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‘Ali Muttaqi’s Growth

As the Qur’an recitation faded, hushed expectation settled over the gathering. Hundreds of listeners crowded into the khanqah: the Sufi hospice’s wide courtyard in Burhanpur was a sea of people seated to form an open space between the troop of musicians and the shaykh, the elderly Sufi master whose grizzled head was bowed. His turban, the color of marigolds, was the brightest object in the courtyard on that warm night. A sustained note from the sarangi strings rang out, conjuring forth the voices of the Qawwali singers. Slow and low they began singing a quatrain in Persian to open the mehfil-e sama.¹

Our raft is sunk, of drowning we’re afraid
You support the helpless and dismayed
For the sake of ‘Usman Haruni, your master
O Mu‘in al-Din Chishti, come to our aid

The voices of the Qawwals swelled as the drums behind them tapped out a rhythm, first gently on the tabla and then, as the singers began to clap percussively, more robustly on the deep-voiced dhol and mridang.

A young boy watched the musicians intently, as emotion washed over their faces and their throats strained with song. He felt his father’s warm presence beside him, calming his fear in this strange and awe-inspiring gathering. His father was looking the other way, toward the shaykh, named Shah Bajan, who raised his head as the song gained momentum, his face luminous as he sank rapt into the vortex of melody and rhyme. “Dark night and frightful waves as storms swirl and roar / Can they know my state, those who stay on the shore?” The father whispered to his son, “Listen carefully, ‘Ali! That couplet is
by Hafiz Shirazi. They chose it because of the image of drowning in a swirling storm, a *girdab*.” But his son was watching Shah Bajan, as the shaykh subtly lifted the corner of his prayer carpet on which he sat cross-legged, otherwise immobile as a statue.

The shaykh looked under the carpet out of the corner of his eye and, seeing nothing there, lowered it back into place. The boy turned to his father, “Why is our shaykh fiddling with . . . ?” “Hush, ‘Ali! Mind your *adab*! Focus on the lyrics—clear your heart of everything except the images reflected there.” The boy knit his brow in consternation as the tempo accelerated into a new verse.

If pain is from you then no cure I desire
If passion is for you, to hardship I aspire
If I be killed in the path of loving you
Not a cent of blood-money from you I require

The quatrain hovered over the courtyard as his father leaned over to whisper in the boy’s ear, “This poem will have a deep impact on our shaykh—it is from our patron saint, Burhan al-Din Gharib.” The Qawwals repeated the Persian verses, syncopated against the drum beat, lingering on the word *‘ishq*, or love, rendering it in countless variations. The shaykh’s frail body quivered with delight, as this poem was a favorite of his much-beloved spiritual ancestor. The boy observed carefully: the shaykh appeared to be holding inside an enormous energy that surged through him, but he stayed seated with profound gravitas.

The boy saw the shaykh, once again, with frail but nimble fingers, lift the corner of his prayer carpet and peer beneath it. Glancing around his father’s form, the boy saw that three gold coins lay where before there had been none. The shaykh slyly picked them up and dropped the carpet’s corner back in place, and then he smiled. The boy’s mouth fell open with questions as he plucked at his father’s sleeve, but his voice was suppressed as drums thundered, shifting from a stately rhythm to a swinging and lilting pace. Their staccato clapping picked up speed as the poetry shifted from Persian to the local Indian tongue. Simple and sweet, the words poured forth—*My lord and savior, helper and protector of all*. Cries burst from the audience as some sobbed and others raised their hands in prayer. “It is our shaykh’s own poem,” the father exclaimed to his one, “in our own Gujari tongue!”

My lord and savior, helper and protector of all
You who take us across no matter what may befall
A fearful mountain path is before me, steep and tall
With lions lurking and thorns where my feet fall
O jungle’s king, over everything ruling, great and small
I give my life and soul to you, now hold me in thrall!

As the musicians sang “I give my life,” the elderly shaykh sprang to his feet like a youth and strode across the courtyard, tears coursing down his cheeks. Standing rapt before the singers, who continued to repeat “my life and soul,” he tossed a gold coin into the lap of the chief singer, followed by another and another. As the boy watched, engrossed yet fearful, it seemed that the old shaykh was flying though his feet were still touching the ground. Those around him rushed to catch hold of his robe as he sat down again on his carpet. Members of the audience rose to bow before him, offering copper and silver coins, which the shaykh received with benedictions to each and every one as they took the opportunity to kiss his hand or touch his feet. Some remained weeping in their places while others rose to spin in graceful circles, their souls soaring on the winds of melody.

Such ritual assemblies of Sufi music, called Mehlī-e Samāʿ (or “Qawwali” in popular parlance) were regular events in the late fifteenth-century Deccan, where ‘Ali Muttaqi was born. His father introduced him to the Chishti community and its musical ritual at a young age. ‘Ali Muttaqi took initiation as a boy with Shāh Bājan (d. 1507), an innovative Sufi master, hadith scholar, poet, and patron of musicians. The music gave life to lyrics in Persian and Indic languages, rooting Islam in the local environment, even if it always opened and closed with recitation from the Qurʾan, framing this multilingual and interfaith ritual with sacred Arabic.

As ‘Ali Muttaqi grew into a youth, he found his ancestral land, Khandesh (Khāndēsh) with its capital of Burhanpur (Burhānpūr), to be both rich and barren. It was wealthy because of its fine industry with cotton that flourished in its iron-rich soil. Its heritage nurtured him, like the rain that the Qurʾan describes falling on the earth and making it vibrate with life. We created you from dust, then a sperm-drop, then a mucus clot, then a fleshy body . . . then we bring you forth as a child, then nurture you to maturity so that you grow firm . . . You see the earth barren until we rain down the waters and it quivers, swells, and sprouts with every kind of growth (Qurʾan 22:5). To understand ‘Ali Muttaqi’s voyage of life, we must begin with the soil—physical, social, and spiritual—from which he grew. This chapter is a satchel filled with memories—memories of his birth, childhood, youthful struggles, and familiar homeland; it is a
The satchel of this chapter will illustrate ʿAli Muttaqi’s growth, from tenuous beginnings to maturing as scholar and status-wielding saint. ʿAli Muttaqi’s life was woven from contradictions and conflicts with his environment, which gave him a distinct individuality. The values that he affirmed were often at variance with those of his contemporaries and even with those from whom he inherited status and authority, like his father and his first Sufi masters. ʿAli Muttaqi grew up immersed in the rituals of the Chishti Sufi order but rejected them. He came to see sainthood not as a status to be inherited by carrying out a tradition but rather as a quality to be acquired through preparation and labor. He explored authenticity as a saint, in contrapuntal movement to his questioning of the accepted forms of saintly legitimacy that enjoyed social recognition in his local environment. His early life interweaves these two crucial terms that are often in contradistinction: authenticity and legitimacy. However, this will become clear only against the background of Sufi practice that he rejected.

Heritage: Chishti Sufis Spreading Islam in South Asia

Sufism, or taṣawwuf, means “Islamic mysticism.” Mysticism can be described as “love of the absolute” in contrast to practical accommodation to routine reality.5 Islamic mysticism seeks spiritual insight and direct experience of God, a search guided by the Qur’an and based upon the example of the Prophet Muhammad, his intimate follower ʿAli, and their spiritual followers (known as
awliyāʾ—saints or “God’s Friends”). It is a way to achieve purity of heart (ṣafwat al-qalb in Arabic) and acquire wise insight (sophia in Greek, which was absorbed into Arabic), as in the way the ascetic followers of the Prophet Muhammad (ahl al-ṣaffa) lived on a bare bench outside the first mosque in Medina. Sufis organized their method of practicing mysticism into socially coherent orders, each called a tariqa, or “Way.” Over time, the vast majority of Muslims accepted Sufism as integral to Islam and upheld its saints as exemplars.

In the tenth century, Sufis settled in a village called Chisht (in Afghanistan near Herat), where they cultivated Sufism with ascetic rigor, poetic eloquence, and musical meditation; they were known as Khwājagān, or “Masters of Chisht.” As the frontier of Sunni rule moved eastward with Turkic invasions into South Asia, Khwāja Muʿīn al-Dīn Chishtī (d. 1236) settled at Ajmer. He taught that a Sufi cultivates “generosity like a river, magnanimity like the sun, and humility like the earth.” He distilled universal teachings from Islam, attracting Hindu devotees while extolling Muhammad as the perfect human being and Imam ‘Ali as the exemplary saint. He and his companions elevated devotional music to a central practice in Sufism. Two generations later, Niẓām al-Dīn Awliyā (d. 1325) institutionalized the Chishti Order in the capital of the Delhi sultanate. As that sultanate expanded over large swaths of South Asia, its cities were enriched by Muslim migrants from Iran and Central Asia who were fleeing Mongol incursions. Nizam al-Dīn Awliya’s family hailed from Bukhārā (now in Uzbekistan) but were counted as Sayyid descendants of the Prophet Muhammad. He grew up an orphan in northern India, but acquired Islamic learning and later embraced voluntary poverty as the best way to uphold the Prophet’s ethical teachings. Chishti Sufis like Nizam al-Dīn Awliya rigorously upheld that the best provision in the journey of life is not merely piety but rather interior reliance upon God (tawakkul) by renouncing worldly acquisitions. This aspect of Chishti teachings would have a great impact on ‘Ali Muttaqi during his years of travel, pilgrimage, and exile.

