

Imperial Visits to the Shrine of Khwaja Mu'in al-Din and the Sacred Geographies of the Chishtiyya

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Abstract

Khwaja Mu'in al-Din, who has been given the epithet of Chishti, Sijzi, and Ajmeri, is designated by modern historians as the founder of the Chishti silsila. This paper traces the textual references to the saint, and interrogates why narratives about him only begin to appear over a century after his death. While scholars have studied the imperial patronage given to the *dargah* of this saint at Ajmer, and the effect this had on the articulation of sovereignty and the ideological claims of the Mughal rulers, it is also necessary to study the effect of this patronage and relationship on the stake-holders of the shrine as well as members of the Sufi fraternity. This paper is a first step in a study about the crafting and creation of community identity on the part of the Chishtiyya, and looks at the narratives about Mu'in al-Din in this light. As the authors of hagiographies and histories ascribed different geographical identities to Mu'in al-Din, this had an effect on the contours of the sacred geography of the Chishtiyya Sufis as well.

Key-words: Khwaja Mu'in al-Din, Sufi shrines, Ajmer, Mughal pilgrimages, identity and community formation.

This paper focuses on the narratives about Khwaja Mu'in al-Din Ajmeri (d. 1236), also known by the *Nisba* (epithet, based on lineage and geographical origin) Sijzi and Chishti, in order to enrich the history of the development of the identity of the fraternity of the Chishtiyya, particularly in north India and the Deccan, over the course of the fourteenth to the seventeenth centuries. Sultanate-era Delhi has been associated with the Chishtiyya by a number of historians, and this is indeed what the contemporary sources portray: Delhi as the site of many sacred shrines and the home of many holy men, both alive and dead.¹ Moving forward in time, Firishta, writing in Bijapur in 1611/12 described the *silsila* as the “Chishtiyya of Ajmer”.² The change of geographical identity is curious, and therefore interesting, and this paper attempts to discover how the Chishtiyya “moved” from Delhi to Ajmer, locating the possible answer in

the imperial patronage of the *dargah sharif*, particularly by the Mughal rulers. Mu'in al-Din, designated by modern scholars such as Mohammed Habib, Khaliq Ahmed Nizami, Bruce Lawrence and Carl Ernst as the founder of the *silsila*, undergoes an evolution in terms of his *nisba* or geographical identity, wherein he is variously referred to as Ajmeri, Sijzi, and Chishti.

Raziuddin Aquil has linked the rise of Delhi as the foremost Sufi centre and bastion of Islam to its being the seat of political power in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, which is somewhat tautological. Interestingly, even so he notes that Ajmer was the Mecca and Delhi was likened to Medina.³ However, the importance given to Ajmer was rather retrospective and it was not seen at par with Delhi in any sense, at least when one speaks of the fraternity of Nizam al-Din Awliya as it existed during his lifetime and for a few decades after. There are references to Salar Mas'ud Ghazi at Bahraich, and even to a shrine at Ajmer, but the figure of Mu'in al-Din only became popular by the end of the fourteenth century, and the first reference to him as the founder of the *silsila* is from the end of the fourteenth century, in the *tazkirat* (biographical compendium) *Siyar al-Awliyā* of Mir Khwurd also known as Sayyid Kirmani, which can be dated at the earliest to 1385. The saint who died in 1236 only appears in literature of the fourteenth century, and it is essential to track the manner in which he was historicized and narrativized in order to unearth the history of this individual as well as the fraternity.

Jyoti Gulati Balachandran has discussed the key role of Sultans and their military commanders in north India and the Deccan in transforming modest tombs of Sufis into grand structures by investing financial resources in the building of mausolea and providing ongoing support to the custodians of the tomb-shrines for their upkeep and maintenance. She argues that this royal commemoration of Sufi tombs marked a formalization of the relationship between Sufis and Sultans, and the construction of grand mausolea was a significant social and political investment that both Sufis and Sultans benefitted from. However, in the

late-fourteenth and fifteenth-century regional Sultanates, she sees the representation and assertion of local and regional, and not always imperial, articulations of power, even as local Sufi shrines became part of a trans-regional network of sacred Muslim sites.⁴ As Balachandran's work on the Gujarati tomb-shrines of Vatwa, Sarkhej, and Rasulabad has shown, the texts produced by stake-holders, the strength of the family who took care of the site, and the involvement of the Sultan were all factors which affected the nature of participation in the space. Therefore, to examine the development of the narratives about Mu'in al-Din and the steady expansion of the legend of his founding the *silsila*, it is important to study the manner in which the resources and environs of the *dargah* expanded as well.

