Hajj to the Heart

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Perilous Pilgrimage and Interconnected Lives

*Proclaim the pilgrimage among the people! They will come to you on foot and all kinds of vehicles, lean on account of journeying through difficult passages . . . and those who honor the sacred rites of God should do so from sincere piety of heart.*

—Qur’an, Surat al-Hajj (22:27–32)

He finished chanting and closed his Qur’an, for what had begun as a refreshing breeze was quickly gathering force in a storm. The wind goaded dark waves, and menacing clouds obscured the horizon. The sea became the sky and the sky the sea, like two hands united to grip their ship, lifting and tossing them recklessly. He slipped his leather-bound Qur’an into his canvas satchel as his fellow passengers, disoriented and fearful, clung to the ship’s wooden planks with increasing desperation. In the twinkling of an eye, their easy passage had become difficult. They had left the Gujarati coastline weeks ago, and their anxiety about pirates and Portuguese marauders had gradually fallen away the nearer they got to Arabia’s shores. As they departed the Yemeni port of Aden and tacked northward along the Red Sea coast toward the Hijaz, their expectations had bubbled over into joy.

Yet now, hope sank as every fiber of their ship groaned. Waves crashed overhead like thunderclouds and the deck buckled. The mast snapped. Sails collapsed while the greedy fists of waves pulled them under, thrashing with the bodies of disoriented passengers like nets full of fish. He barely had time
to register what was happening: the unthinkable was transpiring before his eyes. The solid ship that was their only protection was splintering into shards as sharp as spears. A verse from the Qurʾan coursed through his mind but could barely form on his lips before he leaped into the churning depths—*Upon God I rely, the Lord of the exalted throne* (Qurʾan 9:129).

He was a pilgrim, a scholar of scripture, and a lover of God. Yet none of that seemed to matter as the waves closed over his head. The satchel slung over his shoulder, full of his books, dragged him down. Thunderclaps, crashing waves, cleaving wood, and desperate shouts faded. A profound silence embraced him, pulling him deeper.

Grasping his wrist, a hand. Pulling his collar, another hand. Whose hands were these under his shoulders? His face broke through the water’s surface as he gasped for air and his arms grasped a wooden plank. The hands held him up until he got a firm hold on the plank, which supported a few of his fellow castaway passengers like a floating anchor despite the storm’s cacophony. How many hours did this torture last? His senses were effaced; his mind was numbed as every fiber of his strength went into holding on to the plank. Gradually the storm blew over, the winds calmed, and the waves settled down. Only then did exhaustion overcome him and the several men clinging with him to the plank. He wavered between sleep and death, never loosening his grip.

As day turned to night and night turned to day, his memory slowly returned to him. His name was ʿAbd al-Ḥaqq. He was one of countless pilgrims who braved the sea to reach Arabia from South Asian shores. Many perished in the sea’s dangers, but not he. From landlocked Delhi, he had never seen the sea until the moment he embarked on the ship, heading to the holy cities of Mecca and Medina. His family of scholars was fond of quoting the poetry of Amir Khusro, the Sufi minstrel of Delhi—“The sea of love moves in strange ways, Khusro! Those who jump in sink but those who drown reach the other side.”¹ How could they imagine that their beloved metaphors, when embodied in reality, were so terrifying? His father’s voice surfaced in ʿAbd al-Haqq’s slowly reviving mind, memories of when he taught his son and his circle of disciples from stories by Mawlana Rumi. His rhyming Persian couplets wove narratives, like that of the scholar and the boatman.²

Once a scholar stepped into a boat
And turned towards the oarsman just to gloat:
“Have you learned any grammar?” He said, “No.”
“Then half your life’s been wasted just to row!”
Wind steered the boat towards a whirlpool there
   The oarsman shouted to him, once aware,
   “Have you learned how to swim and keep afloat?”
   “I’ve never learned, skilled captain of my boat.”
   “O scholar, your whole life has been in vain:
   We’re sinking fast—what good now is your brain!”