Chishti Sufis cultivated poetry and music while upholding ascetic rigor, which won them fame in South Asia. But they also nurtured Islamic scholarship inflected toward teaching about equality, love, and renunciation. Nizam al-Dīn Awliya was a hadith scholar and enraged jurists by using these reports to defend the legality of listening to music. Chishti Sufis promoted scholarship and hadith studies but subordinated the literal and political value of such knowledge to the quest for spiritual poverty and humility. As the frontier of Islamic society moved southward, many Chishti Sufis left Delhi. Burhān al-Dīn Gharīb (d. 1337), a disciple of Nizam al-Dīn Awliya,
settled in the frontier territory of the Deccan. When he first came to Nizam al-Din Awliya’s gathering, it was announced that a “poor stranger” (gharib) had arrived, but the shaykh replied, “He is indeed poor now, but the whole world will come to know him.”12 From this first encounter, he earned the nickname Gharib and his future fame was predicted. Nizam al-Din Awliya understood how Burhan al-Din embodied a hadith report in which the Prophet advised, “Live in this world as if you are a stranger or a traveler passing through.”13 Burhan al-Din Gharib took the Chishti engagement with music and poetry to the Deccan when he settled near Daulatabad (Dawlatābād).

Burhan al-Din Gharib fostered the growth of the Chishti Order in the Deccan through his patronage of sung poetry and oral teachings and, later, through adherents’ visitation to his tomb.14 The colorful ecstasies of the Chishti Order shaped ʿAli Muttaqi’s early life, for they were prominent in Burhanpur.15 When the Deccan region of Khandesh—which contained Daulatabad—became independent under the Fārūqī dynasty, its rulers claimed that Burhan al-Din Gharib had blessed their forefather and foretold of his becoming a king. These regional kings—titled “Mīrān” in distinction to the sultans of Delhi—built their capital at the village where Burhan al-Din stayed while traveling from Delhi to the Deccan. Burhanpur was named after the region’s greatest saint, and his distinctive Chishti style of performative sainthood became the norm.

Eighty-five years after the founding of Burhanpur, ʿAli Muttaqi was born in 1480.16 He grew up during the long reign of the fifth king of the Faruqi dynasty, Mīrān ʿĀdil Khān II (ruled 1457–1503). That ruler built the citadel of Burhanpur and established it as the capital of a small but rich kingdom. His magnificent domed tomb is still today treated with reverence.

During the reign of four Faruqi kings before ʿAli Muttaqi’s birth, the Sufi admirers of Burhan al-Din fashioned a lively local culture that elevated public ecstasy as the strongest criterion to demonstrate one’s sainthood.17 The leader of this Chishti community in Khandesh was Shah Bajan, the “Master Music Maker” whose given name was Bahaʾ al-Din. His writing demonstrates important aspects of Sufi adab and the vernacularization of Islam in South Asia. It contains the earliest examples of Urdu poetry (in a dialect called Gujari), showing how Chishtis used local poetic forms and religious images, including those sometimes associated with Hindi literature and Hindu devotion.18 ʿAli Muttaqi’s father had him initiated into the Chishti Order at the age of seven at the hand of Shah Bajan. He had built a congregational mosque and Sufi hospice in Burhanpur but was famous for musical sessions featuring his
original poetry; his popular title, “Master Music Maker,” shows that his authority as a saint was intimately linked to his love of God displayed in ecstatic responses to rhyming word and rhythmic sound. As depicted in the vignette that opens this chapter, his miracles centered on paying musicians lavishly despite his commitment to voluntary poverty.

Born in Ahmedabad (Ahmadābād), Shah Bajan was learned in hadith and trained with Chishti masters famed for their piety (taqwā) and reliance on
God (tawakkul). Shah Bajan combined outward rigor with inward love for music and poetry, through which he could reach out to the common people. Chishti Sufis like Shah Bajan brought Islam into their local context, to make its practices meaningful in their society and to translate its values through symbols easily understandable by common people. He cultivated an early form of Urdu—called Gujari in this region—that was enriched by expressions from varied sources and religious traditions. Shah Bajan wrote “Khazā’in-e Rahmatallāh” in Persian prose but inserted in it poems he composed in Gujari. Few of his poems have been translated into English, yet they are compelling despite the difficulty in deciphering their archaic language.

Shah Bajan’s Gujari poems speak in simple images from daily life yet interlace lines of Persian, restating the meaning in more formal tones. He connected the “local” South Asian spoken idiom to the “universal” Islamic symbolic world...
invoked by Persian. Despite his simple images and colloquial language, Shah Bajan knew theology and Islamic sciences so well that he expressed in creative ways the essential features of Islam. In the following poem, Shah Bajan begins by urging his listeners to awaken the mind to keep watch over the heart and thereby restrain the actions of the body.23

Of all bad deeds, the heart is the king
Keep watch over that lazy arrogant thing
Uphold shariʿa’s discipline, that’s the best
Don’t let idols into the cavern of your chest
Tariqa is where the Prophet’s acts are found
Follow him with faith, don’t just mess around
The real haqiqa is like an ocean vast and wide
Most who enter drown, few reach the other side

The poem begins by addressing the heart (Gr. jī; Ar. qalb). In Sufi thought, the heart is the center of the person: if enlightened by a wakeful mind and insight, the heart is the vehicle for good, but if darkened by a selfish nature and lust, then it is the vehicle for evil expressed in our bodily actions. God has not made two hearts in one chest (Qurʾan 33:4). The human heart can have only one loving orientation: toward the world’s pleasures or toward God’s spiritual realities.

From this first division into three levels, Shah Bajan elaborates corresponding levels of three. Every person consists of body, heart, and mind. For a person to become a real human being, she or he must understand the relationship between matter, soul, and spirit. Becoming a real human means following religious duty (shariʿa), joining an order for mystical training (tariqa), and realizing ultimate reality (ṣīra qīra). This spiritual realization is the fruit of following the shariʿa and cultivating tariqa, but it is achieved by only a few who realize that their ego is passing away such that God alone is real. This is what Shah Bajan means when he says haqiqa is “an ocean vast and wide / Most who enter drown, few reach the other side.”

Chishti Sufis like Shah Bajan explored commonalities with other religious communities. His poetry reveals this pursuit, through words and images, of a common foundation for ethics that is wider than one’s own dogmatic community. Shah Bajan was a pioneer in this movement and wrote his poems to be sung. He called some of his sung poems jikri, a Gujari pronunciation of dhikr, or meditation that repeats God’s names. In South Asia, some Sufi orders demanded silent dhikr, while other orders favored group dhikr with only a drum to keep rhythm or chanting only in Arabic. In contrast, Chishti Sufis taught
that dhikr is good whether in Arabic or in another language, yet devotional music is better when singing poems in the local language accompanied with a variety of instruments, both Indic and Iranian.

Shah Bajan’s lyrics reveal the importance of adab. Adab is the term for “literature” in Islamicate cultures, but its deeper meaning is multidimensional in ways not always acknowledged in Western scholarship. Marshall Hodgson, the historian who asserted the importance of Sufism and literature to understanding Islamic civilization, recognized that adab began as courtly discourse, implying both literary eloquence and refined manners. For Hodgson, adab stood in contradistinction to the shari‘a; it represented a discourse of courtly norms and aristocratic prerogatives that prevailed against the more restrictive vision of “pietism-minded” jurists and hadith scholars. His analysis is suitable for the Abbasid period (eighth through the eleventh centuries). However, Hodgson codes adab as “literature” when his analysis passes from Arabic to Persian and Asian vernacular languages; indeed, he uses Persianate literature as a segue to analyzing arts and architecture in general, pairing them as literary and visual components of a wider “aesthetic culture.” In this sense, the indigenous term for “literature” in Persian and Urdu is adabiyāt, constructed from the plural and understood as “products of eloquent refinement.” Courtly etiquette remained important, but it was increasingly coded as ādāb, again constructed from the plural and understood as “behaviors of refined manners.” However, as Sufism grew and developed toward the end of the Abbasid period, it mediated between court and mosque. The Sufi hospice (khanqah) and saint’s tomb (dargah) became sites for the rejoining of piety and propriety, fervor and fluency, reverence and refinement. Sufis appropriated literary and musical forms from aristocratic culture that radiated from the court, adapting these forms to their own uses; in Sufi hands, literature and music became tools for training in a moral system that was both deeper and more popular than juridical Islam. Sufism recreated the original multivalent meaning of adab, constructed from the singular and understood as “discipline” that leads to outer refinement and inner piety. Sufism restored ethics to the meaning of adab.