Building on the excellent work of P.M. Currie, S.A.I. Tirmizi, and I.H. Siddiqui, who have cross-checked and corroborated the textual references to Mu'in al-Din, in the light of recent scholarship such as Manan Ahmed's, I try to follow the creation and deployment of a store of mystical knowledge as the *silsila* was developing, and the various factors that went into the manner in which the identity of Chishtiyya – at the level of both the individual and the fraternity – was articulated. An essential part of this approach is noting the contemporaneity (or lack thereof) of the sources which scholars have used to study the person as well as the community. I also track the references to a shrine or tomb in these sources, while taking the inscriptions and epigraphs at the *dargah sharif* at Ajmer into account. It has been established that sultans and padshahs were visiting the shrine, and scholars such as Tirmizi and Motiur Khan have studied the imperial patronage given to the *dargah* in some detail, but additionally this paper interrogates the effect that this relationship had on the self-articulation of identity and community of the Chishtiyya themselves. The first section of this paper concerns the textual references to the person of Mu'in al-Din, the second the imperial visits to the *dargah* and their implications, and the third concludes with a few observations about the Chishtiyya *silsila* as it was expanding geographically from the fourteenth to the seventeenth centuries.⁵

I. References to Mu'in al-Din in Histories and Hagiographies

Scholars have taken Mu'in al-Din and Muhammad Ghuri's respective entries into the lands of Hindustan, retrospectively combined into a single event in 1192, as a foundational moment for the Muslim conquest of India—a trope which permeates much of modern scholarship today even as we shed some of the cognitive disparities. In *Sufi Martyrs of Love*, for instance, Bruce Lawrence and Carl Ernst claim that the Chishti order has been the most widespread and popular ever since Mu'in al-Din Chishti settled at Ajmer at the end of the twelfth century.⁶ However, the early Chishtiyya discourses contain no direct reference to Mu'in al-Din, although his descendants do find mention occasionally.

I.H. Siddiqui and P.M. Currie have noticed the anachronism of information about the saint, but they tend to nevertheless build on received narratives, corroborating and cross-checking information from different sources.⁷ Currie, whose excellent study of the shrine and cult of Mu'in al-Din is a rigorous and thorough exposé of the saint's life and the development of the *dargah* and its stakeholders, nevertheless bases this study on two reliable texts, one composed in 1385 and the other in 1536. He supplements this with information from the apocryphal *malḡūzāt*, which were also composed in the fourteenth century, after the death of Nizam al-Din Awliya.⁸

The familiar narrative about Mu'in al-Din coming to Ajmer during the rule of Rai Pithura, and being instrumental in the victories of the *lashkar* (armies) of Islam, also appears in these fourteenth-century texts, particularly the ones produced in Delhi. Gisudaraz, whose *malḡūzāt* was compiled in 1400 CE, does not speak of Mu'in al-Din as the founder of the lineage, although he does mention him as “Mu'in al-Din Ajmeri” and respects him as one of his preceptors in passing. The lineage of the *Siyar al-Awliyā*, in which the five great Shaikhs – Mu'in al-Din, Qutb al-Din, Farid al-Din, Nizam al-Din and Nasir al-Din – are celebrated, is therefore not fully entrenched by the time this text was composed in the Deccan.⁹

The centre of Gisudaraz's sacred geography is still Delhi, and not even Ajmer, even as he preached in Gulbarga.

