

Rise of Sufism in Central Asia: Local Perspective from Uzbekistan.

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This article will look into the reasons (why, how and when) of the rise of Sufism in Central Asia. This paper is based on my personnel communication with the experts in Central Asia and local public opinion from Tashkent, Samarkand, Bukhara, Fergana, Namangan, Kokand and Andijan where I spend one month to interact to know the reasons and rise of Sufism in Central Asia. The rise and spread of Sufism in these lands has deep connections with the political, economic, cultural and civilizational links with Central Asia. The rise was a piecemeal engineering by dedicated Sufis who led the movement with personnel examples of living simple, humble and pure character life of self-realization and empathy for the common people. The ruling elite too played a role in establishing themselves in power and relying on the blessings and good books of Sufis as well as among the common populace by supporting these dervishes to establish mosques, dargahs and madrassas to spread the word of God.

Keywords:

Sufism, Political elite, silk route, Sufi's, Universal Values, Khanqah and Dargah.

Introduction:

The rise of Islam in Central Asia took centuries for Arabs for propagate their faith. The Arab conquest of Central Asia differed from earlier invasions- locals offered fierce resistance, Arabs never faced such a tough fight and conquest went slowly and hence required centuries to achieve its objectives. Finally when Arabs were successful, and as usual they recruited locals in the administration, and slowly Baghdad became the centre of power with the help of Central Asian culture of learning and scientific temper, known as the Golden Age under Caliph Harun Rashid and Mamun's House of Wisdom.(Starr, 2013). The flourishing of Mutazilism and the focus on rationality led to advancement not only in science but in philosophy and religion as well. The drive for Sufism emerged at the heart of Islam during the Seljuk period although early Muslim mystics appeared in Arabia, Iraq and Central Asia in the 9th century. But it was incubated above all in Central Asia with many struggles and martyrs.

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The charismatic Sufi Kharaqani (1033) from Herat Afghanistan, was an Turk, and attracted many students of the brilliant age. He rejected the concern for *jannat* and *jahannum*, and called for a total focus on the Creator only (Zarrinkoob & Zarrinkoob, 1970). Kharaqani rendered Sufiism attractive not only to local population and Iranian speaking people but also to the newly Turk converts who could easily find shared commonalities with their native Shamanism and the capability for much room in Sufism. As early as 1000 AD, Central Asia became as the heartland of the Sufism and this tide would sweep whole of Muslim or Islamic world (Starr, 2013). But why did Sufism emerged popular and what were political, social and economic reasons behind its flourishing across borders, and what were the techniques, ways and methods used by Sufis to preach Islam is worth knowing.

Unveiling the Ascendancy: Factors in the Rise of Sufism in Central Asia

The rise of Sufism in Central Asia was influenced by a combination of religious, cultural, political, and socio-economic factors. These factors not only facilitated the spread of Sufism but also shaped its distinctive characteristics in the region. The key factors include:

Geographical and Economic Factors like Silk Road Connections: Paul Wormser (2014) argues that the spread of Islam in Asia was due to trade routes and Sufism in particular. This argument was further cemented by Professor Dilmorad Teshaboyev at Fargana University, while he argues that Central Asia's location along the Silk Road facilitated the exchange of ideas, goods, and religious teachings. Sufi missionaries and traders spread their ideas along these routes. Sufi orders (*ṭarīqa*) appealed to both the urban elite and rural communities. In rural areas, Sufism often provided a sense of community and support in times of economic or social upheaval. (Personnel communication, October 31, 2024).

Islamic Religious Framework: The formalistic and legalistic nature of orthodox Islam left many seeking a more personal and spiritual connection with God. Professor Muqqadam Ehsanova at Fargana University believes that Sufism, with its emphasis on inner purification, divine love, and mystical experiences, fulfilled this need. Sufism's ability to integrate with local traditions and cultures allowed it to appeal to diverse populations. (Personnel communication, October 15, 2024).

Cultural and Ethnic Diversity: Central Asia was home to rich spiritual traditions, including Zoroastrianism, Buddhism, and Shamanism. Professor Ulfat at Toshkent davlat sharqshunoslik universiteti (Tashkent State University of Oriental Studies) argues that Sufi mysticism resonated with these earlier practices, allowing for an organic blending of religious ideas. Sufi teachings and practices were often adapted to align with local customs and beliefs, making Sufism accessible to various ethnic and cultural groups. (Personnel communication, October 16, 2024).