His father had laughed at the punch line and teased his precocious son and fellow students. Would his father laugh now if he saw his son, just on the cusp of maturity, almost drowned in the sea? His father had spent a lifetime teaching him grammar to unlock the secrets of the Qur’an, the Prophet’s sayings, and Sufi literature. Chuckling, his father would finish the narrative:

   Not grammar but effacement is needed here
   If self-effaced, dive in and have no fear!
   While corpses can float on a stormy sea
   How can the living find security?

These couplets echoed in ‘Abd al-Haqq’s consciousness as he drifted toward shore, little more than a living corpse still weighed down by the books in the satchel slung over his shoulder.

‘Abd al-Haqq survived his ordeal by sea. Though dramatized in this telling, the narrative above follows the facts that he relayed. Many years later, he wrote about his shipwreck and death-defying encounter with the sea in a Persian memoir:

   When I was traveling to the two holy cities [in Arabia], my ship met with a terrible storm and was broken into bits. I, along with some other passengers, clung onto a wooden plank and stayed floating with it for several days. Finally, we were washed up onto shore. I had with me a bundle of books which had become totally drenched. Since we now had to travel from the coast by foot and I had no way to carry them with me, I buried them in the Arabian desert and made a sign at the place so I might find them again later. Then we turned toward Mecca and began traveling by foot.

   Along the way, we were overcome by thirst, and water is scarce in the Arabian desert. My companions appealed to me to pray that God might send us water to drink. I said, “I will voice the prayer and you all say Amen.” We prayed together until God sent a rain shower, and we filled up
our leather bottles with fresh water. After several days of travel by foot, we reached Mecca. We circumambulated the Kaʿba and ran the track between the hills of Safa and Marwa.

Then some Bedouins approached us bearing a load upon their heads. They asked, “Would you like to buy some books?” When they opened their bundle, I found that the books they had for sale were precisely my books that I had left behind buried in the Arabian desert! I said nothing of this to them, but gave them the price they were asking and took the books. All the pages of the books had stuck together while drying such that one could not open them. I once again soaked the book so that the pages separated from each other, yet in this process not one letter was lost such that the book might become useless to a reader!

In danger from drowning and dehydration, Ṭḥān al-Haqq was more concerned for his books than his own life. He recorded the miracle of abandoning his precious texts when stranded on Arabian shores only to have them carried to him by Bedouins customarily feared for plundering pilgrims. His books, for which he obsessively cared, stood in for his own body, to which he hardly paid attention.

What kind of traveler was this? He was no ordinary merchant or mere pilgrim. His pilgrimage was a quest for religious knowledge, a hajj to the heart. He returned to South Asia years later as a mature Sufi master, brilliant hadith scholar, and prolific author, known as Shaykh Ṭḥān al-Ḥaqq Muḥaddith Dihlawī, “Our master, the hadith expert from Delhi.” He revived hadith studies in early modern South Asia, founded an influential madrasa in the Mughal Empire’s capital city, and argued tirelessly that Islamic law and Sufi mysticism were integral to each other. He authored over fifty books, ranging from a biography of the Prophet Muhammad and a history of Medina to invaluable commentaries on prized hadith collections and the most reliable accounts of great Sufis in South Asia. His hagiography of the famous Sufi Shaykh Ṭḥān al-Qādir Jīlānī (d. 1166) was translated into Persian for popular dissemination by order of no less than Prince Dārā Shikōh (d. 1659), heir apparent to the Mughal throne.

