‘Ali Muttaqi’s Maturity

The shaykh sat in the courtyard of the palace. His inner voice whispered to his chest, “Inna ʾllaha maʿ al-sabirin—Surely God is with those who are patient.” Glancing up at the noontime sun with concern, he released a sigh. Just when would this young sultan finish washing?

This was the shaykh’s first visit with the new ruler, a distant nephew of Bahadur Shah who was crowned as Sultan Mahmud Shah III. The shaykh had been in Mecca when the former sultan was martyred at sea. After much intrigue and warfare between pretenders and kingmakers, Mahmud Shah III gained the throne. The crown must have dwarfed his head, as the boy was only eleven. “Patience is the key,” the shaykh reminded himself. “You stayed away for a long time, watching developments carefully and showering this new sultan with prayers from afar”—he had prayed that the young sultan survive and thrive, that he might grow in wisdom and strength, and that he would repel the infidel Farangis from the west and the uncouth spawn of Timur from the north. For so long, he had invoked God to help this boy sultan uphold the shariʿa and succeed in Gujarat where his uncle had failed. “Yes, you stayed away for a year after his coronation, praying that he would break free of those selfish ministers who kept him in a gilded cage, like a little songbird, to rule in his name. So be patient with him now.”

Shaykh ‘Ali Muttaqi had waited in Mecca until ships arrived from Gujarat with charitable gifts from the treasury for Asaf Khan, the prime minister in exile, for the shaykh to distribute to the scholars, Sufis, and poor in Arabia. Cash began to flow in again for the Muẓaffarī Madrasa, the college in Mecca endowed by the sultans of Gujarat as a sign of their legitimacy and prestige.
These were all good signs. Then the invitation came—the boy sultan requested the shaykh to return to Ahmedabad.

He cautioned himself, “Even as he’s showing signs of maturity, you took your time to meet him, so what is the rush now?” He had accepted the invitation to meet only when the new sultan, with a palanquin to transport the shaykh to the palace, came in person to where ‘Ali Muttaqi tarried in Ahmedabad. When ‘Ali Muttaqi had mounted the palanquin, the young sultan surprised him by joining the bearers to raise it up on his own shoulder! The sultan had not protested when the shaykh refused to enter the palace quarters and asked to remain in the courtyard so as to not lay eyes on luxuries that contravened the shari’a. The young sultan had respectfully seated him in the shade of pomegranate trees, where they sat on the same couch to chat. “Yes, he’s no longer a boy, yet not quite a man. But there are good signs. When I observed that the time for noon prayer had arrived, without hesitating he suggested that he would be honored to pray with me as imam. Servants laid the carpets and rushed out to give us complete privacy. He then strode off to make his ablutions and prepare for prayer, but what could be keeping him for so long?”

At least a half hour passed. Finally, the shaykh rose from his couch in the shade and walked across the courtyard into the fierce sunlight. His shadow was beginning to extend: the time for prayer was passing swiftly. He traced the footsteps of the sultan through an archway and into a smaller courtyard garden, heard the sound of water splashing, and followed it into a shaded alcove. There Mahmud Shah III, less a sultan than a troubled boy, was slumped against the cistern wall, trembling. His cap was lying in a deep puddle, his head dripping wet, his sleeves rolled up, his pant legs drenched. The stream of water coming from a fountain spigot in the wall was left open, filling the cistern to overflowing. A brass ewer and pitcher lay dented on the ground where they had been thrown. The boy sultan scrambled to stand, but the shaykh stopped him. “Stay seated—I’ll sit with you.” The shaykh knelt before him on the wet ground as the sultan wiped at his eyes, stammering, “I was making my wudu ablutions but . . .” The shaykh quieted him, “I know.” “But the water, it did not . . .” “Baba Mahmud, I know.” “It did not clean me like it should have . . .” the sultan continued frantically, “because the water is not pure, or the vessels are filthy, or . . . or the whole palace is poisonous.” The shaykh asked, “Or you are polluted, is that what you think?” The young sultan lowered his gaze in shame.

“Baba Mahmud, you are not polluted,” the shaykh said quietly but firmly. “I do not sit with polluted people,” he continued as he picked up the ewer and
pitcher. The sultan watched him carefully as the shaykh stood and leaned over the cistern wall. He scooped some water with the ewer, swirled it to rinse the vessel, and poured out the water on the flowerbeds that grew around the courtyard. This he repeated three times. Then he rinsed the pitcher three times, pouring out the water at the roots of the rosebushes. He then filled the pitcher to the top with water and turned to the sultan with a smile. “Baba Mahmud, this is pure water, a blessed and subtle substance, highly revered in our *shariʿa*. Any doubts that you harbor in your mind about this are merely the whisperings of the tempter in your breast, the tempter who is in every human breast. Say with me, *I seek refuge with the Lord of humanity . . . from the harm of the creeping tempter that whispers in the chests of humanity.*” The shaykh recited Surat al-Nas quietly over the pitcher, blowing over the water. “Yes, you know the verse from the Qurʾan. That whispering of doubt is the voice of Shaytan. Now take this water and drink a sip—and let it wash away any trace of doubt that sullies the clean slate of your heart.”