Political Environment: Devin De Weese (2016) is of the view that the legacy of Najm al din Kubra (1145-1221) has attracted considerable attention in intellectual and initiatory impact in Khwarazm as he had travelled widely and lived during the reign of Khwarazmshah Tekesh and his son Alla din Mohammad reign. It was during this time he established a khanqah in Gurgang where he enjoyed respect from the ruling family. Some Sufis even were very close advisors of Caliphs like Shihab al din Umar Suhrawardi to Caliph al-Nasir. While Professor Kayumov at Namangan State University argues that some rulers supported Sufism as a means of consolidating their rule and promoting social cohesion but Sufi orders often acted as intermediaries between the rulers and the masses. Conversely, in times of political oppression, Sufi movements provided an alternative spiritual and socio-political framework that often resisted authoritarian control. These arguments are not mentioned by Weese (2016). (Personnel communication, October 30, 2024).

Sufi Brotherhood: The establishment of Sufi orders (like the Naqshbandi and Yasavi orders) created structured networks for the dissemination of teachings. Medina Ehsanova, Research Scholar at Fargana, states that these brotherhoods often served as centers of learning, spiritual training, and social welfare. Charity and education played a crucial role as Sufi institutions provided charity, education, and spiritual guidance, which endeared them to the population. (Personnel communication, July 17, 2025).

Charismatic Leadership of Saints and Scholars: Dr. Khikmatoy Abdulkhamidova, senior Lecturer at Fargana, is of the view that the lives and teachings of charismatic Sufi saints and scholars, such as Ahmad Yasavi and Baha-ud-Din Naqshband, inspired devotion and attracted followers. (Personnel communication, July 15, 2025).

Hagiographies and Pilgrimage: DeWeese & Gross (2018) mentions the disciple of Najm ud Din Kubra were renowned from hagiographic depictions (13th and 15th century). Renowned figures from Shiraz including Taj ud Din Mohamud Ushnuhi, Muvaffaq al Din al Khasi wrote his Persian treatise on mystic practices. While adding to such line of thought Professor Gulnoza at Farghana University told me that the reverence for Sufi saints led to the establishment of shrines and pilgrimage sites, which became focal points for spiritual activity (Personnel communication, July 18, 2025)

The Mongol Invasions: DeWeese & Gross (2018) mentions Sayf al-Din Bakharzi (d.1273) established himself after the death of Najm ud din in Mongol ruled Bukhara, where he was a jurist of Hanafi school of thought and madrasa manager while also parting Sufi training to disciples. Among his disciples was Kamal al Din Abu'l Muzaffar al- Husayn al- shaybani al-Baladi, who was the mentor of historian Jamal Quareshi as well as the teacher of Masduk Bek, son of Chingiz Khan's trusted advisor Mahmud Yalavach, hence important person in Mongol service. Sa'd al Din Hammuyi (1252) was from a prominent family with Sufi ties in Khurasan. He too had good relations with the Mongol rulers of Iran, his son, Sadr ud din was entrusted with the overseeing the conversion to Islam of the Ilkhanid Ghazan in 1295. Nodira Abduvaliyeva, Associate Professor of Farghana University, gives a different perspective of what happened during the Mongol conquests in the 13th century. He argues that the conquests disrupted an established political and social structures. Sufi orders often stepped into the resulting power vacuum, providing spiritual solace and a sense of stability amidst chaos to the common people of Central Asia, giving them hope and strength to believe in God (Personnel communication, July 18, 2025).

Intellectual Contributions: Sufi thinkers like Al-Ghazali helped reconcile Islamic theology with mysticism, making Sufism intellectually respectable. Professor Jabbar at Namangan State University believes that the poetry and literature of Sufi poets such as Rumi and Hafiz popularized Sufi concepts through their accessible and emotionally resonant works. By addressing the spiritual, social, and cultural needs of the people in Central Asia, Sufism established deep roots in the region and became a significant force in shaping its religious and cultural identity. His words were very forceful and convincing as he teaches history of Central Asia at the university (Personnel communication, November 1, 2024).

Sufi Strategies: Spreading Sufism with Heart and Soul

The spread of Sufism was facilitated by a variety of methods that emphasized peaceful propagation, personal example, and integration with local cultures. The Sufis adopted a flexible and inclusive approach that resonated with diverse communities. Some of the key methods used by Sufis included:

Personal Example and Charismatic Leadership: Professor Nilofer, Director at Tashkent University of Oriental Studies, is of the view that Sufi saints and leaders lived humble, pious lives that inspired admiration and emulation among the masses. Their personal magnetism and perceived spiritual powers drew people to their teachings and way of life. I could feel and understand her argument as we were well received by her whole department, and infact served food, and these people still hold those humble and pious ideas of inspiration by practice (Personnel communication, October 17, 2024).

Establishment of Khanqahs and Dargahs: Senior Lecturer and Linguist Sharibboy Kuyumov at Namangan State University who knows more than eight languages opines that Khanqahs (Sufi Lodges) were established by Sufis that served as centers for spiritual instruction, worship, and communal gatherings. These became hubs for spreading Sufi teachings. The tombs of revered Sufi saints became pilgrimage sites where people of all backgrounds sought blessings and guidance, further popularizing Sufi practices (Personnel communication, November 2, 2024).

