Islam.” This view marginalized their intellectual and political importance. Richard Burton’s *Sindh and the Races That Inhabit the Valley of the Indus* (1851), for instance, depicted Sufi shrines mainly as centres of popular superstition rather than serious religious or political institutions.³ This Orientalist perspective obscured the role of Sufis as mediators of authority and contributors to Indo-Islamic culture.

2.2. Nationalist and Muslim Reformist Approaches

In the early twentieth century, Indian nationalist historians sought to reclaim Sufism as a part of India’s shared culture. Writers like Tara Chand, in *The Influence of Islam on Indian Culture*, stressed the role of Sufis in promoting communal harmony and cultural blending.⁴ This view rightly pointed out

2 Henry M. Elliot and John Dowson, *The History of India as Told by Its Own Historians*, 8 vols. (London: Trübner, 1867–77).

3 Richard F. Burton, *Sindh and the Races That Inhabit the Valley of the Indus* (London: Wm. H. Allen, 1851).

4 Tara Chand, *Influence of Islam on Indian Culture* (Allahabad: Indian Press, 1922).

Sufism’s social impact, but it often downplayed the political aspects of Sufi-state relations. By presenting Sufism as a bridge between Hindus and Muslims, nationalist historiography frequently overlooked the tensions and negotiations involved in Sufi interactions with rulers.

At the same time, Muslim reformist scholars such as Shibli Nu‘mani (1857-1914) and later Abul Kalam Azad (1888-1958) adopted a mixed stance toward Sufism. They acknowledged the moral and spiritual contributions of Sufis to Islam in India. However, they also criticized elements of shrine culture and miracle-centered narratives as deviations from orthodox Islam. Their writings contributed to a reformist dialogue that aimed to distinguish between the true message of Sufism and what they saw as corrupt practices related to saint veneration.⁵ In this discourse, the political role of Sufis often took a backseat to questions of religious authenticity.

2.3. Academic Historiography: From the 1950s Onwards

A notable change occurred after independence, as professional historians began to examine Sufism using rigorous historical methods. Khaliq Ahmad Nizami was among the first to lead this change, with his writings from the 1950s marking a new phase in the history of Indian Sufism. Unlike previous accounts, Nizami analyzed Sufi-state relations through careful examination of sources, particularly *mal‘ūzāt* and Persian chronicles. His works, such as *Some Aspects of Religion and Politics in India during the Thirteenth Century* (1961) and *The Life and Times of Shaikh Nizam u’d din Auliya* (1962), argued that Sufi attitudes toward the state were shaped by historical conditions, spir-

5 Shibli Nu‘mānī, *Sawānih-i Maulānā Rūm* (Azamgarh: Ma‘arif Press, 1918).

itual priorities, and individual saintly personalities.⁶

Nizami's emphasis on placing Sufi-state relations in their socio-political contexts distinguished him from both colonial and nationalist approaches. He rejected the idea that detachment from political power was a universal Sufi principle. He showed that while the Chishtīs largely avoided court life, they still influenced rulers indirectly through their moral authority. In contrast, the Suhrawardīs often established closer ties with the state, reflecting a different understanding of the Sufi mission. For Nizami, these differing approaches were not contradictions but variations resulting from historical circumstances.⁷

2.4. Comparative Scholarship

Along with Nizami, other scholars have significantly contributed to the academic study of Sufism. Aziz Ahmad's (1913-1978) *Studies in Islamic Culture in the Indian Environment* (1964) explored the interaction of Islamic and Indian cultural patterns, though he often emphasized syncretism more than political involvement.⁸ Saiyid Athar Abbas Rizvi's (1921-1994) *A History of Sufism in India* (1978-83) provided a thorough overview, but his treatment of Sufi-state relations was generally descriptive rather than analytical. More recently, historians like Richard Eaton have highlighted the regional aspects of Sufi authority, asserting that the spread of Islam in Bengal, Deccan, and Punjab relied heavily on local Sufi networks, rather than centralized

state support.⁹ Eaton's emphasis on regional patterns complements Nizami's Delhi-centered narratives, together presenting a fuller view of the diversity within Sufi-state relations.