No account of Islam in South Asia neglects to discuss Ṭḥān al-Haqq’s contribution and influence. Yet when he washed ashore in Arabia, he was nobody. How did Ṭḥān al-Haqq mature into a great religious leader? He left South Asia in despair and matured in Mecca’s rarefied air, under the guidance of Sufi scholars there. In Arabia, he searched for learning, piety, mystical insight, and political acumen. He found these qualities unified in the Muttaqi community of Sufi scholars who bridged the distance between South Asia and Mecca; the
members of this community taught new reformist ideals of Islamic scholarship fused with mysticism, ideals that they sent back to South Asia through texts, training, and disciples, including most prominently ʿAbd al-Haqq. This community was named after its founding saint, Shaykh ʿAli ibn Ḩusām al-Dīn ibn ʿAbd al-Mālik ibn Qāḍī Khān al-Hindī al-Muttaqī (lived 1480–1567, hereafter called ‘Ali Muttaqi), who crossed the same dangerous sea about six decades earlier, leaving Gujarat to live in exile. He settled in Mecca to teach, write, and train disciples in order to build a reformist Sufi community (in contrast to a distinct Sufi order). Many sailed from South Asia to join him and receive training, braving the perils at sea.

One person’s life, when extended through travel and text and taken as exemplary, forms the basis for a network of interconnected lives that persist through time as a community. This book explores how ‘Ali Muttaqi established the Muttaqi community that thrived, despite political challenges, over the long sixteenth century, affecting abstract concepts like reform, discipline, piety, and political legitimacy that were central to Islamic society in an era of radical change. Its approach takes inspiration from Richard Eaton’s method of viewing “biography not as a genre inherently antithetical to social history, but as a vehicle that could be recovered and mobilized for writing precisely such history,” meaning the post-Marxist history of longue durée social dynamic, power structures, and political conflicts rather than the bourgeois narrative of great men.4

This book documents the life of ‘Ali Muttaqi and the Muttaqi community that followed him over three generations spanning one and a half centuries, beginning with ‘Ali Muttaqi’s birth in 1480 and ending with ‘Abd al-Haqq’s death in 1642. It analyzes their collective effort to promote reformist Sufism that fused hadith studies, juridical principles (qawāʿid) and Sufi discipline (adab) in an ethical program with scholarly, political, and spiritual dimensions. They did this long before most scholars identified Islamic reformism and revivalism as a historically important force in the eighteenth century.

Only through the liminal and forgotten Muttaqi community did ‘Abd al-Haqq mature into the Sufi scholar famed in history, and only through ‘Abd al-Haqq did this community’s reformist Sufi teaching flourish back in its members’ South Asian homeland. Their journeys of body, soul, and mind over the boundaries of land and sea, political loyalty, and established custom constitute a “Hajj to the heart”: an inner pilgrimage toward renewed piety. As the Qur’an says of the Hajj pilgrimage, Those who honor the sacred rites of God should do so from sincere piety of heart (Qur’an 22:37). Yet how the Muttaqi community defined “piety” led into subtle debates and bitter disputes with their fellow Muslims from South Asia.
Embarkation: Introducing a Passenger

Undertaking the pilgrimage is a turning point in life for every Muslim who shoulders the material dangers and ritual rigors of its journey. The Qur’an concludes its description of the hajj in verses 22:27-32 by specifying its timing, its conditions of peace, and its requirement of provision. For Muslims in South Asia before the sixteenth century, the Hajj often required land travel, which, though slow, allowed pilgrims to trade, study, and visit holy sites along the way in the major cities of Central Asia, Iran, and Iraq. But in ‘Ali Muttaqi’s era, embarking on the Hajj almost invariably meant provisioning for a treacherous sea voyage. This was especially true after the Safavid Empire in neighboring Iran became a Shi‘ī state in the early sixteenth century and travel overland became difficult. For Muslims from South Asia, the Hajj was a spiritual climax intensified by the dangers of the passage and the difficulty of provision.

Packing one’s satchels for the journey was an onerous task and anticipated an exciting adventure. The Qur’an warns pilgrims that making provision for the hajj is only a metaphor for the inward journey of ethical living. Whatever good you may do, God surely knows of it—Take provision on your journey but know that the best provision is sincere piety, so stay wary in your piety if you have insight (Qur’an 2:197). In one’s spiritual life, the only apt provision is performing good works: doing good is like saving money now for insurance against future downturns and disasters. Yet the Qur’an makes a more profound warning amid the metaphors of banking and trading. It proclaims that good deeds are not enough, for they must be done with sincere intention and purity of heart: the best provision is sincere piety.