Like adab, the term akhlaq, meaning “ethics,” is also a complex notion in Islamic civilization. Following Hodgson’s insights, Muzaffar Alam studies both courtly and Sufi approaches to ethics in South Asia. For him, adab is courtly refinement that produced akhlaq literature, the formal ethical system that addresses governance outside of the narrowly juridical shari‘a. Composed by court scholars, akhlaq is an elite discourse whose user may be trained in jurisprudence or literature but have a philosophical orientation to the maintenance
of justice. While focusing on *akhlaq*, Alam largely ignores *adab* in his treatment of systematic ethics and political philosophy in South Asia. However, Sufis in South Asia developed *adab* as ethical literature linked to practical discipline on a popular level, parallel to how court scholars developed *akhlaq* as philosophical literature on an elite level. Barbara Metcalf has reflected on how Sufi authors and leaders have made the concept of *adab* “a key to central religious concepts of South Asian Islam.” Nizam al-Din Awliya is a classic example: he bridged courtly and popular audiences so effectively that certain sultans perceived him as a threat, while other sultans relied on him as an indispensable support. He did not write books, but his oral discourses were recorded in a new genre of ethical literature, *malfūţāt* or “oral teachings.” His followers in the courtly orbit wrote texts in genres as varied as political theory and lyric poetry. The breakup of central authority of the Delhi sultanate in the fourteenth century both created regional sultanates with their own provincial capitals and increased the importance of vernacular languages. Sufis responded to both stimuli and strove to preserve the ethical content of *adab* as “refined manners” by stressing moral discipline rather than aristocratic etiquette. Within this wider civilizational perspective, Shah Bajan’s Sufi poetry in Gujarati takes on new importance as an example of *adab*, discipline that both shapes moral character and inspires eloquent words.

Chishti Sufis nourished an emerging style of vernacular poetry and, similarly, had a decidedly localizing penchant when it came to pilgrimage. They advocated visiting shrines of South Asian saints, which largely eclipsed the pilgrimage to Mecca. For instance, Shah Bajan started on the Hajj, but partway there a dream informed him that his intention was accepted and he must return to South Asia. His aborted pilgrimage confirmed a trope among Chishtis: it was a higher ethical duty to stay local in both place and style than to make the long journey to Mecca or adopt Arabizing airs that would separate one from the local populace. This vernacular attitude among Chishtis might be termed a religious ideology of confirming the particularistic against the universal in Islamic devotion.

In Burhanpur, ‘Ali Muttaqi attended musical sessions with Shah Bajan as a child, as depicted in the fictional vignette that begins this chapter. In these Qawwali assemblies, ‘Ali Muttaqi witnessed the dramatic displays of ecstasy and trance that they could inspire, giving him his first taste of spirituality and his early notion of the role of saints. ‘Ali Muttaqi attended these assemblies to cultivate his spiritual sense at the same age that he attended school to hone his rational faculties.
Dissatisfaction: Rejecting a Chishti Heritage

When ʿAli Muttaqi was around fifteen years of age, his father died. He then left Burhanpur to seek employment, having completed the traditional course of religious and literary training. He presented himself as an educated young gentleman at Mandu (Māndū), the capital of Malwa (Mālwa), a prosperous kingdom just north of Khandesh. Mandu was the colloquial name for Māndawgārh, meaning “Fortress of Joy” (Persian sources translate its Indic name as Shādiyābād). ʿAli Muttaqi arrived at the court of Ghiyāth al-Dīn Khiljī (ruled 1469–1500), whose reign was peaceful and prosperous: according to the historian Farishta, even the mice and birds in Mandu’s palace had monthly stipends assigned for their welfare!30 Like Deccan kingdoms that gained independence from Delhi, the rulers of Malwa patronized a new elite class of courtiers, soldiers, artists, and builders.31 ʿAli Muttaqi was one of many talented people attracted to their court. He spent his early twenties at court, amassing enough wealth to move his mother and family to Mandu. Records about his early life are vague, but it seems his householding success was short lived.

Hagiographic sources say that ʿAli Muttaqi’s worldly success tasted bitter to him, and while still young he resigned from his position at the Malwa court. What caused his sudden change of heart? At this time, Sultan Ghiyath al-Dīn Khilji was aging, and his two sons spawned a bitter rivalry. Before the sultan died, the younger son attacked the elder, who served as prime minister. In retaliation, the elder son slew his brother and his whole family, despite their taking refuge in their father’s palace. The elder son was crowned Sultan Nāṣir al-Dīn (ruled 1500–1512), and a few days later his father was poisoned.32 ʿAli Muttaqi witnessed both fratricide and patricide at Mandu and may have been caught up in factional fighting. He never related the exact causes but committed himself to renouncing worldly ambition.

The young ʿAli Muttaqi returned to Burhanpur in hopes of continued Sufi training but found that Shah Bajan had died. He renewed his initiation with Shah Bajan’s son, ʿAbd al-Ḥakīm, but was unmoved by the Chishti rituals that had so charged his childhood. The emotional outpouring, eloquent poetry, and ecstatic music of Burhanpur now failed to stir him. Thus, he began reaching back into his Chishti lineage, beyond the immediate examples of his master, to find a model that struck him as authentic. He recorded quotations from past Sufi masters whom he admired, titling this collection from his early life “al-Jawāhir al-Thamina,” or “The Precious Jewels.”33 ʿAli Muttaqi’s youthful search brought him to a new role model: the master of the master
of Shah Bajan, named Shaykh ʿAzizallāh Mutawakkil (d. 1506), whose epithet means “Reliant on God Alone.” His reputation glowed in Mandu, where ʿAli Muttaqi heard of him.

ʿAzizallah Mutawakkil was born in Gujarat and traveled to the Deccan. When he learned that people in Daulatabad “were worshipping only in outward form while relying on Brahmins for their daily affairs,” he headed to Mandu. ʿAzizallah never accepted gifts of food or money, relying solely on God for daily provision. When he was about to cross the Narmada River and arrive at Mandu, he announced that he would enter the city on the condition that the ruler would not meet him, send him gifts, or seek his blessing. The sultan of Malwa complied and ʿAzizallah settled in Mandu, whose residents looked to him as a patron saint, while traveling often to Burhanpur. He lived in strict isolation, emerging from his room only on rare occasions when others were in need. He followed the Chishti rule of not saving for the future. Each night, he would clear his home and distribute any goods found there to the needy—even excess water. This ascetic style of devotion appealed to ʿAli Muttaqi: he asked leave of his master, Shah Bajan’s son, and followed the example of ʿAzizallah Mutawakkil. He traveled as a form of training to discipline the self and minimize his reliance on other people and worldly comforts. As he traveled, ʿAli Muttaqi met different spiritual masters from diverse Sufi communities. From his viewpoint as a wandering ascetic, most of them were comfortably self-satisfied. ʿAli Muttaqi considered Sufism, as it existed in his local environment, to be in grave need of reform. In this opinion he was not alone, for there was a movement raging in Gujarat and the Deccan that confirmed his ideas: the Mahdawi movement. He was attracted to this vibrant movement, which elevated the ideals of Sufi communities while critiquing their acquired forms.

The Mahdawi movement was a complex religious and social movement that grew out of Chishti ideals. The leader of the movement, Sayyid Muḥammad Jawnpūrī (d. 1505), claimed to be more than just another Sufi master or Muslim saint. Instead he declared himself the Mahdi who would come to revive the Muslim community, to correctly interpret the Qur’ān, and to establish social justice. As the Mahdi, he claimed to embody the ethical virtues of the Prophet Muhammad in a way that replicated the Prophet’s presence, as if the Prophet’s personality had appeared again (though without the gift of revelation). This intimacy with the Prophet, which approached total identity with him, would wipe away all the routine forms of religious authority and social legitimacy in Islamic society like so much rust that had crusted the face of a mirror. Those who accepted Sayyid Muhammad’s claim to be the Mahdi renounced
their position, property, and family. They joined Mahdawi circles (dāʿira) in shantytowns outside cities where they engaged in intense spartan devotions, scrupulously fulfilled ritual obligations, and shared their wealth.

Their leader claimed that the Prophet Muhammad embodied both the outer ritual forms and their implicit inner ethic, yet the Arab Muslims of his time could not apprehend this inner ethical meaning of revelation. Therefore, the Prophet had announced the future coming of the Mahdi, who would embody the Prophet’s ethics and make explicit what the Prophet had left implicit. This was the teaching of virtuous excellence (iḥsān), which had been the goal of saints to convey for almost a millennium. However, none could convey it completely, because no saint was the replica of the Prophet in bloodline, mindset, and spirituality, until the advent of the Mahdi. Sayyid Muhammad Jawnpuri left Jawnpur to wander with his followers. In accord with hadith reports relating to the future Mahdi, he made the pilgrimage and in Mecca announced publicly his claim to be the Mahdi. Returning to Gujarat, he made two public announcements and attracted followers who set up a huge camp to hear his discourses on Qur’anic interpretation and ethics.

In this way, Sayyid Muhammad Jawnpuri tried to rescue Sufi ideals from the limited domain of Sufi orders. He rejected the rituals of popular practice and their mediation through past masters. He claimed to exclusively represent spiritual training in its complete form (takmil-e tariqa). He did not rely on any horizontal connection to a mediating saintly guide but rather gave up his ego to be absorbed in the spiritual personality of the Prophet Muhammad. His followers consequently rejected the routinized sources of religious authority: they jettisoned Sufi lineages, distanced themselves from allegiance to any single legal method, and even called into question many of the hadith reports about the Mahdi himself. They tried to rebuild the prophetic community around a living exemplar in the Mahdi, as the early Islamic community had grown around the Prophet’s guidance in the moment. Their new community repudiated the institutions that seemed to them to have become alienated from the spirit of the Prophet, in favor of radical renunciation of wealth, social status, and scholarly pride.