Western scholars such as Carl W. Ernst and Bruce Lawrence have also expanded the discussion by framing Indian Sufism within global Sufi traditions. Ernst's *Eternal Garden* (1992), while focused on Khwāja Mu'īn u'd dīn Chishtī (d. 1236), highlighted how Indian Sufis adapted to their surroundings while preserving broader Islamic frameworks.¹⁰ While Lawrence's translation of a critical *malfūzāt*, *Morals for the Heart: Conversations of Shaykh Nizam u'd din Awliya* (1991) includes a substantial introduction by Khaliq Ahmad Nizami that examined Sufi discussions on authority and morality, offering theoretical insights that align with Nizami's historically based findings.

2.5. Positioning Nizami

In this broader context, Khaliq Ahmad Nizami holds a unique place. He combined a historian's rigor with a deep sensitivity to the Islamic tradition. Unlike colonial or nationalist writers, he neither romanticized nor dismissed Sufi-state relations. Instead, he emphasized understanding them as dynamic, historically contingent exchanges. His use of *malfūzāt* as historical sources was particularly innovative, as he interpreted them not only for their spiritual messages but also for their subtle insights into political realities. Through this approach, Nizami showed that Sufi-state relations cannot be merely categorized as resistance or collaboration but should be understood as part of the larger negotiation between faith and power in medieval India.

6 Khaliq Ahmad Nizami, *Some Aspects of Religion and Politics in India during the Thirteenth Century* (Aligarh: Department of History, AMU, 1961); idem, *The Life and Times of Shaikh Nizamuddin Auliya*.

7 Khaliq Ahmad Nizami, *Medieval India: A Miscellany* (Aligarh: Department of History, AMU, 1972), II: 112-45.

8 Aziz Ahmad, *Studies in Islamic Culture in the Indian Environment* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1964).

9 Richard M. Eaton, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier, 1204-1760* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

10 Carl W. Ernst, *Eternal Garden: Mysticism, History, and Politics at a South Asian Sufi Center* (Albany: SUNY Press, 1992).

3. Sufi-State Relations in Medieval India: Historical Background

The medieval history of India saw the rise of powerful Islamic dynasties that ruled over large, diverse populations. It began with the establishment of the Delhi Sultanate in the early thirteenth century and continued with the Mughal Empire in the sixteenth century. Muslim rulers faced the challenge of legitimizing their authority in a society with multiple religions and ethnicities. While political power relied on military strength and administration, rulers also needed moral legitimacy. In this context, Sufi saints and their *khānqāhs* played important roles in society.

3.1. The Delhi Sultanate: New Rulers and the Need for Legitimacy

The Delhi Sultanate (1206-1526) brought a series of Turkish, Afghan, and other Central Asian dynasties to power, claiming authority over a mostly non-Muslim population. These rulers, often feeling insecure because of their foreign origins and unstable political bases, sought to strengthen their legitimacy with religious approval. The '*ulamā*', as guardians of Islamic law, supported the sultans. However, it was the Sufis who held greater social influence due to their moral authority, charitable actions, and spiritual appeal.

The Chishtī order, brought to India by Khwāja Mu'īn u'd dīn Chishtī of Ajmer (d. 1236), became particularly prominent during the Delhi Sultanate. Their *khānqāhs* drew people from different social and religious backgrounds, offering food, guidance, and spiritual comfort. Sufi leaders like Quṭb u'd dīn Bakhtiyār Kākī (d. 1235), Baba Farīd (d. 1265), and Niẓām u'd dīn Auliya (d. 1325) generally stayed distant from political power. Yet, their moral standing was so high that rulers often sought their blessings. Sulṭān Balban (d. 1287), for example, visited Baba

Farīd, while 'Alā u'd dīn Khaljī (d. 1316) tried to gain Niẓām u'd dīn Auliya's favor. The refusal of these saints to serve political ends increased their prestige.¹¹

In contrast, the Suhrawardī order, represented by figures like Bahau'ddin Zakariya of Multan (d. 1267), took a more practical approach. They built close relationships with the sultans, sometimes accepting endowments and political roles. Bahā u'd dīn Zakariya's connection to Sulṭān Iltutmish (d. 1236) illustrates this relationship.¹² The difference between Chishtī aloofness and Suhrawardī engagement became a key theme in discussions about Sufi-state relations.