The sultan rose to his feet while the shaykh held the pitcher to his lips. He took a sip of water and began to breathe easier. The shaykh paused for a moment, imagining all the blood this boy had shed to survive to this point, all the trauma he must be carrying. “Would you like to know how our Prophet—may peace and blessings be upon him—used to make ablutions?” The sultan nodded. The shaykh held the pitcher above the ewer. He took the boy’s right hand and, pouring a gentle trickle of water, he washed it. Then the left. He kept pouring gently, just enough for the boy to rinse his mouth and nostrils, his face and forearms, his ears and hair, and then his feet and ankles. “If you opt for the Prophet’s method for *wuḍʿ*, then you can wash easily, without wasting a drop.” He handed the pitcher to the sultan, who stared in amazement: not even half of the water in the pitcher was used.

“If you adopt this method, then God will preserve your mind from all that burdens you. Inshallah, all will pass away.” The sultan gazed at him with gratitude and asked, “Will you come every day to pray with me?” The shaykh answered, “I will come and pour water for you myself. Now pick up your cap before the shadows indicate that noontime has passed.”

This dramatized account is based on an oral narrative that ʿAli Muttaqi told his successor, ʿAbd al-Wahhab, and was later written down by ʿAbd al-Haqq Muhaddith Dihlawi. The event was so pivotal to the career of Sultan Mahmud Shah III that it became part of the lore of the sultanate of Gujarat. The more worldly minded historian Ulughkhani narrated it to mark the beginning of
the sultan’s reign. It was a key moment in ‘Ali Muttaqi’s life, expressing his last hope for political independence of the sultanate.

This narrative displays ‘Ali Muttaqi’s newfound maturity, acquired through his exile in Mecca. He was now a hadith expert with rare skills and recognition from the best masters of Prophetic reports in Arabia. He was also a Sufi master with admired initiations in multiple Sufi orders. He combined these separate kinds of authority in a new model of sainthood that implied innovative principles of Sufi training, one that radiated that subtle charisma of someone who felt that he had died to self-will and remained a vessel through whom divine aid and guidance could flow to others. The result was Sufism of a rarefied kind, called the triple tariqa. He forged its reformist vision while in exile in Mecca and desired to apply it in Gujarat.

The reform project had institutional and political dimensions, which will be unpacked from the satchel of this chapter. As ‘Ali Muttaqi matured and began to exercise greater authority, his project of reform was the grain ripening on the wheat stalks of his hopes and aspirations, planted long ago and tended carefully until they might bear fruit. The righteous are like a crop that is sown, whose seeds sprout then grow tall, then firmly thicken and mature on their stalks, to the delight of the faithful sower and the consternation of the disbelievers (Qur’an 48:29). Seeds are useless until they sprout, grow, and bear fruit. In the same way, principles are useless until they are embodied in personalities and actions. ‘Ali Muttaqi developed the principles for his Sufi project of reform. He then strove to embody them as a scholarly saint.

This chapter is a satchel full of actions through which ‘Ali Muttaqi embodied the principles he articulated. These actions constituted his maturity, the ripening of his program for Sufi reform. His reformist Sufism was based on principles that would temper sainthood with the sharia sciences like hadith and jurisprudence, and embodying these essential principles would empower him to influence Gujarat from afar. After a few years in Mecca, he was invited back to Gujarat with revived authority and a mandate to institutionalize reformist Sufism back in South Asia.

Foundation: Critiquing Sufism from Within

On an institutional level, ‘Ali Muttaqi solidified his reformist vision by fusing three Sufi orders—the Qadiri, the Shadhili, and the Madyani—into the triple tariqa. As noted in the previous chapter, Ahmad Zarruq had previously advocated a single initiation into these three lineages as the unifying force of a Sufi community. ‘Ali Muttaqi took initiation in them as a fused and
integral set. He led this community by presenting himself as a scholarly saint. In that role, he sought to refine the reformist content of the triple tariqa, to strengthen its community of disciples, and to popularize it beyond its origin among elite scholars.

ʿAli Muttaqi received initiation into these three orders simultaneously from Shaykh Muhammad al-Sakhawi. Their fusion was, at least partly, an inherited form of Sufi legitimacy. However, ʿAli Muttaqi actively sought ways to strengthen the fusion between the orders as a method to temper Sufi devotion and to purify it of practices he thought inauthentic. His use of wisdom sayings integrated this genre derived from the Shadhili Order, while his writings on death and rebirth took its rhetoric from literature of the Qadiri Order. Beyond the realm of texts, ʿAli Muttaqi offered disciples initiation into all three lineages together, rather than to any one individually. He hoped that each would strengthen the others and that the combination of three would limit any possibility of partisanship, exaggeration, or innovation. He hoped that this fusion would prune ritual forms from within these lineages, rather than compound the ritual forms promoted by each one.