ʿAli Muttaqi became involved with the Mahdawis. They impressed him with their ascetic lifestyle and devotional practices, and he had extended discussions with them. He may have had acquaintances in this movement, accepted hospitality at their camps, or joined them as a renunciant member of their liminal community. In his view, the Mahdawis advocated the strict ascetic regime of ʿAzizallah Mutawakkil. Externally, they refused to save money and food from day to day to live in sole reliance on divine providence and withdrew
from habitual social and family relations. Internally, they cultivated an intense form of ritual meditation with the goal of waking ecstasy, which Sayyid Muhammad Jawnpuri termed “seeing God in this world with one’s eyes.”

This movement grew amid criticism and persecution, advocating revival of the shariʿa around the charismatic Mahdi. Spurred by expectation of the millennium (marked by the year 1000 in the Islamic calendar), the Mahdawi movement advocated total rejection of Islamic society as it had historically evolved and a total withdrawal from routine forms of social life in favor of building a radically new and just society. In this call for a new beginning, the Mahdawis were both utopian and absolutist: they held that Muslims who did not accept Sayyid Muhammad as the Mahdi promised at the end of time were actually infidels. As a seed community that would revitalize and recreate the true Muslim community once again, as the Prophet Muhammad had done almost a millennium before, they claimed for themselves the title of true Muslims.

Sayyid Muhammad Jawnpuri died in 1505, when ‘Ali Muttaqi was in his midtwenties. Conflict intensified between followers of the purported Mahdi and his detractors. Accusations of infidelity flew between the Mahdawis and their Sunni opponents, erupting into sharpened rhetoric between the sultan of Gujarat and the Mahdawi camps. Violence and denunciation shocked ‘Ali Muttaqi and led him to doubt the Mahdawis, whom he had admired. The Mahdawis persisted in building a schismatic community within the wider Sunni community that ignored or questioned their mission; in response, ‘Ali Muttaqi concluded that their ideals for reviving the shariʿa and reforming Sufi devotional practice were indivisibly linked to their project to build a separate community. This nullified any benefit of their ideals, since their program for reform could never spread widely in the general society, bound as it was to the doctrine of the Mahdi.

At first, ‘Ali Muttaqi made these conclusions viscerally rather than intellectually. He wrote that, despite his initial interest in Mahdawi practices and adherents’ ascetic way of life, he grew increasingly skeptical that Sayyid Muhammad Jawnpuri was the Mahdi. In this way, ‘Ali Muttaqi is like the famous Mughal-era historian ‘Abd al-Qādir Badāʿūnī (d. 1605), who penned the earliest record of the Mahdawis by a Sunni opponent.37 ‘Ali Muttaqi’s rancorous debate with the Mahdawis will be detailed in this book in the fourth satchel. At this point in his life, ‘Ali Muttaqi had no role model in his local environment from his Chishti community or from the Mahdawis. He continued to wander: his outward rootlessness expressed his inward confusion as he failed to find a personal model upon whom to base his aspirations.
From Gujarat, ʿAli Muttaqi traveled northward through Sindh to Multan. The hagiographic sources are vague about the chronology or itinerary of his travels. He unmoored himself from his Chishti heritage, a “continental” Sufi movement that spread from Delhi to its satellite towns and distant provinces on the pattern of the sultanate of Delhi’s imperium. He rejected the Mahdawi alternative, which was like a politicized version of the Chishti Order that morphed under the pressure of millennial expectations. In his wanderings, ʿAli Muttaqi searched for something new, exhibiting “coastal” movement that abandoned mainland fixities in favor of fluidity and exploration. Sindh was where the Gujarati coastline met the Indus River delta; traveling from there upriver led one into the land of five rivers, the Punjab. Traversing this coastal and riverine system, he minimized intake of food and social intercourse to build up inner stamina and spiritual insight.

ʿAli Muttaqi traveled to hone his inner resources. He was “thoroughly dissatisfied with the outward formalities of inherited saintly authority and the way masters trained disciples among his contemporary Sufi colleagues, so he traveled to Multan to search for the authentic principle [maqṣūd-e aşlī] of spiritual development.”38 ʿAli Muttaqi did not intend to meet a new master in Multan but was rather discovering for himself in the journey what were the real principles of Sufi practice. His travels were a direct form of training in ethical nonattachment that eschewed elaborate ritual forms (as in Chishti devotion) and an ideological framework (as in Mahdawi renunciation). This was an experiment in “the death of the will” and later inspired his written work on what to do if one has not found an acceptable saint as a guide.39 ʿAli Muttaqi’s biographer describes these travels at length to show how he systematically limited his desires down to the minimum that would support his life.

In Multan, the major city on the Indus and a center of Sufi scholarship, he met the man who could serve as his model of sainthood. Ḥusām al-Dīn Muttaqī became his spiritual guide, embodying inward sincerity and outward asceticism while orienting his spirituality to strengthening the Sunni community against schism. Upon meeting him, ʿAli Muttaqi concluded that his youthful training in the Chishti Order had little benefit and many pitfalls. He began again, to mine his own experience and find the criteria of saintly authenticity under new guidance. He settled outside of Multan with Husam al-Din for an intense two-year discipleship. His overriding concern in this period was the “preservation of his faith” from all the youthful experiences that had distracted him: showy musical devotion, worldly ambition, and sectarian adventurism.

Biographical sources do not name Husam al-Din’s formal affiliation to a
Sufi order. He used the nickname “Muttaqi” (meaning the “Pious One”) rather than a formal moniker (nisba) relating him to an order. The Suhrawardi Order had long dominated Multan, and its members cultivated scriptural studies and avoided musical gatherings. Husam al-Din shared those opinions but protested how Suhrawardi leaders dabbled in politics and built powerful family dynasties, so he seems to have not belonged to that order. Husam al-Din advocated the “death of self-will,” which was vividly described in the Qadiri Order; he may have been a Qadiri, for that order had newly flourished near Multan.

Husam al-Din did not initiate ‘Ali Muttaqi into an order. Rather, he gave the principles that underlay all the orders. He trained ‘Ali Muttaqi for two years, allowing the latter to systematize intuitions he had gleaned from his travels and his rejection of other spiritual guides. ‘Ali Muttaqi, who underwent Sufi training that fused devotional insight to the acquisition of knowledge and rational endeavor, was Husam al-Din’s only known disciple. Under Husam al-Din’s tutelage, he filtered his experience of Sufi methods of training through the lens of the example of the Prophet Muhammad and his exemplary virtues. Husam al-Din called this “the devotional method of scrupulous caution and wariness of God” (ṭarīqat-e warā o taqwā). ‘Ali Muttaqi began to articulate the ethical principles that should underlie any spiritual training, no matter to what Sufi lineage it might outwardly belong. These principles centered on the concept of “self-willed death and the death of self-will.”

‘Ali Muttaqi admired how Shaykh Husam al-Din reduced outward devotion to a means of cultivating inward sincerity. The shaykh expressed this heightened attention to sincerity in his scrupulous attention to money, food, dress, and the outer mode of life. More extreme in his nonattachment than ‘Azizallah Mutawakkil, Husam al-Din would not accept food from others, whether given or bought. To keep aloof from any possible pollution, he stubbornly farmed his own food on a tract of kharāj land, rather than accepting land from the state or religious endowments. He insisted on paying the full 10 percent tax to the state on all produce from such lands in order that his food would have no taint of selfishness or illegality about it. His ritual attention to the source of his food was matched by his attention to the method of eating, for he authored a text on how to eat like the Prophet Muhammad. When the Mughal prince Bābur (then ruler of Kabul in Afghanistan) invaded Punjab in 1524, he besieged Multan, throwing the government into disarray and inflicting the population with famine; since there was no legitimate administration to collect agricultural taxes, Shaykh Husam al-Din gave up agriculture completely and lived off fish that he caught himself.
His exacting attention to ritual and legalistic piety might cast doubt upon whether Husam al-Din was a saint at all, for he attracted no community of disciples, gave no public teachings, and exhibited no miracles. However, his attention to piety made him consider issues of social justice in ways uncommon in his South Asian environment. He saw a Sufi’s sincerity bound up in how taxation was gathered and used and how public money was spent. He critiqued the ways that his contemporaries participated in political power by currying favor with rulers. He refused to lean against the wall of the dargah of Multan’s most revered saint, Bahāʾ al-Dīn Zakariyā (the grand master of the Suhrawardi Order, d. 1262), or rest in its shade; this monument had been built with money from the public treasury, which Husam al-Din thought should be spent on feeding the hungry and caring for orphans. Building tombs for revered saints was one of the major ways that rulers courted favor with powerful Sufi communities, who could in turn grant them popular support.