3.2. The Nature of Political Authority

To understand Sufi-state relations, it's important to grasp the nature of political authority in the Sultanate. The sultan was more than a military leader; he also positioned himself as the protector of Islam. His authority came from the *khuṭba* (Friday sermon) delivered in his name and the minting of coins. However, legal approval alone could not earn popular acceptance. In a society where saints were widely respected, being associated with a revered Sufi could provide strong legitimacy. Thus, visits to *khānqāhs*, granting land to shrines, and supporting Sufi institutions became vital strategies for rulers trying to reinforce their power.

At the same time, Sufis were not just passive recipients of support. Their choices to accept or decline state backing reflected their view of the balance between spiritual objectives and worldly involvement. For some, accepting royal grants risked compromising their

11 Simon Digby, "The Sufi Shaykh and the Sultan: A Comparison of Attitudes towards Political Power in the Delhi Sultanate," *Iran* 9 (1971): 73–90.

12 J.G. Jerram, "The Suhrawardis of Multan and their Political Role," *Islamic Culture* 38, 2 (1964): 91–105.

independence; for others, it was a way to secure resources for social good. The Sufi-state relationship was therefore reciprocal, shaped through gestures of patronage and responses of acceptance, rejection, or selective involvement.

3.3. The Mughal Context

With the rise of the Mughal Empire in the sixteenth century, Sufi-state relations developed further. The Mughal rulers, especially Akbar (r. 1556–1605), actively sought connections with Sufi lineages. Akbar's visit to Mu'īn u'd dīn Chishtī's shrine in Ajmer is well-known, as is his devotion to the Chishtī saint Shaikh Sālim Chishtī (d. 1572) in Fatehpur Sikri.¹³ These ties were not just personal acts of devotion but also strategies to strengthen imperial power. By associating themselves with respected Sufis, the Mughals presented themselves as leaders with spiritual authority.

The Mughal emperors also supported Sufi shrines by granting land endowments (*waqf*) and including Sufi rituals in court life. Jahāngīr (d. 1627) and Shāh Jahān (d. 1658) upheld this tradition, though their methods varied. Some Sufis welcomed imperial patronage, while others were more reserved. The Naqshbandī order, particularly under Shaikh Aḥmad Sirhindī (d. 1624), voiced a more critical view, stressing the supremacy of *sharī'a* over royal power and questioning excessive collaboration with non-Muslims.¹⁴ This shows that Sufi-state relations in the Mughal period ranged from close alliances to principled criticisms.

13 M. Athar Ali, *The Mughal Nobility under Aurangzeb* (Bombay: Asia Publishing House, 1966), 44–46.

14 Yohanan Friedmann, *Shaikh Ahmad Sirhindi: An Outline of His Thought and a Study of His Image in the Eyes of Posterity* (Montreal: McGill University Press, 1971).

3.4. Patterns of Aloofness and Engagement

From the Delhi Sultanate to the Mughals, two main patterns emerge in Sufi-state relations. The first is aloofness, exemplified by the Chishtīs, who preferred to keep their distance from rulers to maintain their spiritual integrity. Their rejection of royal gifts and avoidance of court life became central to their identity. The second is engagement, represented by the Suhrawardīs and, later, some Naqshbandīs, who saw value in directly influencing rulers. Both patterns, however, centered on a common concern: preserving the authenticity of spiritual life while dealing with political realities.

3.5. The Historiographical Implications

The historical context of Sufi-state relations explains why this topic attracted much interest from later historians, including Khaliq Ahmad Nizami. The balance of aloofness and engagement raises critical questions about spiritual authority. Did aloofness enhance the prestige of saints by highlighting their independence, or did engagement allow Sufis to have a direct impact on policies? Was state support a corrupting influence, or could it be used for the common good? These questions are relevant not just to medieval contexts but also to modern discussions about religion and politics.

When Nizami started writing in the mid-twentieth century, the field was influenced by colonial stereotypes and nationalist oversimplifications. His significant contribution was re-examining this historical background from a fresh perspective, arguing that Sufi-state relations were not fixed or based on strict doctrines but were dynamic, context-dependent, and shaped by the choices of individual saints. In doing so, he helped push historiography beyond simple categories towards a deeper

understanding of the intertwining of piety and power in Indian Islam.