P.M. Currie noted that the three contemporary historians – Minhaj us-Siraj Juzjani, Hasan Nizami, and Fakhr-i Mudabbir – did not mention Mu'in al-Din at all.¹⁰ Therefore, the historical Mu'in al-Din appeared in Sufi sources, but the authors of *tawārīkh* had not yet begun to notice him. This happened only after the *Siyar al-Awliyā* was written, and possibly because the shrine in Ajmer began to gain popularity and resources by the end of the fourteenth century. By the time 'Abd al-Haq Muhaddith Dehlawi wrote the *tazkirat Akhbār al-Akhyār*, begun in the 1580s but completed in the first decade of the seventeenth century, the narrative of the *Siyar al-Awliyā* had become widespread. Even more interestingly, 'Abd al-Haq indicates Mu'in al-Din's sacralisation of the lands of Hindustan, lauds him as a defender of Muslims, and interestingly this Mu'in al-Din is said to have arrived in India from Sijistan, and bears the nisba of Sijzi.¹¹ Yet his primary association is still with protecting the environs of Ajmer and Nagaur.

It appears that as Ajmer became more and more important to the Mughals, it began to be included in an increasingly foundational manner into narratives of history, and Abd al-Haq even includes a story of how Ajmer got its name –from a Raja named Aja which means sun and Mir meaning mountain– as well as details of the importance of Nagaur. The locales of Ajmer and Nagaur thus maintain this sense of being a spiritual stronghold of Chishtiyya saints in the sixteenth century. Interestingly, even in the sixteenth century there was an awareness that the shrine at Ajmer received royal patronage, indicating that the shrine's success was also due in some part to its proximity to royal machinations. By contrast, in the chronicle produced by Abul Fazl, the litterateur and favourite of Akbar reiterates the story of Muizz al-Din Ghuri and Rai Pithura, but does not mention Mu'in al-Din.¹² It appears that in Abul Fazl's iteration, since Akbar had stopped visiting the *dargah* a decade before, he did not feel the need to include the same details as 'Abd al-Haq had.

And so curiously, we see the Muin al-Din Ajmeri in the early *malḥūzāt* evolve considerably into the Muin al-Din Sijzi or Chishti of the *tazkirat* and *tawārīkh*, and as his legend grew, we see chronicles also picking him up, yet in markedly distinct ways. It is remarkable that along this journey, Firishta's geographical imagination of the contours of the Chishtiyya fraternity, viewed from the 1611 Bijapur court, centered this fraternity in Ajmer and on the figure of Mu'in al-Din, despite Nizam al-Din Awliya's continuing popularity in not just Delhi but across the subcontinent.

II. The *Dargah Sharif* at Ajmer

The shrine-complex of the *dargah sharif* of Mu'in al-Din is situated in Ajmer, which is in a valley surrounded by the Aravali hills in Rajasthan. The geography of the city as well as its position along a highway of commerce between the Gangetic plains and the ports of Gujarat made it an important strategic location from the end of the twelfth century to the beginning of the nineteenth, as Tirmizi has described in detail.¹³ The details about the incursions into Ajmer and its political history have been recorded by several historians and also popular guide-books and tourist-aids. Syed Moini and Motiur Rahman Khan have also written about imperial visits to the *dargah*.¹⁴ Rulers from Delhi, Gujarat, and Rajasthan constantly had their eyes on Ajmer, and the Mughals launched a number of their political campaigns in Rajasthan with Ajmer as their base.

There are no verifiable references to the shrine until the middle of the fourteenth century, almost a hundred years after the death of Mu'in al-Din, and most often in connection with a royal visit. For the purposes of this paper, I wish to interrogate the manner in which the imperial connection impacted the identity and community of the participants of the shrine as well as the community that called themselves Chishtiyya and professed spiritual descent from Mu'in al-Din. The first recorded imperial visit to Mu'in al-Din's grave at Ajmer is found in Isami's *Futūḥ al-Salāṭīn* (composed after 1349-50), wherein the date of the visit is given as 1325.¹⁵

Zafar Khan, while still a governor of Gujarat under the Tughluqs, visited the shrine in the course of an expedition against Ajmer in 1396, as Sikandar Manjhu informs us in the *Mir'at-i Sikandari* (composed 1611). Sher Shah also visited the tomb in 1544, according to 'Abd Allah in the *Tarikh-i Daudi* (1575-76).