Husam al-Din taught a pared-down version of Sufi devotion, in which inner spiritual states were concealed by acquisition of knowledge. He based this Sufi method on “The Revival of Religious Disciplines” (Iḥyāʾ Ulūm al-Dīn) by Abū Ḥāmid al-Ghazālī (d. 1111) and the commentary on it, “ʿAyn al-ʿIlm.” He set ʿAli Muttaqi reading, memorizing, and meditating upon these books, in addition to a commentary on the Qurʾan. He placed his disciple in an isolated cell and would come to visit him only in order to bring these books to study. This training carefully balanced the acquisition of outer textual knowledge with the illumination of inner experiential knowledge: both had to be pursued together, but the balance was hard to maintain. He would come to ʿAli Muttaqi’s cell with books stacked on top of his head and knock; if no answer came he would leave his disciple in deep meditation, but if he came to the door, they would settle down to read and discuss together.

Husam al-Din composed a short treatise, “Preserving the Faith” (“Ḥifẓ al-Īmān”), which reveals his teachings. He most likely wrote it as a result of his intensive studies with ʿAli Muttaqi. The author explained, “I have spent some time reading through religious books, and have gathered together these beneficial morals about preserving one’s faith. Perhaps this will be helpful for those Muslims who are not expert enough to read them all for themselves.” He drew from at least twenty-seven basic works in Sufi devotion and Islamic doctrine to define faith (īmān) and document all its outward signs. He laid out what causes faith to ebb away and become eclipsed by selfishness, leading to false claims of faithfulness. Finally, he detailed the means by which a sincere person can keep their faith firm. Although he addressed his book to the general population of Muslims, he felt that many Sufis suffered from weak
faith. A person’s faith may crumble at the time of death, and this will happen if one puts his or her faith in inauthentic religious practices (bid`a). Faith crumbles because Sufis “search for cosmic reality” rather than stay content with revealed scripture. These were both indirect critiques of his contemporary Sufis and the saints to whom they looked for guidance. Husam al-Din further pronounced that if someone experienced such an “eclipse of faith” it was as if they were infidels, even if some faint stirring of faith caused them to insist on calling themselves Muslims. Such an eclipse of faith occurred especially when a Sufi might claim sainthood in an act of self-aggrandizement or purposeful display of miraculous actions.

With such strong pronouncements, Husam al-Din gave ‘Ali Muttaqi clear reasoning and vocabulary to make sense of his feelings of dissatisfaction with current forms of sainthood. It provided him with outward criteria to measure the authenticity of anyone who claimed to be a saint (or who was recognized by others as a saint). The teacher and student saw themselves continuing and even intensifying the project of al-Ghazali: to assert that Sufi practices express the inner dimension of the shari`a that is given its outer form by the legal and scriptural disciplines of knowledge. However, they surpassed even al-Ghazali, for he dealt mainly on the level of rhetoric, framing Sufi ideals within the prose of legal norms and hadith reports for the purpose of defending Sufi practices from those who might claim that is was “heterodox” or beyond the bounds of the shari`a. In contrast, ‘Ali Muttaqi claimed that the disciplines of knowledge must saturate Sufi training, moving beyond merely rhetorically framing Sufi practices. He insisted that Sufi saints should be first recognized as scholars. Without this training, they had no personal authenticity and their claim to being saints was socially dangerous.

Shaykh Husam al-Din imparted this method of tempering Sufi devotion with the study of the religious disciplines to ‘Ali Muttaqi. He taught that reading books of religious knowledge was a kind of dhikr, as was memorizing texts, correcting them, copying them for publication, and researching them. ‘Ali Muttaqi’s primary disciple, ‘Abd al-Wahhab Muttaqi, would later express this ideal when he advised his disciple ‘Abd al-Haqq.

The man who is always engaged in good deeds is always engaged in dhikr. Saying prayers is dhikr; reciting Qur’an is dhikr; studying religious knowledge is dhikr. Any good action is dhikr. One should be doing such good things at every moment. But the actions of one who abandons seeking knowledge will never benefit themselves or others. To choose to sit in isolation and perform dhikr, that is like taking medicine to cure a specific
illness. You only need it from time to time, as you feel sick. But seeking knowledge is such an important form of worship that if anyone lays it aside, they must reflect on their conscience and review their state of taqwa.\(^5\)

Husam al-Din’s teaching contrasted with the Chishti Order’s emphasis on emotional presence over rational inquiry. Nizam al-Din Awliya taught that immersing oneself in God is the true goal and everything not related to it is an obstacle, even learning hadith from books.\(^5\) Pursuing scriptural knowledge could be a form of egoism that veiled the Sufi from God’s presence. Chishti Sufis adopted this attitude, making poetry, music, and love their focus, even if they read and taught from books. Husam al-Din Muttaqi countered that scriptural knowledge was the key to finding God’s presence. Following him, continuous learning and pursuit of knowledge formed the cornerstone of ‘Ali Muttaqi’s subsequent career and prepared him to revive hadith studies as a vehicle for Sufi training.

In contrast to those whom he warns against in “Preserving the Faith,” Husam al-Din called his own Sufi method “the way of scrupulous caution and wariness of God.” These two interlinked terms were the basis of Husam al-Din’s spiritual vocabulary. Taqwa or wariness is the connection between the human heart and the divine presence: it is a relation of fear and awe that leads to wariness. In Husam al-Din’s view, taqwa encompassed the sincerity of a saint’s orientation to God, which was the foundation of faith. Wara‘ is extreme caution, so as not to trespass the bounds of humility and legality in any thought, word, or action. Whereas wariness is an inward relationship to the divine that is invisible to others, scrupulous caution is an outward demeanor and a visible way of behaving with others. As manifested in Husam al-Din’s life, caution made him extraordinarily scrupulous about the sources of his money and food. He passed on to ‘Ali Muttaqi this pious emphasis on food and its purity and minimal intake.

Husam al-Din offered ‘Ali Muttaqi practical training rather than demanding total devotion to his person like many other Sufi guides. He gave ‘Ali Muttaqi a rigorous advanced education in scriptural disciplines and, more importantly, gave him an ideology that placed the acquisition of such knowledge as the center of Sufi training. However, he did not initiate ‘Ali Muttaqi into a discrete order, granting him no title or relic to mark his formal discipleship. This was not the usual Sufi training according to the model of master and disciple. Rather, Husam al-Din treated his disciple like a pupil, offering him training on the model of teacher and student. A teacher offers students knowledge and
the tools to acquire knowledge themselves. In contrast, a master demands absolute obedience from disciples, whose task is to subjugate their own will rather than to self-consciously seek knowledge. Husam al-Din behaved as if Sufi training on the model of master and discipline was no longer viable; rather, what remained was to acquire training in the *shariʿa*: conforming to its dictates would involve devotion that limited one’s ego. He did not demand that ʿAli Muttaqi stay with him until his death or act as his spiritual successor. Husam al-Din lived until 1553, while ʿAli Muttaqi left his company after only two years to return to Gujarat with the intent to live authentically as a saint back in his home environment.52

**Alienation: Experiments in Authenticity**

Setting out from Multan, ʿAli Muttaqi traveled as an experiment with this pared-down method of Sufi devotion, “the way of scrupulous caution and wariness of God.” He was not traveling toward a pilgrimage place, neither the Hajj’s goal of Mecca nor a local saint’s shrine. He was traveling toward his heart’s sincerity. Outward movement was merely a method to strip away everything that obscured this goal. ʿAli Muttaqi systematically limited his intake of food; at first, he would carry enough food to last him two or three days, but after some time that same amount would last him for four or five days. If he stayed in a town, he conscientiously avoided sleeping in mosques and rented a room to avoid being obliged to accept gifts of food and money from others, the origins and legal purity of which was unknown. He swore to rely only on God to provide for his needs, yet concealed this oath to remain aloof from anyone offering help.53

This ascetic practice was ʿAli Muttaqi’s experiment in the “death of self-will.” This experiment gave him the certainty that he had experienced for himself the ultimate criterion that marked the real passage into being a saint. In the liminal state of the open road, there was no master present to whom to attribute this transformation and no fellow disciples present to witness it. ʿAli Muttaqi expressed his ideal of authentic sainthood in negative terms by stating what it was not: it was not a state marked by social distinctions such as inheritance, dress, or bodily postures as in dance or trance. It was not a state that an act of will or self-assertion could claim. It must be earned indirectly and could never be demanded. The only positive expression he could make embodied in its very language the ultimate negation: one could achieve sainthood only through “dying to yourself before your actual death.”
By this expression, he meant that the only way to become a saint was through a profound gesture of surrender. This is an ultimate paradox: to achieve something valued above all else, one must relinquish the very desire to achieve it. This paradox cuts to the core of psychological experience framed as “mysticism.” Intent and desire lead to struggle and self-assertion, which in many cases cause the failure to arrive at a desired result. This is especially true when the object of desire is abstract, remote, and of ultimate value (like sainthood). If one can loosen the bondage of intentionality, then one can attain one’s goal without self-aggrandizing effort. ‘Ali Muttaqi used the metaphor of death to illustrate his own abandoning of will, volition, and ambition to encourage others who admired him as a saint to do the same.