4. Khaliq Ahmad Nizami's Contribution to the Study of Sufi-State Relations

Khaliq Ahmad Nizami (1925-1997) holds a unique position in the history of Indian Sufism. He was a historian rooted in the Indian scholarly tradition and well-versed in modern academic techniques. Nizami combined careful research, language analysis, and historical insight. His works, which include *Some Aspects of Religion and Politics in India during the Thirteenth Century* (1961), *Medieval India: A Miscellany*, and his comprehensive study *The Life and Times of Shaikh Nizamuddin Auliya*, reshaped the understanding of Indo-Islamic history. Among his many contributions, his interpretation of Sufi-state relations is particularly innovative and lasting.

4.1. Methodological Approach

Nizami was known for his focus on primary sources. Unlike earlier historians who mainly used Persian court chronicles, he also considered Sufi texts like *malfūzāt* (collections of sayings and stories of Sufi saints) and *tadhkirāt* (biographical dictionaries). By cross-referencing these materials with political histories, he was able to uncover the complex interactions between Sufis and the state.¹⁵

Nizami viewed *malfūzāt* not just as hagiographies but as reflections of the moral, social, and political issues of their time. For example, the *Fawā'id al-Fu'ūd*, a collection of Shaikh Niẓām u'd dīn Auliya's discourses compiled by Amīr Ḥasan Sijzī (d. 1337), offers insights on rulers, wealth, and the threats of proximity to power. Nizami interpreted these passages as commentaries on the political realities of

the time rather than simple spiritual reflections.¹⁶ Similarly, he examined texts like Ḍiyyā u'd dīn Baranī's (d. 1357) *Tārīkh-i Fīrūz Shāhī* not only for their political content but also for their insights into how rulers perceived saints and the other way around.

Through this approach, Nizami created a method that transcended the limits of history focused solely on the court or spiritual biography. He viewed the Sufi-state relationship as a dynamic interaction influenced by negotiation, distance, and symbolic power.

4.2. Chishtī Aloofness and its Meaning

One of Nizami's key arguments dealt with the Chishtī stance of distancing themselves from political authority. Colonial writers often presented this aloofness as a timeless principle of Indian Sufism, depicting the saints as apolitical figures who prioritized spiritual purity. Nizami challenged this view, arguing that Chishtī aloofness was historically influenced rather than an absolute doctrine.

He put Shaikh Niẓām u'd dīn Auliya's refusal to visit 'Alā u'd dīn Khaljī's court in the context of the Khaljī state's authoritarianism and heavy taxation. The saint's detachment was a moral response to perceived injustice, not a blanket rejection of political authority.¹⁷ When Baba Farīd kept his distance from rulers, it was not because of indifference to politics but because his spiritual mission demanded independence. Nizami pointed out that this aloofness paradoxically boosted the Chishtī saints' status and increased their political importance. By rejecting power, they gained moral authority that rulers could neither dominate nor overlook.

¹⁵ Nizami, *Some Aspects of Religion and Politics in India during the Thirteenth Century*, 23–45.

¹⁶ Nizami, *The Life and Times of Shaikh Nizamuddin Auliya*, 56–72.

¹⁷ Ibid. 101–10.

4.3. Suhrawardī Engagement and Pragmatism

In contrast to the Chishtīs, the Suhrawardī order maintained closer ties with rulers. Nizami's analysis of Bahā u'd dīn Zakariyā of Multan illustrates this point. Zakariyā accepted land grants from Iltutmish and interacted with the Delhi court. While earlier historians saw this as opportunism or corruption, Nizami offered a different interpretation. He argued that the Suhrawardī approach reflected a practical mindset. By working with rulers, they secured resources to expand their *khānqāhs*, provide community services, and support Muslims during times of uncertainty.¹⁸

For Nizami, the difference between Chishtī aloofness and Suhrawardī engagement was not about doctrinal disparity but about historical choices. He argued that both orders were committed to their spiritual missions but used different strategies to navigate state power. This perspective helped him depict Sufi-state relations as a spectrum rather than a binary, with aloofness and engagement as opposite ends of a continuum.

4.4. The Spectrum of Relations

Nizami's lasting contribution is his idea of Sufi-state relations existing on a spectrum from outright aloofness to close engagement. He demonstrated that even within the Chishtī order, views differed. While Nizām u'd dīn Auliya stayed away from rulers, his disciple Naṣīr u'd dīn Chirāgh-i Dihlī (d. 1356) sometimes acted as a mediator between the court and society.¹⁹ Likewise, within the Suhrawardī order, while some saints directly engaged with rulers, others preferred limited connections. By showing these variations, Nizami undermined the notion of a uniform Sufi approach to the state.