‘Ali Muttaqi heard these words with deep awareness, words that entered his heart and transformed it. He arrived in Mecca in 1535, one of countless South Asian Muslims who made the pilgrimage at the cusp of the early modern period, but he was a pilgrim with a difference. He was a scholar, well versed in Arabic, scriptural hermeneutics, and hadith studies. He was a Sufi, deeply immersed in mystical devotion and searching for spiritual intimacy with the Prophet and, through him, for the love of God. He was an advisor to rulers, experienced in political diplomacy and social critique. He was a voyager for whom pilgrimage was a metaphor for his whole life as a process, rather than just a one-time event after which he returned safely home. Pilgrimage extended to overtake and color his entire life. He sacrificed all for his ideals and principles, even if they were not popular and won him only continued exile.

This book will explore ‘Ali Muttaqi’s life, spirituality, struggles, writings,
and legacy. His scholarship and writings covered genres like hadith, Sufism, and social ethics. Analyzing the legacy of ʿAli Muttaqi requires us to go on a voyage with him—a voyage of the imagination across the Indian Ocean from the Deccan where he was born; to Gujarat, where he established his authority; to Arabia, where he lived in exile and spread his ideals. He crossed the Arabian Sea five times, voyaging in states of despair, hope, distress, confidence, and serenity. This study catalogs all that he carried in his satchels. More than books, clothing, and food, ʿAli Muttaqi packed his satchels with ideas and ideals. He carried memories both fond and scarred. He carried skills hard-earned through studies and also insights gifted to him in flashes. He carried arguments with his colleagues, the consequences of which cost his followers their reputations and, at times, their very lives.

This study unpacks the satchels of ʿAli Muttaqi to display the burdens that he bore and the hopes that he nurtured. The satchels that held his piety’s provision serve as metaphors for the chapters of this book. We can imagine him loading six satchels onto the ship that will carry him through his life’s journey: satchels containing his youthful growth, his midlife exile, his mature authority, his contested mission, his dedicated followers, and his reformist legacy that they perpetuated after his death.

Moorings: Time and Place, Sources and Narratives

All voyages are ultimately circular. ʿAli Muttaqi left Gujarat and died in exile in Arabia, but his followers perpetuated his legacy back in South Asia. The coastal region of Gujarat is central to this story, along with its neighboring regions in the Deccan. This book builds on the work of Samira Sheikh, whose analysis of Gujarat left off in 1500. In the sixteenth century, Gujarat thrived as a sultanate and subsequently as an important province of the Mughal Empire. As Jyoti Balachandran notes, “The message was loud and clear: the Gujarat Sultans were central to the functioning of the Muslim community in the region; they had ushered in a new chapter,” and the message was broadcast through textual narratives, urban growth in ports and capitals, and architectural monuments. Gujarat’s long coastline, rich seaside entrepôts, and Muslim travelers illustrate South Asia’s oceanic connections to Arabia and beyond.

The Muttaqi community thrived though sea journeys between Gujarat and Arabia, defining a “maritory” or maritime zone that changes our view of “territories” that otherwise seem disconnected. Sufi support of the sultans of Gujarat is one dimension of the story told in this book, which builds
on Balachandran’s recent analysis of historical vision offered by fifteenth-century Sufi texts in Gujarat. Another dimension that is more hidden and difficult to decipher is Sufi involvement with hadith scholarship. In Mecca, ʿAli Muttaqi studied hadith with the best scholars of his generation and fused Sufi discipline with hadith studies. He trained a generation in this style of reformist Sufism—a mixture of mysticism, hadith studies, theological knowledge, and political savvy.