Abul Fazl, Badauni, and Qandahari have provided the details about Akbar's pilgrimage to the *dargah* at Ajmer from Agra on foot. The padshah visited the *dargah* almost every year between 1568 and 1580, but never again for the remaining 25 years of his life.¹⁶ Jahangir, Shah Jahan, and Aurangzeb similarly made visits to the *dargah* before or after successful political campaigns.¹⁷ The princess Jahan Ara was devoted to the Shaikh and patronised construction at the *dargah*, in addition to the biography which she composed of the life and teachings of Mu'in al-Din, titled *Mu'nis al-Arwah*. Imperial visits went hand-in-hand with imperial control, and the Mughals especially interfered in the administration and finances of the shrine to a great degree. In addition to the sultans and *padshahs* who patronised the shrine and its environs, modern political leaders such as Rajendra Prasad, Indira Gandhi, and even Donald Trump have visited it, donated *chadars*, and participated in the rituals there. The political power of this holy shrine is therefore well-established. This is evident even in a painting of Mu'in al-Din from the *Jahangir nama*, housed in the Chester Beatty collection, which portrays Mu'in al-Din proffering the Timurid globe (as a symbol of universal sovereignty) to Jahangir.¹⁸ On the orb is inscribed, according to Currie "They key of victory over the two worlds is entrusted to thy hand."¹⁹ Political victories were often celebrated with donations and constructions to the mosque, such as Akbar and Jahangir's donation of cauldrons and Shah Jahan's construction of a gateway after successful campaigns. Even Santoji, the Maratha governor of Ajmer, laid out a garden for Mu'in al-Din's mausoleum, called Chishti Chaman, in 1769.²⁰ It is notable that the first surviving inscription on the cupola of the shrine can be dated to as late as 1532, almost three centuries after the death of the saint.²¹

We also find no references to *ziyārat* or pilgrimage to Ajmer before the fourteenth century. Zain al-Din Shirazi describes a visit made in 1351-52. In the *Siyar al-Awliyā*, Khwurd describe how Maulana Fakhr al-Din Zarradi went on pilgrimage to Ajmer after the death of his master, and although Nizam al-Din died in 1328, the text of the *Siyar al-Awliya* was completed after 1385. Therefore, even after accounting for the gap between an event and the recounting of narratives about it, it can be asserted that the *dargah* was certainly functioning by the middle of the fourteenth century.

S.K. Banerji and N Hanif have described Salim Chishti's association with not only the Mughals, but before them Sher Shah, Islam Shah, and the noble Khawas Khan.²² It therefore stands to reason that the Mughals, particularly Akbar, wanted to associate with this saint as he had already been connected with their political rivals. In doing so, they also wanted to create a history that connected them to the Chishti order, and by worshipping in a performative manner those who were already popular, they too could co-opt the power and prestige which went hand in hand with such popular displays of piety. Their relationship with Mu'in al-Din, Hamid al-Din, and Farid al-Din was also a way of buttressing the link to Salim Chishti.

III. Sacred Geographies in History and Hagiography

The retrospective importance given to the Ajmer *dargah* as a centre or headquarters of the Chishti *silsila* can be definitely traced to the fifteenth century, although it began in the fourteenth.²³ And the textual articulation of Mu'in al-Din as the founder of a *sufi silsila* can be found in the *Siyar al-Awliyā* of the late-fourteenth century, but as other Chishtiyya *malfūzāt* did not pick it up uniformly, we can see that the trope only calcified by the sixteenth century as well. Currie has also raised the question of why Mu'in al-Din became important so long after his death, and connects it quite rightly to the increasing prestige of Nizam al-Din, as well as his being a pioneer of Islam who was instrumental to the conquest of India.²⁴ This latter argument is less credible.