Integration with Local Cultures: Professor Muhtaram Bakayevna, who teaches Islam and Timuridis at Samarkand State University, and I have attended her lectures at Samarkand University for one week. She argues that Sufism has played a significant role in Central Asian history. During Timurid authority, Sufi leaders played a role in defining the relationship between the ruled and the king. During the latter decades of Russian colonial control, the Russian Civil War, and the onset of Soviet government, Sufis once more served as a source of legitimacy for the local khanates of the eighteenth century and as a catalyst for opposition mobilization. During the years of Soviet religious persecution, the veneration of Sufi tombs gained significance, which made the resuscitation of Sufism inevitable when the resurgence of Islam was sanctioned by the state in the latter Soviet years. Sufis incorporated local traditions, languages, and symbols into their teachings to make them accessible and relatable to indigenous populations. They often

aligned their spiritual practices with local rituals and folk practices, making Sufism more appealing to the masses (Personnel communication, October 19, 2024).

Prof. Kayumov at Namangan University told me that Islamic rulers often provided stability with unified leadership in fragmented regions, making Islam associated with order and prosperity. The political elite used Islam as a unifying factor in building alliances (diplomacy) with neighboring regions and tribes. The role of the political elite in spreading Islam was multifaceted, ranging from direct military expansion to the subtle promotion of Islamic culture and institutions. Their support provided the infrastructure, legitimacy, and resources necessary for the growth and entrenchment of Islam in diverse societies (Personnel communication, November 2, 2024).

Mystical Poetry and Literature: Professor Nilofer states that Sufi poets like Rumi, Hafiz, and Bulleh Shah used poetry to express Sufi ideals of divine love and unity. These works were emotionally resonant and widely appealing. Sufi teachings were translated into local languages and disseminated through books and oral recitations, spreading their ideas far and wide (Personnel communication, October 17, 2024).

Use of Music, dance and Chanting: Martha Brill Olcott (2007) argues that early Sufis withdrew from society gathering followers and going back to countryside where they developed religious *tariqas* or orders with *zikr* that combined with physical movements of body combined with Quranic recitation by founders of these Sufi orders, and added elements of *sama* and *raqs* (songs and dance) with the intent of ecstatic abandon. While Professor Akhlaq Ahan at Jawaharlal Nehru University views Sufi practices like *qawwali* and other forms of devotional music helped convey their spiritual message in an engaging and memorable way. In some orders, such as the Mevlevi order (whirling dervishes), ritualistic dance was used to symbolize the soul's journey towards God (Personnel communication, may 13, 2022).

Interfaith Dialogue and Tolerance: Sufis often interacted peacefully with adherents of other faiths, fostering mutual understanding and demonstrating the inclusiveness of their teachings. Prof. Kayumov argues that Sufis' respectful approach to existing religious traditions encouraged conversions without coercion (Personnel communication, Namangan, 2024).

Missionary Activities: Sufi missionaries traveled extensively to spread their teachings. Prof. Kasimov, for instance, argues that Central Asian Sufis played a significant role in introducing

Sufism to regions like South Asia and the Middle East. Sufis cultivated networks of disciples who carried their teachings to new areas, ensuring the continuation of their message (Personnel communication, June 15, 2024).

Social Welfare and Service: Prof. Kayumov also believes that Sufis provided food, shelter, and assistance to the poor and needy, earning widespread respect and devotion. They often acted as mediators in local disputes, strengthening their social and spiritual influence (Personnel communication, November 2, 2024).

Educational Activities: Some Sufis established educational institutions to teach Islamic theology, jurisprudence, and Sufi practices argues Prof. Akbar and added that through sermons and storytelling, Sufis imparted their wisdom in ways that were accessible to illiterate populations (Personnel communication, October 30, 2024).

Focus on Universal Values: Sufi teachings of universal brotherhood, love, and the unity of all beings appealed to diverse audiences and transcended social and religious boundaries. Prof. Sohiba argued and believed that Sufis often engaged in healing practices, which enhanced their spiritual authority and drew followers seeking solace (Personnel communication, October 28, 2024).

Pilgrimage and Networking: The act of visiting Sufi shrines became a means of spiritual renewal and a way to strengthen communal bonds among followers. Prof. Irodakhon also argued that the organized structure of Sufi orders (*ṭarīqas*) facilitated the systematic dissemination of Sufi teachings across vast regions (Personnel communication, June 13, 2024).

These methods combined to make Sufism a dynamic and widely embraced spiritual movement, leaving a lasting impact on the religious and cultural landscapes of the regions it reached.