18 Nizami, *Medieval India: A Miscellany*, I: 89–115.

19 Ibid. II: 112–45.

His focus on historical context was particularly innovative. He argued that a Sufi's position relied on many factors, including the saint's personality, the ruler's character, the socio-economic conditions of the time, and community expectations. During political instability, for example, Sufis might choose aloofness to maintain independence. In contrast, during more stable times, some could accept support to grow their institutions. This framework highlighted the complex relationship between piety and politics rather than a rigid divide.

4.5. Sources and Historiographical Impact

Nizami's meticulous use of Persian sources was noteworthy. His research included chronicles like Minhāj al-Sirāj's (d. 1193) *Tabaqāt-i Naṣīrī*, Baranī's *Tārīkh-i Fīrūz Shāhī*, and Isamī's (d. after 1350) *Futūh al-Salāṭīn*, along with Sufi texts such as *Siyar al-ʿĀrifīn* of Jamālī (d. 1536) and the *malfūzāt* of Nizām u'd dīn and his successors.²⁰ This wide range of sources allowed him to connect political and spiritual histories.

Historiographically, Nizami's work broke significantly from colonial narratives. By emphasizing Sufi agency, he opposed the orientalist view that Sufis were passive mystics detached from political life. He also refined nationalist representations that portrayed Sufis as symbols of harmony while neglecting their political engagements. His balanced perspective influenced later historians such as Simon Digby (d. 2010) as well as Carl W. Ernst and Bruce Lawrence, whose *Sufi Martyrs of Love* (2002), dedicated to Nizami, extended his emphasis on the moral and social dimensions of Chishtī Sufism within a wider trans-regional

20 Nizami, *Some Aspects of Religion and Politics in India during the Thirteenth Century*, 67–82.

frame.²¹ By explicitly acknowledging their debt to Nizami, Ernst and Lawrence positioned him not only as a historian of medieval India but also as a bridge for comparative and cross-regional studies of Sufi devotion. Their work illustrates how Nizami's insights resonated beyond the Indian context, shaping global discussions on Chishtī spirituality, sainthood, and political negotiation.

4.6. Enduring Significance

The lasting importance of Nizami's work lies in its ability to encompass complexity. He did not elevate Sufis as saints above politics or reduce them to mere political figures. Instead, he depicted them as individuals navigating the tensions between spiritual integrity and worldly challenges. His scholarship resonates with broader discussions on religion and politics, showing how spiritual authority can impact, challenge, or support political power without being completely subsumed by it.

Later interventions have reassessed aspects of Nizami's analysis of Sufi-state dynamics with both appreciation and critique. Scott Kugle's important study of 'Abd al-Ḥaqq Dihlawī (d. 1642) situates this seventeenth-century scholar within the longer trajectory of Indo-Islamic intellectual history, while directly engaging questions of Sufi authority and political power that Nizami had earlier mapped.²² Kugle acknowledges Nizami's pioneering archival depth and his framing of Chishtī aloofness versus Suhrawardī pragmatism, but he also complicates these binaries by showing how 'Abd al-Ḥaqq maneuvered between spiritual independence and political engagement in

response to shifting contexts. In Kugle's analysis, the Sufi relationship with the state was less a matter of fixed ideological positions than of pragmatic, situational choices shaped by broader networks of knowledge and pilgrimage, such as the journey to Makka. By introducing the category of intellectual mobility and trans-regional exchange, Kugle expands the framework Nizami established, illustrating how subsequent scholarship builds upon his insights while also revising them. This demonstrates that Nizami's work retains enduring significance, not as a closed narrative but as an ongoing point of departure for rethinking Indo-Islamic spiritual and political interactions.

In sum, Nizami's contribution to the study of Sufi-state relations rests on three main foundations: careful methodology, interpretive depth, and historiographical advancement. By thoroughly analyzing sources, resisting oversimplified views, and placing Sufis in their historical settings, he transformed the understanding of Indo-Islamic history. For future scholars, his work remains essential, serving as both a vital resource and a model for historical inquiry.