In addition to ʿAli Muttaqi himself, this book documents three of his fellow passengers, his primary followers who moved through Gujarat to Arabia and back. ʿAbd al-Wahhāb Muttaqī lived and taught in Mecca (d. 1593). Muḥammad ibn Ṭāhir Pāṫanī transplanted the Muttaqi community’s reformist ideals to Gujarat but was assassinated amid partisan conflicts there (d. 1578). ʿAbd al-Haqq, previously mentioned, successfully institutionalized his reformist Sufism in Delhi, far from tumultuous coasts. Thereafter, ʿAli Muttaqi’s ideals spread in South Asia and beyond the Mughal realm to Southeast Asia, where Sufi scholars in Aceh (in Sumatra) and other regions took initiation into this community. In Delhi, ʿAbd al-Haqq’s madrasa and Sufi hospice (khānqāh) institutionalized the fusion between Sufism and hadith studies. He engaged with Mughal rulers, a strategy that ultimately did not work. But ʿAbd al-Haqq’s institution and Sufi cadres and scholarly followers built a popular base, which slowly altered Islam in South Asia, gradually and indirectly.

The efforts of those in the Muttaqi community played out in a shifting geographic stage. Their story traverses the boundary of land and sea, complicates distinctions between regions like South Asia and Arabia, and transcends the binary of scriptural scholarship versus Sufi mysticism. Their efforts also played out as a chronological drama. Their story crosses an imaginary threshold important to Muslims but unnoticed by others: the advent of the Islamic millennium, “a symbolic occasion of great moment.” This occurred on October 19, 1591 (Muharram 1, AH 1000), in the middle of the period considered in this book (which we can conceive of as the “long sixteenth century” favored by historians of early modern world history). Muslims looked forward to its occurrence for the century leading up to it, beginning in 1495–96 (AH 900), with a heady mixture of anxiety and enthusiasm. Christians who were attentive to Islamic discourse predicted that if the Mahdī, the divinely guided religious leader of the last days as expected by Muslims, did not arrive by the year 1500, then all Muslims would renounce their religion under a soon-to-appear world-dominating Christian emperor. Cornell Fleischer demonstrated the importance of apocalypticism and messianism in the powerful early modern
Islamic empires (especially in the Ottoman rivalry with Catholic empires in the Mediterranean world) and challenged other scholars to explore these themes in Safavid, Timurid, and Mughal contexts.9

This book takes up Fleischer’s challenge in the Indian Ocean context. It inverts Fleischer’s focus by examining those who opposed millennial speculation and sought to damper it rather than those who encouraged it and accrued power through it, building on Fleischer’s insightful comment that apocalyptic discourse depended upon hadith reports and their interpretation.10 ‘Ali Muttaqi opposed the spiritual and political speculation that the impending millennium sparked in Muslim polities. He and his community wagered their authority as Sufi masters and hadith scholars in a discursive battle against speculative forces, which came to a head in Gujarat, where political instability led to a potent mix of anxiety and opportunity for Islamic movements both millennial and Sufi. For indeed, in 1496 a Sufi revivalist from South Asia proclaimed himself the Mahdi in Mecca and achieved a vibrant following in Gujarat by 1500. Gujarat, with its sea-lane connections to Arabia, was an important theater for millennial debates.

The decades leading up to the Islamic millennium constituted an opportunity for politico-religious reimagining. As a conceptual boundary in time, it helped Muslims integrate into their religious imagination those momentous political, social, and economic changes already at play. For Muslims around the Indian Ocean coasts, 1498 heralded great changes. The Portuguese invaded ports, seized islands, and dominated trade; soon centralizing states, such as the Mughal, Safavid, and Ottoman Empires, arose on land to claim divine mandate. In this era, sea journeys were endangered by the Portuguese, who were not mere pirates who had long preyed upon merchants and pilgrims along Indian Ocean coasts; they were, rather, the vanguard of European colonization, which began not on land but rather on the seas and its strategic islands. Portuguese intervention in South Asian politics contributed to the fall of the sultanate of Gujarat, the coastal polity that ‘Ali Muttaqi chose as his home.