Sufi literature offers a long tradition of paradoxical sayings that try to lure the will into just such a spontaneous gesture of surrender. A Sufi master who would become very dear to ‘Ali Muttaqi, named Abū’l-Ḥasan al-Shādhili (d. 1258 in Humaithara, Egypt), said, “If you must willfully plan, and how can you avoid willfully planning, then plan only not to willfully plan.” Al-Shadhili focused only on the will’s propensity to plot and plan for its own benefit rather than on critiquing the very ontological existence of the will. However, an earlier saint, Bāyazīd Bīstāmī (d. 874–75), phrased the same idea in a more radical critique: when asked by a divine voice, “What do you want?” he answered, “I want only to not want at all.” These admonitions to abandon self-will permeate Sufi teachings, and ‘Ali Muttaqi likely learned the emphasis on death of the volition from the Qadiri Order. One of the primary texts taught in this order is “Openings of the Unseen” (Futūḥ al-Ghayb) by ‘Abd al-Qadir Jilānī. It contains this remarkable section on voluntary death and rebirth as the dramatic passage into sainthood.

If you have died to the demands of other people (God have mercy on you) then may God make you die to your own desires. If you have died to your own desires (God have mercy on you) then may God make you die to your own will and planning. If you have died to your own will and planning (God have mercy upon you) then may God grant you a whole new life. At that moment, you are revived with a life after which there is no presence of death. . . . You will become the most unique person, the well-spring of sanctity, the hidden core of the hidden, the very secret of the secret. At that moment, you inherit the innermost legacy of the Prophet and Messenger of God. His spiritual authority is sealed with your person. From you, the anonymous saints go forth to lift away anxiety and
distress. The rains of bounty and blessing will fall through you, and by your being calamities and afflictions will be lifted from the shoulders of all the people. You will bear the weight of the land and all its people.56

This language of death is not about suicide in its destructive mode. It urges one to seek a fuller life under the guise of not requesting anything by one’s own will. In his Persian commentary on this Arabic text, ‘Abd al-Haqq wrote, “By requesting that death in which there is no sign of life, I want that life in which there is no sign of death. This is absolute death to the self and its willfulness and desires.”57 The death of self-will became a foundation of ‘Ali Muttaqi’s method for those who followed him. Echoing Shaykh ‘Abd al-Qadir Jilani, he taught that “the Sufi is the land that everyone, good or bad, can walk over; the Sufi is a cloud that casts shade on everyone equally; the Sufi is rain that gives water without calculating any return.”58

To achieve this dissolution of the ego, ‘Ali Muttaqi advocated a frontal assault on the body and its volition while excluding other metaphoric avenues that existed in Sufi communities for acting out this same drama of being-close-to-death. His advocacy of the death of self-will contained within it an implicit critique of his contemporary Sufis, suggesting that they followed established forms of Sufi rituals and enjoyed traditional legitimacy but lacked the underlying alchemical experience of psychological death that would make them efficacious and preserve them from egoistic abuses. The drama of institutional Sufi rituals would have required him to adopt uncritically the practices of a wide community. Such acceptance would have run counter to his position of extreme caution and suspicion of relying upon others. In contrast, his frontal assault on the will through bodily discipline required no community and—as his life history demonstrates—no spiritual guide to impart the training to cultivate it.

Through his solitary travels, ‘Ali Muttaqi eased himself into the experiments with the “death of self-will.”59 He crafted for himself props to keep his attention constantly on the presence of death, such as his “death satchel” (Ar. kharīṭa; Gj. jḥōlī). Earlier, Sufis would commonly carry a small bag with their devotional items, which served as an outer symbol of their commitment to the mystical path. Nizam al-Din Awliya mentions this “little purse of derwishes” called a kinf (or its Arabic diminutive form, kunayf) in his oral discourses.60 However, ‘Ali Muttaqi pushed this symbol to extremes; he saw individual experience of death before one’s death to be the sole criterion of a person’s sanctity. Upon granting disciples the status of his authoritative representatives, ‘Ali Muttaqi would give them a shoulder bag like his own “death satchel” in
place of a patched cloak (khirqa), the traditional symbol for attainment among other Sufi communities. A century later, Shaykh ʿAbd al-Haqq described this bag, how to wear it, and how ʿAli Muttaqi and his community would grant it in place of a traditional cloak.61

His oral teachings also testify to how ʿAli Muttaqi considered his experience of death as the touchstone of his sainthood. In his old age, a rumor spread that he was dying, though he was actually healthy at the time. Admirers rushed to see him before he passed away. When they arrived, they expressed surprise that he was lively, since they had heard that he was on the brink of death. ʿAli Muttaqi smiled and begged their forgiveness; he explained how such a strange rumor was not a simple error but confirmed his authentic sainthood. He said, “I am a man who has already sipped the drink of death and has seen what lies beyond it—I’ve stood before God to be judged but was sent back for second lease on life to be made useful for God’s purposes. Such a man is never far from the mindful presence of death.”62 He referred them to his earlier youthful rigors of ascetic denial and not to his old age or impending death. Having long ago “sipped the drink of death,” he had abandoned his own will in order to live as God’s saint.

ʿAli Muttaqi’s travels led him back to Gujarat. There, his heightened rhetoric of saintly authenticity implicitly rejected his Gujarati colleagues and their current forms of Sufi authority. A saint is the center of a devotional community of Sufis, and ʿAli Muttaqi tried to build such a community in Gujarat. He searched for allies and colleagues, but this would be a difficult struggle as his ideology conflicted with those around him. Ultimately, he was unable to remain in Gujarat and would choose a life of exile in Mecca for political, religious, and scholarly reasons.

His newly forged identity as an authentic Sufi master was expressed in his adopting the title “Muttaqi” for himself. Muttaqi means “the Pious One” or “the One Aware of God,” and it is a term with deep roots in the Sufi tradition. The early Sufi sage al-Ḥakīm al-Tirmidhī (d. 869) noted that even some people called “Muttaqi,” despite their piety, are tempted and often defeated by ego (nafs).63 Al-Tirmidhi wrote extensively on disciplining the egoism of the soul (adab al-nafs) and understanding the spiritual anatomy of the heart.64 In his short treatise called *Natures of the Egos* (Ṭabāʿī al-Nufūs), he analyzes the ego that develops in different kinds of persons and their various activities.

The ego continuously wages war against the believer and weaves deceits until it wrests him away from righteousness and alienates him from his center. They are like two chess players who come together over the board
to duel, dividing the pieces between themselves. They play the game, removing the other’s pieces from the board one after the other, until one of them relentlessly removes all the pieces of the other player and takes him into captivity. Desire is the chessboard of the ego which continuously strategizes and moves against the pieces belonging to the true One, taking piece by piece until it leaves the believer’s heart empty of the true One and captures it. The arrogant one is deluded and befuddled by the deception of the ego, and plugs up the ears of his heart from hearing what messages come to him. Then desire [ḥawā], from the dark shadow of the ego, throws up object after object before the ego, and the ego casts these images into the heart. If the heart accepts these images and craves, then it is deluded by the arrogance of the ego. The ego keeps up this game relentlessly until it finds the opportunity to drive the heart into a corner, overcome it, and take it into captivity.\textsuperscript{65}

According to al-Tirmidhi, Muslims known for their piety (taqwa) are prone to continuous deceit by the ego, ending up arrogant and proud. ‘Ali Muttaqi, however, adopted his honorific name the “Pious One” after his traveling experiment with the death of volition, through which he claimed to have subdued the overweening impulses of his ego. His ego was dethroned: in the Manichaean chess match that al-Tirmidhi imagined between the vulnerable soul and the crafty ego, ‘Ali Muttaqi claimed to have engineered a checkmate. Indeed, the term “checkmate” comes from the Persian-Arabic hybrid term shāh māta, or “thus died the king.”

With this new confidence, ‘Ali Muttaqi decided to settle in Gujarat. He did not return to Mandu, where his mother and family lived, or to Burhanpur, where his religious teachers and previous guides were active. His decision to settle in Ahmedabad reflected a program of action. From the capital of Gujarat, he could contact diverse communities of the religious elite. Alienation from his surroundings and emerging confidence in his own spiritual authority incited him to write. However, since writing a text is a display of ambition and authority, the task did not come easily to him. ‘Ali Muttaqi claimed that he authored his first text at the inexorable urging of divine will, thus denying his own authorial ambition. Once his pen began to move, it never stopped. He wrote continuously for the rest of his life (whether composing, editing, or copying), even in his sick bed until the moment of his death.

His first composition, “Exposition of the Ways to God” (“Tabyīn al-Ṭurūq”), reveals that he was digesting his experiences of death by relating them to the variety of Sufi practices that surrounded him.\textsuperscript{66} In this initial foray, he
ignored the terms of his own experience, the “death of self-will,” as the means to gain distance from one’s own selfish desires. Instead, he inverted this idea and wrote about closeness to God (qurb ilā ‘llah) as the common goal of all aspirants to sainthood. This text was ostensibly a commentary on the famous saying by Najm al-Din Kubrā (d. 1221), “The paths to God are as numerous as the variety of beings in creation.” ʿAli Muttaqi argued that since the methods for spiritual training are numerous, they are of little importance.67 What is important is that these methods be based on a solid foundation, which is legal rectitude, performing religious obligations, and avoiding religious prohibitions as charted in the shari’a. Although he began by urging the reader to engage in supererogatory acts of worship, he ended by stressing that such acts were ultimately invalid unless based on the scrupulous observation of the shari’a.68 “Obligatory acts of worship are not complete and perfect means of closeness to God, without supererogatory acts of worship to supplement them. Without supererogatory worship as an expression of love, these acts of obligatory worship only save the actor from punishment, rather than gifting him intimacy. Performing only the obligations is the ‘path of being saved.’ In contrast, performing obligations and completing them with optional acts of worship (in prayer times and in every moment) is the ‘path of approaching intimacy’ step by step.”69 In his initial text, ʿAli Muttaqi advocated a mildly reformist perspective on Sufi practice. His reformist perspective had not yet crystallized into a reform program. Taqwa was more important than ritual or forms of dhikr, and dhikr included acts of teaching, social service, and charity, which were probably more meritorious than contemplative dhikr.