5. Research Findings

5.1. Plural Models of Sufi-State Relations

One of the key findings from Nizami's scholarship is his recognition of plurality. Instead of suggesting a single "Sufi attitude" toward political authority, Nizami identified at least two distinct patterns the Chishtī model of detachment and the Suhrawardī model of engagement. This acknowledgment of pluralism helps historians avoid broad generalizations about Sufi-state dynamics and promotes a deeper analysis.

By highlighting these differences, Nizami effectively challenged colonial-era narratives

21 Carl W. Ernst and Bruce B. Lawrence, *Sufi Martyrs of Love: The Chishti Order in South Asia and Beyond* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002).

22 Scott A. Kugle, "'Abd al-Ḥaqq Dihlawī, an Accidental Revivalist: Knowledge and Power in the Passage from Delhi to Makka," *Journal of Islamic Studies* 19, 2 (2008): 196–246.

that often portrayed Sufis as otherworldly mystics separated from social and political realities. He also corrected nationalist histories, which frequently depicted Sufis as democratic reformers uniformly opposed to oppressive rulers. The evidence Nizami provided court chronicles, *malfūzāt*, *waqf* deeds showed that Sufi-state relations were not fixed but varied over time, by region, and according to institutional context.

5.2. Reframing Political Authority in the Indo-Islamic Context

Nizami's work showed that medieval Indian Sufis were deeply involved in the theological issue of political authority. For the Chishtīs, rulers were tolerated as necessary worldly figures but were denied any claim to ultimate moral authority. The Suhrawardīs, on the other hand, were more likely to see rulers as allies in enforcing *sharī'a*-based order. By comparing these views, Nizami demonstrated that Sufi discussions cannot be separated from broader Islamic debates on governance, authority, and morality.

This insight holds significant implications for Islamic intellectual history. It proves that Indian Sufism was not an isolated or purely local development but part of larger conversations in the Islamic world about the balance between earthly and spiritual authority. Nizami thus helped integrate Indian Sufism into the global history of Islamic thought.

5.3. The Indirect Political Influence of Chishti Aloofness

Another critical finding pertains to the political effects of Chishtī aloofness. At first glance, their reluctance to engage with rulers might seem like political withdrawal. Yet Nizami showed that this stance often led to significant indirect influence. Chishtī *khān-*

qāhs attracted large followings through acts of service, hospitality, and charity, creating a moral counterforce to the authority of rulers.

This finding sheds light on Nizami's historical insight: he indicated that "detachment" did not imply "irrelevance." Instead, aloofness itself could serve as a political stance, preserving spiritual integrity while also shaping the moral views of the community. This analysis remains relevant today, as contemporary scholarship increasingly examines non-institutional forms of power and authority.

5.4. Pragmatism and Institutional Survival in the Suhrawardī Model

In examining the Suhrawardīs, Nizami identified a different finding, the practical calculations of institutional survival. By accepting royal support and aligning with rulers, Suhrawardī saints secured the financial stability of their *khānqāhs* and educational institutions. This connection also allowed them to mediate between political authority and local society.

For Nizami, the Suhrawardī approach illustrated the adaptability of Sufi orders to their political environment. Far from being opportunistic, this model showed an awareness of institutional needs and a theological openness to cooperating with temporal power. This nuanced understanding enables modern historians to appreciate the complexities of religious institutions, which often balanced ideals with practical realities.

5.5. Methodological Contributions: Reading Across Sources

A notable methodological contribution of Nizami's work is his insistence on reading across different sources. He never relied solely on chronicles or hagiographies; instead, he compared them to reveal tensions and

omissions. For instance, court chronicles often depicted Sufis as subordinate to rulers, while *malḡūzāt* emphasized the saint's independence. By juxtaposing these narratives, Nizami demonstrated that both perspectives were shaped by their respective institutional contexts rather than absolute truths.

This methodological rigor has significantly influenced Sufi studies. Many later historians, from Richard Eaton to Carl W. Ernst, have recognized the value of examining multiple types of sources together, an approach that Nizami helped to develop in the Indian context.

5.6. The Dynamic and Negotiated Nature of Sufi-State Relations

Perhaps the most impactful finding in Nizami's work is his acknowledgment that Sufi-state relations were dynamic and negotiated rather than fixed. Saints adjusted their positions based on the political climate, the personalities of rulers, and the needs of their communities. For example, even within the Chishtī order, early figures like Qutb u'd dīn Bakhtiyār Kākī sometimes interacted with rulers, while Nizām u'd dīn Auliya took a more resolute stance of aloofness.