‘Ali Muttaqi and his followers are mentioned in every account of Islamic reform in South Asia, but their Sufi affiliations are obscured and their spiritual activities ignored in favor of their important position in hadith studies. Sufism was not a negligible phenomenon of folkloric performance or unorthodox marginality, as some scholars portray it. Rather, Sufis were active agents in political change, social reform, and Islamic scholarship. Sufism was the center of intellectual and political life during the end of the sultanate of Gujarat and the early Mughal period. This book illuminates the Muttaqi community’s
contribution to Sufism and explains its involvement in social and political affairs. In arguing these claims, this book will center the study of Sufism in Islamic discourses of ethics (akhlāq) and disciplined comportment (adab), following the lead of Muzaffar Alam. It positions itself against other contemporary scholarly trends, such as seeing Sufism in terms of political power and social capital as in the scholarship of Nile Green, or in terms of bargaining with supernatural forces as in A. Azfar Moin. Moin characterizes Sufis in the Mughal era as supporters of superstition in the form of sorcery, thaumaturgy, astrology, and divination. This book offers a more reasoned assessment—based on a broader foundation of archival sources—on interactions between Sufis and political rulers in the long sixteenth century. *Hajj to the Heart* makes this scholarly intervention by balancing information drawn from Sufi writings—theological, ethical, and hagiographic—with information from historical chronicles that were produced by courtiers.

Sufi ethics, discipline, and comportment provide a lens with which to analyze issues of political power and social relations in early modern Islam in South Asia. Sufis of the Muttaqi community saw themselves as channels for the Prophet Muhammad’s inner charisma and outer norms, not merely as scholars of the scriptural tradition of hadith studies. While the Prophet’s blessed body might have been inaccessible, the corpus of his traditions was available through textual expertise. Members of the Muttaqi community specialized in hadith studies yet also saw themselves as living exemplars, embodying discourse through their own breathing flesh, performative ethics, and social intercourse.

To tell the story of the Muttaqi community more vividly than its cursory mention in previous scholarship, this book draws on rare manuscript sources in Arabic, Persian, and Urdu. These sources, often unpublished and mostly unedited, include Ṭāli Muttaqi’s original writings and oral discourses and Ṭabd al-Haqq’s account of Ṭali Muttaqi and Ṭabd al-Wahhab Muttaqi’s lives and teachings titled *Zād al-Muttaqīn*, or “Provision of the Pious.” ’Ṭabd al-Haqq’s writings are crucial in this study, including his letters to Mughal grandees, his critique of the famous Naqshbandi revivalist Aḥmad Sirhindi (d. 1624), and his religio-political advice to Emperor Jahāngīr (ruled 1605–27). This study takes into account the biographies provided by the protagonists and their supporters, in addition to those given by their adversaries in the Shaṭṭārī Order and the Mahdawi movement.

Using fifty manuscript books by Ṭali Muttaqi, in addition to other sources from archives in India, Pakistan, Turkey, Cairo, Europe, and North America,
this book provides the most complete treatment of this three-generation community of Sufi scholars. Yet gathering these sources, translating passages, and analyzing them are not enough. This book breathes life into their literary remains to lift them off the page and clothe their lines of script with flesh and feeling. The archival lines traced on paper—by them and about them—call us to imagine them afresh through prose that is more novelistic. Each chapter, conceived as a satchel prepared for a long sea journey, begins with a vignette based on documented facts but presented as dialogue and drama; the narrative vignettes dispense with formalities, such as diacritics and death dates, in order to invite readers into the story and empathize with its characters. For just as sails are mere cloth until the wind blows into them, so academic writing is mere information until readers enliven it with imagination. Only then can readers be moved to embark on a voyage of thought, argument, and inspiration—a true Hajj to the heart.