ʿAli Muttaqi asserted that those who engaged in Sufi rituals should downplay the distinctiveness of each lineage and adhere to the shari’a. ʿAli Muttaqi’s reformist rethinking of Sufi practices set up a dynamic of distance and intimacy. He perceived that his intimacy with God was proportional to his distance and alienation from the people surrounding him. This is exactly the danger of pride that al-Hakim al-Tirmidhi warned against:

_Taqwa is defined by the Prophet of God when he said [in a hadith report], “Do not snub others or consider them less than you—just be like brethren, worshippers of one God.” Then he continued, “For indeed taqwa is just here” while he pointed to his chest. Thus, we know that taqwa means purity of heart to avoid holding others in contempt or belittling them or having no empathy with them, thus keeping aloof from their problems and refusing to give them good counsel and effective help so that they might worship God, and to encourage them in good deeds. Indeed, the_
person with taqwa is like a man who exits the bathhouse having cleansed himself of all filth and impurity and wearing clean white clothes. If he sees dirt being blown around by a wind, he rushes to cover his head, his beard and his clothes in order to avoid getting coated in dirt! Such it is with the Muttaqi, the person with taqwa, who has purified his heart and his chest.\textsuperscript{70}

Al-Hakim al-Tirmidhi lampooned Muslim devotees who thought their piety made them better, cleaner, and purer than other Muslims around them. In just this way, ‘Ali Muttaqi became alienated from masters of the Chishti Order and other orders with their distinctive, popular styles of devotion and who through popularity enjoyed positions of power. Later, he described his state of singular despair at the spiritual alienation he felt for all surrounding him in Gujarat.

That neighborhood of conscientious poverty lies abandoned and its homes sag in despair. Its folk have all departed, leaving for other places or passing away. Only the impostors and hypocrites have prospered, those who are busy with envy, lies, and worldly ambitions. They distract themselves with listening to music that is forbidden, and erupting into dance that can only lower their dignity. They engage only in forgery, selling themselves, impassioned anger and rivalry, malice, cheating and hatred, envy and greed, pride and dissimulation. They approach others with enmity. They gaze upon young men with love and sit around with kings in luxury and with scholars in flattery. Those impostors themselves embody such deceitful and lowly qualities, so how can it be legal to take them as spiritual guides and Sufi masters? How can one pledge allegiance to them and wear a cap from their hands?\textsuperscript{71}

This elegy to his times served as an introduction to his advice to all who desired to sincerely pursue sainthood. For them, he defined intimacy with God (qurb) and then defined the saint (wali) as one whom the experience of closeness and intimacy with God has indelibly touched. He expanded on the idea that one’s distance from the people gauged one’s nearness to God, as if to justify his own alienation from these local Sufis who maintained intimate contact with people, engaged in populist styles of devotion, and entertained mass followings.

His first text, though small, reveals ‘Ali Muttaqi’s approach to the practical contours of Sufi practice. It differs from the work of most of his contemporaries, who saw the clearest expressions of closeness in poetry and the
most efficacious expressions of intimacy in ecstatic behavior. His sobriety and moderate ascetic discipline were so outside the routine for saints of his time that he acquired notoriety and popular respect. Crowds flocked to him as he walked through Ahmedabad, wishing to receive his blessing. He slammed the door of his house on the crowds and installed a lock to keep them away. He employed a servant to console people with blessings and prayers that came “from the shaykh” who refused to come to the door. And he left his home only for communal prayers on Fridays. This reclusive behavior increased his popular acclaim in Ahmedabad, the city that would become the center of his world.

Embedding: Setting Roots in Gujarat

To understand ‘Ali Muttaqi’s growth, we must explore the sultanate of Gujarat, the region in whose nourishing soil he was transplanted. This kingdom—its prosperous lands and profitable seas with its glittering capital of Ahmedabad—was the center of his world. The sultanate of Gujarat comprised a world of power, wealth, and cosmopolitan ambitions that has not received the scholarly attention that it deserves. Samira Sheikh has demonstrated how the sultanate has often been overshadowed by the Mughal Empire. Scholars (mainly architectural historians and scholars of trade) are attracted to Gujarat under Mughal rule. Yet the history of Islamic culture in South Asia is enriched by a focus on the earlier sultanate of Gujarat located as pivot between continent and sea: Gujarat connected North India and the southern Deccan and also linked South Asia to Arabia.

In the late medieval period, the sultanate of Gujarat was ruled by the Muẓaffar-Shāhī dynasty. It is named after Muẓaffar Shāh, the regnal name of the adventurous administrator who founded the dynasty in 1411. He was formerly known as Muẓaffarkhān and had been appointed governor of Gujarat in 1391, when it was a province of the sultanate of Delhi under the Tughlaq dynasty. However, centralized rule was tenuous. In 1351 the Deccan region asserted independence as the Bahmani sultanate. Situated between the Deccan and Delhi, the province of Gujarat also began to feel political tremors. Khan had to fight to assert his rights as governor—despite his appointment from Delhi—against the previous governor, who toyed with open rebellion. Muzaffarkhan embodied upward mobility in the Tughlaq regime: his father had been a Hindu Rajput, the son of a village chief, who helped a Tughlaq prince who got lost while hunting in Gujarat. That prince mounted the throne as Firōz Shāh Tughlaq (ruled 1351–88), and Muzaffar Khan’s father rose to a
Ahmedabad in the sixteenth century
prominent position as his cupbearer in Delhi, converting to Islam and ranking as nobility.⁷⁴

Muzaffar Khan grew up in Delhi with administrative knowledge, military skill, and loyalty to Sufi ideals. When he asserted his rights as governor of Gujarat, his son was appointed prime minister in Delhi, but as civil war broke out in Delhi, centralized rule almost disappeared. Muzaffar Khan made a pilgrimage to Ajmer to visit the tomb-shrine of Muʿin al-Din Chishti; such visitation (ziyārat) had long been a symbol of seeking spiritual blessings to become a ruler. He and his son harbored ambition to take over the throne in Delhi from their power base in Gujarat. Their plans were thwarted in 1398 when the Central Asian conqueror Timur sacked Delhi and carted off its wealth and human skill to his capital at Samarqand.

After Timur’s sack of Delhi, Gujarat became effectively an independent realm, and its governor took the title Muẓaffar Shāh (ruled 1407–11 as sultan). His son urged him to march on Delhi, but Muzaffar Shah knew that the days of centralized rule from Delhi were over. The son revolted, imprisoned his father in 1404, and declared himself sultan in order to seize the throne of Delhi. This futile goal was abandoned when the son was poisoned by his relatives, who reinstated Muzaffar Shah. He gave his name to the Muzaffar-Shahi dynasty, whose lineage of sultans of Gujarat are given in appendix A. He abdicated in 1411 a few months before his death to allow his grandson Ahmad to take the throne.

Aḥmad Shāh became sultan at age nineteen and founded a new city, Ahmedabad (formerly a town called Ashaval). He moved the capital of Gujarat from Patan (Pāṭan) (Ar. Fattan; formerly Gj. Anhilwād, Ar. Naharwāla), which looked northeast toward Delhi and the wider Gangetic plain. In contrast, his new capital, Ahmedabad, was on the Sabarmati River, facing southwest toward the Gulf of Cambay and the Arabian Sea. Ahmad Shah reoriented Gujarat as an independent sultanate toward its twelve port-cities and their maritime trade and overseas links to Arabia. From Delhi, Sikandar Lōdī (ruled 1488–1517) gazed with envy at Gujarat’s ports and their revenue from trade and manufacturing, saying, “The magnificence of the kings of Delhi rests on wheat and barley; the magnificence of the kings of Gujarat rests on coral and pearls.”⁷⁵

Ahmad Shah’s intimacy with Sufis mirrored his political vision. Muzaffar Shah’s father had close ties to Sufis from the Suhrawardī Order. According to legend, he and his brother converted under the guidance of Shaykh Jalāl al-Dīn Makhdūm-e Jahāniyān, whose grandson Sayyid Burhān al-Dīn Qutb-e ‘Ālam (d. 1453) settled in Ahmedabad and married the daughter of
a noble of Gujarat; his son Shâh-e ‘Ālam (d. 1475) and their descendants became religious leaders over many generations. The sultanate was reputed to prosper through the blessing of these Suhrawardi saints who were Bukhari sayyids, descendants of the Prophet Muhammad who lived in Bukhārā (now in Uzbekistan).