The *Siyar al-Awliyā'* had created a linear history of Sufis, by taking disparate bits of information from the *malḥūzāt* and structuring them in a manner that portrayed a coherent picture of the emergence of the silsila, as Jyoti Gulati's work has shown.²⁵ Amir Khwurd reported that Mu'in al-Din had settled in Ajmer during Prithviraj Chauhan's reign, warned him about harassing his disciple, and prophesied the eventual victory of Muizz al-Din. With the coming of the Afghans and Mughals, the sacred geography and spatial imagination began to evolve, and not just in the chronicles but in the Sufi sources as well. By the end of the sixteenth century, we see the importance of Mu'in al-Din in the histories of Abul Fazl and Firishta as well, although in rather different manners. This relationship affected the conception of community identity of the Mughals as well as the Chishtiyya, who by now can be seen as a fully institutionalised, powerful, and wide-ranging order of Sufi saints. Nizam al-Din was Badauni, Nasir al-Din was Awadhi, and Mu'in al-Din was originally Ajmeri. This saint, who started out Ajmeri, became Sijistani, sometimes Chishti (and therefore Herati), and yet retained an association with the saints of Delhi and the Deccan. Even so, Firishta spoke of the Chishtiyya of Ajmer, even as none of the rest of the saints he spoke about in this group had a particular association to Ajmer.

Despite the vast amount of hagiographical and historical literature about Mu'in al-Din, it is significant that so little information is verifiable in sources contemporary to him. The scholarship of Peter Brown in the context of the European cult of saints, and Sunil Kumar in the context of the sufi shrines in Delhi has shown that the transformation of a holy man to saint is often because of the endogenous history of the shrine, and the resources that it controlled.²⁶ Jyoti Gulati Balachandran's study of Shaikh Ahmad Khattu and the Sufis of Gujarat also brought to the fore the intricate and varying relationships between Sufis and Sultans, and how royal patronage on the one hand and a strong family with history and stature on the other, resulted in two very different paths of development for the shrines in Vatwa and Sarkhej. The royal patronage or lack thereof, allowed stake-holders to reflect on their identity in different ways.²⁷ In the

case of Ajmer, the descendants of Mu'in al-Din had nothing to do with the *dargah*, and we do not get details of their lives until the seventeenth century according to Currie. None are buried in Ajmer and seem to have gone to Mandu or Gujarat. But there was an intense rivalry among the stake-holders of the shrine to claim the position of *sajjada-nishin*.²⁸ Akbar ordered investigations into those attendants at the shrine who by the late sixteenth century were claiming to be descendants of Mu'in al-Din in order to gain access to the resources of the shrine. Akbar and the other Mughal rulers often intervened in the administration of the shrine and decided upon the legitimacy of claims to succession. In 1567, for example, Akbar banished the *sajjada-nishin* and appointed his own.²⁹

In tracing the historical development of the Chishtiyya, it is crucial to study not only significant moments, texts, and people, but also how traditions were made, particularly how knowledge was ordered. The historical Mu'in al-Din "Ajmeri" was pushed into the position of founder, a process which went hand in hand with the inflow of resources into Ajmer. Ajmer was strategically placed, and had been a subject of contention among even the Rajputs, Sultans, and Surs. It was also connected to Pushkar, and this combination of its strategic location as well as popular appeal made it natural that this would be a place that the Mughals had their eye on. While today one can definitely see that it is a sort of "headquarters" (as Atia Rabbi Nizami and Mumtaz Khan have called it) for the spread of the silsila, the *dargah* came to occupy this place very slowly, over the course of at least three centuries. The imperial patronage of the shrine of Khwaja Mu'in al-Din Chishti, in addition to the benefits to the rulers as already noted by scholars, also had an effect on the self-identification and self-historicisation of the Chishtiyya, and how the tradition that we witness today developed. While meta-narratives – and the modern scholarship based on them – portray a coherent picture, individual sources rarely conform to them, and even while participating in them, individual sources always complicate these meta-narratives. This paper comprises an attempt to study these individual sources which construct the

received narratives about the saint, and traces their creation to the changing valences and fortunes of the *dargah sharif* at Ajmer.

