Indian Sufism since the Seventeenth Century: Saints, Books, and Empires in the Muslim Deccan

Nile Green
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Based on his doctoral dissertation submitted to the University of London, the present book is a wonderful study of the Sufis of Aurangabad (and, more generally, in the Deccan realms of Hyderabad's Nizams) and their consequent legacy in independent India. Green builds upon earlier research on the Muslim Deccan undertaken by Carl Ernst (*Sufism at Khuldabad*, which is adjacent to Aurangabad) and Richard Eaton (*Sufis of Bijapur*) and brings to the fore insights from religious studies on the nature of holy men and their interaction with politics, words, and worlds.

The Deccan has a rich Muslim heritage: Persianate from the fourteenth century and then dominated by the Mughals and their successor states from the end of the seventeenth century. This heritage also accounts for the significance of Sufis and their shrines in the region: the Aurangabad shrines are an important facet of this landscape, and this book is a welcome introduction to them. Green also furthers the theoretical position of Ernst and Eaton: the centrality of the cult of saints for Sufism means that the studies should focus on shrines as "realms of the saint." Sufism is thus not merely about masters and disciples or obscure and metaphysical arguments about gnosis, enlightenment and the marvellous; rather, it concerns sacred spaces and geographies of spiritual vitality and currency centered on the saints' shrines.

Starting from Aurangzeb's conquest of the Deccan and establishment of his capital at Aurangabad (the former Khirki of the Nizam Shahs) and following through to the legacy of the Panchakki shrine in the 1990s, Green's work comprises five chapters that weave together an incisive textual analysis of Persian and Urdu sources, readings of architecture as repositories of Sufi text, and fieldwork among Aurangabad's Sufis.

Chapter 1 introduces these Sufis in the age of the new Mughal Empire in the Deccan and focuses on Shah Nur (d. 1692, an interesting Iranian who

may well have been a Shi`i), the Naqshbandi warrior-saints Shah Palang-posh (d. 1699) and Shah Musafir (d. 1715), and the Chishti Shaykh Nizam al-Din (d. 1729). He discusses the importance of the literary sources for their lives and influences, not just such *malfuzat* and *tazkiras* as the *Malfuzat-i Naqshbandiyya* (available now in a superb translation by Simon Digby [published by Oxford University Press in India]) and *Ahsan al-Shama'il*, but also such poetic and belles-lettrist anthologies as Afzal Beg's *Tuhfat al-Shu`ara'* and Azad Bilgrami's *Khazana-yi `Amira*. Of particular significance is the interplay between the word and the world, between the pilgrimage and the shrine's sacred space, and the "spiritual geography" of the texts themselves.

Chapter 2 develops an argument about the poetry and politics of saint-hood in the Nizam's state. Given Aurangabad's significance as the first Asaf-Jahi capital before the move to Hyderabad in 1763, the political patronage of the shrines was critical and enshrined in the texts as well. The case of Shah Nur reflects the shifting allegiances and fortunes of Shi`i notables and Sufis after the Mughal Empire's demise. Whereas the Sufis' influence declined in the northern Shi`i principality of Avadh, in the Deccan the Shi`is' previous dominance gave way to the official patronage of Sufism and its shrines. Central to this process was the narration of the "life of the saint" and the sacred geography of his shrine and the polity.

Chapter 3 shifts to the British period and demonstrates the shifting concerns and links between the shrines in Aurangabad and Delhi mirroring the political links and allegiances. Chapter 4 considers the Sufis' role in the age of the revolt. Finally, chapter 5 ends with an examination of the Aurangabad holy men in modern India and their stories within the nationalist narrative.

Each chapter has a fairly consistent structure: an opening section on the particular chapter's theme; a section on the three sets of saints and their legacies; a section on the literary tradition; and finally a discussion of the links and parallels among the literary, spiritual, and political traditions of the age. This form allows one to compare and contrast each period's fortunes and vagaries.

My only criticism is that, at times, the book is written in a rather dense style and, perhaps because the chapters stand alone, the overall text is slightly disjointed. There are also a number of typographical errors, which perhaps are unavoidable nowadays. A contextualizing chapter to introduce the book's various themes would have been useful as a preliminary, as well as a final concluding chapter to draw together the various narratives and trajectories. The title is also slightly misleading but, I guess, marketing demands this: a book on Indian Sufism will no doubt sell better than one that merely describes itself as a study of Deccan Sufism (it is, in fact, a bit more precise

than that as well). Nevertheless, it is quite pioneering and considers such important and hitherto unused sources as the works of the Aurangabadi Naqshbandi thinker Qamar al-Din, who wrote works in Arabic and Persian on light mysticism. The literature on Sufism in India is richer and more textured as a result of this work.

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