Muzaffar Shah showed respect to Sufis from the Chishti Order with their reputation as spiritual guardians of South Asian rulers. Ahmad Shah added to this a special fondness for Shaykh Aḥmad Khattū (d. 1445) of the Maghribi Order linked to Shaykh Abū Madyan Shuʿayb (d. 1198, a Sufi master popular in North Africa and Yemen). Ahmad Khattu helped Ahmad Shah lay the foundation of the capital, near his own residence at Sarkhej (Sarkhēj). He was the principal “Ahmad” who gave his name to the city, along with three others: Sultan Ahmad Shah himself, Qāḍī Aḥmad Jūd (disciple and successor of Ahmad Khattu), and Mālik Aḥmad. Legend asserts that the four pious Ahmads were aided by twelve Sufis known as Bābā (an endearing honorific for a darwēsh or qalandar) who were remotely associated with the Chishti Order. While this book focuses on how the sultans of Gujarat interacted with Sufis and fostered Islamic culture, their stable rule had lasting impact on Hindu, Jain, and other religious communities in Gujarat.

Gujarat was already dotted with Muslim tombs related to Sufi, Ismāʿīlī, and legendary figures. The sultans of Gujarat patronized new ones, now clustered around the growing capital of Ahmedabad. The tomb-shrine (rawḍa; Gr. rōza, Ur. dargāh) of Ahmad Khattu became a place of royal residence and burial as well in the era of Mahmud I (ruled 1458–1511), who led Gujarat to its zenith. He was known as Maḥmūd Bēgrā, or “Mahmud of the Buffalo Horns,” referring to either two curved buffalo horns (like the shape of his macho mustache) or two fortresses that he conquered (Girnār and Chāmpānēr). In either case, his nickname implied masculine vigor. He built a new capital at Champaner with a magnificent multistoried congregational mosque (jāmiʿ masjid), constructed in 1509.

His strength was acknowledged by the Lodi sultans of Delhi (who began to honor him with gifts like an independent sultan) and the Bahmani sultans of the Deccan. He received emissaries from the new Safavid Empire in Iran, a major trading partner of Gujarat in the Arabian Sea and Persian Gulf. During his fifty-three-year reign, the sultanate of Gujarat prospered and patronized Sufis and Islamic scholarship on the Qur’an and hadith. The sultans invited scholars of hadith from Egypt and Arabia to Gujarat to serve in court.

His successor, Sultan Muẓaffar Shâh II (ruled 1511–26), zealously acquired a
copy of *Fatḥ al-Bārī*, or “Disclosure of the Creator,” the esteemed commentary on the hadith collection *Ṣaḥīḥ al-Bukhārī*, written by Ibn Ḥajar al-ʿAsqalānī (d. 1449). Arrival of such texts were important events during which sultans would publicly display deference to the Prophet’s legacy and value its scholars. Similarly, ship captains carried the multivolume hadith commentary of *Fath al-Bārī* on their dangerous voyages across the Indian Ocean in the belief that God would not destroy a ship bearing such blessed cargo. Arriving in Gujarat, hadith scholars expected generous reward and political postings as administrators or treasury officers. New connections from Arabia to the sultanate of Gujarat supplemented and nourished the ongoing devotion of South Asian Muslim scholars to hadith and Qurʾan commentary.

Despite the growing importance of hadith scholarship, Sufi leaders remained crucial figures in the religious life of the sultanate. Many Sufis were also scholars of the Qurʾan and hadith, and they came to the fore when Sultan Muzaffar II died in 1526. His death sparked rivalry that would have enormous impact on ʿAli Muttaqi. Of the sultan’s six sons, four aspired to the throne: Sikandar, Nasīr Maḥmūd, Bahādur, and Laṭīf. Prominent Sufis predicted that his third son, Bahadur, would take the throne. But the ailing Sultan Muzaffar II did not raise Bahadur’s rank to signal his favor, and Bahadur fled in fear of his brothers. At Ajmer, Bahadur sought refuge in the blessings of Muʿīn al-Dīn Chishti’s dargah. Sultan Muzaffar II delayed naming a successor as his health failed, hoping that Bahadur would return to Gujarat. As the sultan died, civil war broke out between his eldest son, Sikandar, and his youngest, Latīf. Sikandar failed to show deference to Sufi leaders in Ahmedabad and appeared to lose popular legitimacy. He proclaimed himself sultan but was poisoned after just three months.

The minister who poisoned him raised to the throne a boy from the royal family, to rule in name as Maḥmūd Shāh II but in fact to be a puppet of the regent minister. This internal chaos in Gujarat was mirrored by external warfare in North India. From Ajmer, Bahadur procured support from the sultan of Delhi, Ibrāhīm Lōdī (ruled 1517–26) but got caught up in the chaos of the Mughal invasion. Bahadur was present at Panipat where the Lodi army was defeated; he was fleeing with Lodi commanders when news reached him of his father’s death. As Prince Babur occupied Delhi, Bahadur evaded Mughal interception and returned to Gujarat, announcing his claim to the throne. Bolstered by Sufi leaders and popular support, Bahadur dethroned the boy-puppet and displaced his rival brothers. He was crowned as Bahādur Shāh in 1527. The story of his father’s death, his sibling rivalry, and his political triumph through his appeal
to Sufis and scholars illustrates the vibrant environment of Gujarat. The sultanate of Gujarat was a crucible that alloyed Sufi leaders, hadith scholars, and political patrons, which proved to be fertile ground for ‘Ali Muttaqi’s growth.

Bahadur Shah was reigning when ‘Ali Muttaqi settled in Ahmedabad. In keeping with his practice of alienation, ‘Ali Muttaqi socialized with few companions. He built a small community of like-minded Sufi and religious scholars. His friends were Qāḍī ‘Abdallāh Sindhi, his son Qāḍī Ḥamīd Muḥaddith, and his brother Raḥmatallāh. Qāḍī ‘Abdallāh came to Ahmedabad along with his family to escape some catastrophe in Sindh. He was a jurist but had a Sufi perspective, and he befriended ‘Ali Muttaqi. He and his brother became disciples and then successors. ‘Ali Muttaqi was also friends with Miyān Ghiyāth, who lived in Bharoch (Bharōch); he exhibited a limitless generosity, giving people whatever they might need, whether money, clothes, food, medicines, tools, or books—his house was always full of things to give away. His piety focused on scrupulousness in the details of the sunna, which probably attracted the friendship of ‘Ali Muttaqi.

In another step toward maturity, ‘Ali Muttaqi decided to marry, but records do not identify his wife or mention whether ‘Ali Muttaqi allied with a notable family of Ahmedabad. The couple had a son who died in childhood. At this point, ‘Ali Muttaqi revealed that he had never set his heart on building a household. After his son’s death, he said to his wife, “I now have no need for this marriage since our son has disappeared. I married you out of duty to produce a son and to raise him well. Now that he has passed beyond this world, on the day of resurrection he may plead for me before God as my son who died before he came of age. You are free to do as you please, whatever you decide.” She asked to stay in his company to draw water and carry it for his ritual baths. It is not clear whether she stayed on as his wife or simply as a follower. However, he must have treated her with ample kindness, for many of her relatives joined them as followers of ‘Ali Muttaqi and servants in his household. He lived just outside the Shāhpūr Darwāza in Ahmedabad, in a house with a mosque in its compound.

His fame reached the ears of Sultan Bahadur Shah, who requested his audience repeatedly. ‘Ali Muttaqi turned down the requests. Finally, the sultan sought the mediation of Qāḍī ‘Abdallāh Sindhi, whom he knew to be his close friend. Qāḍī ‘Abdallāh begged ‘Ali Muttaqi to see the sultan, even if only once. ‘Ali Muttaqi complained that he might see the sultan dressed in a manner against the sharī‘a, and then he would have to chastise him, ruining the whole meeting and perhaps placing his life in danger. Qāḍī ‘Abdallāh reassured him that the sultan wanted only to see him—on any condition, even if
he refused to say a word—and that the qadi himself would be present to speak with the sultan and distract him with stories. Finally, ʿAli Muttaqi agreed to meet the sultan and gave him some admonition. Despite his stern approach to the meeting, ʿAli Muttaqi seems to have won Bahadur Shah’s trust and confidence.91

This narrative is crucial in ʿAli Muttaqi’s hagiography. It reveals his wariness of the sultan, whom he considered decadent. It shows his courage in giving strong advice to a ruler, foreshadowing his later role as a reformer. It displays his virtue of scrupulous caution in refusing royal gifts. Finally, those who witnessed the scene or spread the news of it would see the sultan’s acceptance of ʿAli Muttaqi’s criticism to be proof of the latter’s status as a saint. ʿAli Muttaqi became a patron and advisor to Sultan Bahadur Shah, showing that he understood himself to be one of the saintly pillars of the sultanate of Gujarat. He also grew close to one of Bahadur Shah’s chief ministers, Aṣaf Khān, who was a soldier and administrator famed also as a scholar and paragon of virtue.92 Yet this apparent success was an illusion, as the second satchel will reveal. A political calamity was brewing like a dark storm on the horizon, and its winds would carry ʿAli Muttaqi far away into exile.