Notes and References

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- ² Muhammad Qasim Firishta, *Tārīkh-i Firishta, Jild-i duāzdahum*.
- ³ Aquil, *Hazrat-i Dehli*, pp. 23-48.
- ⁴ Jyoti Gulati Balachandran, *Narrative Pasts: The Making of a Muslim Community in Gujarat, c. 1400-1650*, New Delhi: OUP (2020), pp. 124-5.
- ⁵ For references to the manuscripts and hagiographical literature used for this study, please see my unpublished MPhil dissertation titled "Disentangling the Chishti silsila: The Husaini tariqa and the Jawami' al-Kalim" (University of Delhi, 2016), and my forthcoming PhD thesis titled "Becoming Pir: A Social History of Power among the Early Deccani Shaykhs" (University of Delhi, forthcoming).
- ⁶ Bruce Lawrence and Carl Ernst, *Sufi Martyrs of Love: The Chishti Order in South Asia and Beyond*, Palgrave-Macmillan (2003), p. 1.
- ⁷ I. H. Siddiqui, "The Early Chishti Dargahs" in C.W. Troll, ed., *Muslim Shrines in India: Their Character, History and Significance*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press (1989), pp. 1-24, p. 4
- ⁸ P.M. Currie, *The Shrine and Cult of Mu'in al-Din Chishti of Ajmer*, New Delhi: OUP (1989, 2006 rpn), pp. 25-27. See the eighth chapter for details about how the legend developed.
- ⁹ Sayyid Akbar Hussaini, *Jawāmi' al-Kalim*.
- ¹⁰ Currie, *Shrine and Cult*, p. 25
- ¹¹ 'Abd al-Haq, *Akhbār al-Akhyār*
- ¹² Abul Fazl, *Ain-i Akbari* vol 3 and *Akbarnama*.
- ¹³ S.A.I. Tirmizi, *Ajmer Through Inscriptions*. New Delhi: Institute of Islamic Studies, 1968, p. 11.

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- ¹⁴ Syed Liyaqat Hussain Moini, “The City of Ajmer during the Eighteenth Century: A Political, Administrative & Economic History”, PhD Thesis submitted to the Centre of Advanced Studies, Department of History, Aligarh Muslim University (1987); Motiur Khan, “Akbar and the Dargah of Ajmer”, *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, Vol. 71, 2010, pp. 226-35.
- ¹⁵ Isami, *Futuh al-Salatin*, ed. A. Usha. Madras, 1948, p. 466.
- ¹⁶ Tirmizi, *Ajmer Through Inscriptions*, p. 12.
- ¹⁷ *Ibid.*, pp. 12-13
- ¹⁸ T.W. Arnold, *A Catalogue of Indian Miniatures: The Library of Chester Beatty*, Vol. 1, p. 30, Miniature No. 14 of the Royal Albums. I am very grateful to Jean-Baptiste Clais, the curator of the Louvre, for sharing the wealth of images and visual materials.
- ¹⁹ Currie, *Shrine and Cult*, p. 106.
- ²⁰ Tirmizi, *Ajmer Through Inscriptions*, p. 24.
- ²¹ Tirmizi, *Ajmer Through Inscriptions*, p.16.
- ²² S.K. Banerji, “Shaikh Salim Chishti, the Shaikh-ul-Islam of Fathpur Sikri” in *Bharata Kaumudi: Studies in Indology in Honour of Dr Radha Kumud Mookerji*, Part 1, Allahabad: The Indian Press (1945), pp. 69-76; N. Hanif, *Biographical Encyclopaedia of Sufis: South Asia*, New Delhi: Sarup & Sons (2000), pp. 346-348.
- ²³ Atia Rabbi Nizami and Mumtaz Khan, “Origin and Evolution of Chishti Dargahs in South Asia: A Preliminary Exploration” in *Jamia Geographical Studies* ed. M.H. Qureshi, New Delhi: Manak Publishers (2012), pp. 23-66: pp. 43, 58-9 contains a useful summary of this conception.
- ²⁴ Currie, *Shrine and Cult*, p. 85.
- ²⁵ For a thorough and innovative study of this text, and an explanation of the ordering of its contents, see Jyoti Gulati, “Exploring the elite world in the *Siyar al-Awliyā'*: Urban elites, their lineages and social networks.” *IESHR*, Vol. 52, No. 3 (2015), pp. 241-70
- ²⁶ Peter Brown, *The Cult of the Saints: Its Rise and Function in Latin Christianity*; Sunil Kumar, *The Present in Delhi's pasts*, p. 104.
- ²⁷ Balachandran, *Narrative Pasts*, p. 73
- ²⁸ Currie, *Shrine and Cult*, pp. 150-52
- ²⁹ *Ibid.*, pp. 152, 164.