Elite Embrace: How Political Powers Boosted Sufism's Spread

The political elite played a significant role in the spread of Islam, particularly in facilitating its acceptance and institutionalization in diverse regions. Their influence was evident in various aspects of governance, culture, and society, which helped integrate Islamic beliefs and practices into the lives of their subjects. Key contributions of the political elite include:

State Patronage and Institutional Support: Rulers funded the construction of mosques, madrasas (Islamic schools), and other religious institutions, making Islamic practices more accessible argues Professor Muhtaram Bakayevna and added that implementation of Sharia (Islamic law) as the legal framework in many regions promoted Islamic values and norms in everyday life. The elite often patronized Islamic scholars (ulama) and Sufi leaders, enabling them to disseminate Islamic teachings more effectively. (Personnel Communication, October 18, 2024).

Encouragement of Conversion: Political elites sometimes offered social, economic, and administrative advantages to those who embraced Islam. Professor Muhtaram Bakayevna said that such as exemption from certain taxes (e.g., *jizya*, the poll tax on non-Muslims) or access to government positions were often provided to converts, who were often integrated into the ruling elite or military, thereby creating a symbiotic relationship between the state and the new Muslim populace. (Personnel communication, October 18, 2024).

Facilitating Trade and Cultural Exchange: Islamic rulers promoted trade and protected merchants, who played a critical role in spreading Islam along trade routes. Professor Guzal Mukhammadjonova at Fargana University believes trade and mobility fostered urbanization, and the elites created hubs where Islamic culture, education, and commerce flourished, encouraging its spread and spread of urban centres (Personnel communication, October 18, 2024).

Military Expansion and Conquests: Prof. Kayumov in one of the classes at Namangan told me that the early Islamic caliphates (Umayyad, Abbasid) expanded their territories through military campaigns, introducing Islam to new regions. In many cases, Islamic rulers allowed religious freedom that is tolerant to other faiths which encouraged gradual conversion rather than resistance. Conquered elites were often assimilated into Islamic governance structures, spreading Islam among their followers and dependents, therefore, the integration of local populations (Personnel Communication, November 1, 2024). He added that caliphates (*Umayyads and Abbasids*) institutionalized Islam across vast territories, standardizing religious practices and promoting Islamic culture. The Mughals in India supported Islamic art, architecture, and education, while engaging in dialogues with other religious traditions, enhancing Islam's appeal. As a major Islamic power, the Ottomans institutionalized Islamic governance, law, and culture across Europe, Asia, and Africa (Personnel Communication, November 1, 2024).

Intermarriage and Social Integration: Marriages between Muslim rulers and local elites often facilitated the integration of Islam into ruling classes and broader society. Professor Irodakhon Kholdarova at Fargana University adds that the “conversion to Islam sometimes provided access to higher social or political status, encouraging adoption of the faith”. (Personnel communication, November 1, 2024).

Cultural and Intellectual Patronage: The elite often supported advancements in Islamic sciences, philosophy, and arts, creating a cultural allure for Islam. Professor Sohiba Zakirova is of the opinion that the rulers funded the translation of works into Arabic and Persian, fostering an intellectual environment that attracted people to Islamic civilization. (Personnel communication, October 25, 2024).

Support for Sufi Orders: Political elites frequently endorsed Sufi orders, which played a major role in spreading Islam through their emphasis on love, spirituality, and syncretism with local traditions. Dr. Shakhlo Karimjonova, Senior Lecturer argues that Sufi leaders often acted as mediators between rulers and the populace, legitimizing the rulers while spreading Islam. The implementation of Islamic administrative practices made the faith integral to the functioning of the state, encouraging its adoption by the population. Rulers endowed religious institutions with land grants and wealth, ensuring their influence and stability. (Personnel Communication, October 25, 2024).

Conclusion:

Sufism has played a significant role in Central Asian history. Central Asia became the heartland of Sufism, sweeping the Muslim or Islamic world. The rise of Sufism in Central Asia include geographical and economic factors like Silk Road connections, Islamic religious framework, cultural and ethnic diversity, and political environment. Sufism’s mysticism resonated with earlier practices, making it accessible to various ethnic and cultural groups. The political environment also played a role in the spread of Sufism across borders. The lives and teachings of charismatic Sufi saints and scholars inspired devotion and attracted followers the establishment of shrines and pilgrimage sites, which became focal points for spiritual activity. Poetry and literature of Sufi poets such as Rumi and Hafiz popularized Sufi concepts, while the spread of

Sufism was facilitated by a variety of methods that emphasized peaceful propagation, personal example, and integration with local cultures. The Sufis adopted a flexible and inclusive approach, and leaders lived humble, pious lives that inspired admiration and emulation among the masses. The role of the political elite in spreading Islam was multifaceted, ranging from direct military expansion to the subtle promotion of Islamic culture and institutions. Although there is a lot of local perspective yet to be explored and this will need time and more rigorous research to reach the local people of Central Asian who had first-hand experience of those changes.

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