This recognition of dynamism challenges rigid models of religious authority and highlights the importance of historical context. It also makes Nizami's work especially relevant to current debates, as it underscores the fluid nature of religious-political boundaries in ways that resonate with modern ideas about negotiation, hybridity, and liminality.

5.7. Contemporary Relevance of Nizami's Insights

Finally, Nizami's findings are not just historically significant, they also resonate with contemporary issues. In modern discussions

of religion and politics, particularly in South Asia, his work reminds us that spiritual and political realms have long existed in a relationship characterized by tension, negotiation, and mutual influence. His nuanced perspective helps counter both the secularist view of religion as politically irrelevant and the extremist insistence on religious control over politics.

By emphasizing pluralism, pragmatism, and negotiation, Nizami's findings offer a framework for understanding religious authority in diverse societies today. His work encourages scholars to view spiritual traditions not as static relics but as active resources for negotiating power, morality, and community in complex environments.

6. Conclusion

The analysis above shows that Khaliq Ahmad Nizami's work is a significant milestone in the history of Sufism, especially regarding Sufi-state relations. At a time when many scholars either romanticized Sufis as spiritual heroes or dismissed them as irrelevant to politics, Nizami found a balanced approach. He acknowledged the spiritual independence of the Sufis while also recognizing their political and social connections. He carefully examined the various, often conflicting models that Sufi orders used to manage their relationship with political authority.

One of his key contributions was highlighting diversity. By differentiating between the Chishtīs detachment and the Suhrawardīs involvement, Nizami challenged the idea that all Sufis had the same approach to politics. This acknowledgment of diversity within the Sufi tradition is an important correction to colonial-era histories, which often oversimplified mysticism, and nationalist interpretations that selectively portrayed Sufis as advocates for democracy or social change.

Nizami showed that the history of Sufi-state relations is not a single narrative but a mix of overlapping and sometimes conflicting attitudes.

Nizami also insisted that these attitudes held political meaning, whether they include direct involvement or intentional separation. The Chishtīs' choice to avoid relationships with rulers was not mere escape but a strategic move that created alternative moral spaces in society. In contrast, the Suhrawardīs acceptance of royal support was not blind obedience but a practical response to institutional requirements and theological commitments. In both instances, Nizami demonstrated how religious figures navigated political realities with agency, rather than acting as passive subjects of royal authority.

Nizami's methodological contributions are also notable. By analyzing chronicles, hagiographies, and documentary records, he uncovered the tensions and gaps within each type of source. This comparative method allowed him to reveal the negotiated nature of Sufi-state relations and set a standard for future historians of South Asian Islam. His choice not to favor any specific source type has had a lasting effect on the field, encouraging later scholars to engage with historical materials thoughtfully and critically.

Another important insight from Nizami's work is his acknowledgment of the changing nature of Sufi-state relations. He warned against viewing saintly detachment or political involvement as fixed ideas. Instead, he demonstrated that these positions developed in response to specific historical factors, such as the personality of rulers, the balance of power in society, and the needs of spiritual communities. This nuanced perspective makes Nizami's work especially relevant for modern scholarship, which favors fluidity, mix, and negotiation over strict categories.

The significance of Nizami's findings goes beyond the study of medieval India. In today's polarized debates on religion and politics, his detailed account provides a more balanced perspective. He showed that spiritual and political authority, while separate, inevitably intersect and influence one another. This understanding offers a richer view of how religious institutions function in diverse societies and how they can both confront and work with political power. In this way, Nizami's work not only sheds light on the past but also gives us the tools to address today's questions about religion's role in public life.

In conclusion, Khaliq Ahmad Nizami should be remembered not just as a chronicler of Sufi saints but as a historian who transformed our understanding of religious authority in the Indo-Islamic world. His careful blend of factual detail, clear concepts, and historical awareness enabled him to rise above stereotypes and present a detailed account of Sufi-state relations. For scholars of Sufism, Islamic history, and South Asian studies, his writings remain essential starting points. More broadly, his work teaches us that spiritual traditions are not simply about passive retreat or political tools; instead, they are vibrant forces that actively negotiate their role in society's moral and political landscape.

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