From within allegiance to a Sufi single order, it was difficult to institute a reform of ritual practices. Loyalists to tradition cited honored masters in their own order who practiced rituals in a distinctive way and interpreted opposition to those rituals as disloyalty to the ancestral masters of that lineage. This is why the triple tariqa was so crucial to ʿAli Muttaqi’s reform program. When opposing any particular devotional practice or ritual form that he perceived as illegitimate or inauthentic, he fell back upon the other two lineages to offer a contrasting example or to counter any charges of disloyalty to the tradition. Examples of his reform from within Sufi orders include his rejection of Sufi music and his nuanced avoidance of existential philosophy.

From the perspective of Sufi devotional life in South Asia, ʿAli Muttaqi’s most dramatic reform was denouncing music. When South Asians began to convert to Islam in large numbers, devotional music gatherings became a virtual training ground for Islamic customs and a model of a casteless but ordered society. Despite the historical importance and popularity of music, ʿAli Muttaqi opposed the practice as it existed in Gujarat and wider South Asia. Some jurists resisted the practice because they felt that music and poetry were irreverent and sensual, but ʿAli Muttaqi opposed it because he believed that Sufis used it as a shortcut to saintly authority. He judged devotional music not in terms of music itself but rather in terms of a saint’s interaction with the wider public. He accepted that devotional music might be acceptable in private sittings or individual meditation but objected if it were a venue for
showy displays of ecstasy and rivalry for public acclaim. ‘Ali Muttaqi considered a saint’s attendance at such sessions as pandering to the “animal urges” of the masses to demonstrate one’s sainthood in order to demand fealty, favors, or submission. Juridically, he noted that music’s legality was open for debate, but sociologically, he condemned the habit as a temptation toward self-aggrandizement.

With this condemnation of music, ‘Ali Muttaqi included all manner of large devotional gatherings. He critiqued aspiring saints’ custom of sponsoring public feasts and poetic recitations. He also decried the vivacious ritual of shahid-bāzī, or gazing at young men to contemplate the beauty of creation. This ritual was popular among Sufis in Burhanpur, in both the Chishti and Shattari Orders, judging from the acerbic condemnations of the practice that arose from jurists and reform-minded Sufis in that city. These gatherings publicly displayed sainthood to a populist and mixed audience, which blurred the distinction of scholar and unlettered or Sufi and uninitiated.

‘Ali Muttaqi pointed out the theological and experiential reasons for aspiring saints to avoid the public displays associated with listening to music. Part of his internal reform of Sufi devotion was to limit expressions of love mysticism. Love for God is an essential dimension to a Sufi’s personal experience. In a treatise dedicated to the subject, ‘Ali Muttaqi argues that true love does not lead to the overt displays of love-madness that were expected in popular culture. In “Warning to Lovers,” he argues that true love of God manifests in particular signs in a saint’s comportment. The true lover conceals passion from the gaze of others, refraining from bragging, sighing, weeping, or lamenting. Similarly, the lover must love death, for one can stay constantly with the beloved only after death. In a wisdom saying, he wrote that “death is a cord that leads lover to beloved,” so the true lover waits expectantly for death. Love entails obedience to the beloved’s command, and since “the Qur’an is a love-letter from God,” the lovestruck Sufi needs to study the letter and acquire the knowledge to understand it. ‘Ali Muttaqi undermined the allure of love by deflating the essential vocabulary of that tradition. He argued that “union with the beloved” (ittiḥād) does not imply the mingling of two distinct essences but actually means “to desire nothing but God and think of nothing but God.”

The boldness of this reform program emerged against the backdrop of the loyalty by which South Asian Muslims adhered to devotional music and love poetry. Earlier Chishti Sufis limited music by restricting its audience and frequency but did not question the ritual at its foundation as ‘Ali Muttaqi did. When ‘Abd al-Wahhab Muttaqi’s disciple ‘Abd al-Haqq first encountered these
reformist ideas, he questioned their very applicability to the South Asian context.

ʿAbd al-Haqq complained to his master that, “in Delhi and its environs, the practice of sama’ involves complex and bizarre rituals that are very popular with the masses. While living there, it is next to impossible to stay aloof and avoid such practices. If someone tries to denounce sama’ there, or even just tries to avoid practicing it, one would have to run contrary to the entire Sufi community and all the Muslims. All the townspeople would be suspicious of such a person. All the common people would accuse him of contradicting the great saints of the past, and lay blame against him! In those environs, people come together in huge gatherings: worthy people mix with unworthy ones, while the righteous sit with the corrupt. All kinds of people mix freely while participating in these rituals. What should one decide in such a case?”

ʿAbd al-Haqq doubted that he could denounce devotional music without suffering a virulent backlash. ʿAbd al-Wahhab ordered ʿAbd al-Haqq to simply never practice sama’ in the way that his fellows did in contemporary South Asia. ʿAli Muttaqi had called it “a habit of the common Sufi darwesh, not a foundation of the path,” such that none are obliged to practice it.

Just as ʿAli Muttaqi designed his fusion of three Sufi orders to curb the social excesses of musical gatherings and limit the experiential hyperbole of love, he also hoped it would restrain the speculations of reason and imagination. Through his reform program, ʿAli Muttaqi addressed a saint’s relation with doctrine and ideology and sought to limit the teaching of existential philosophy and cosmology (ḥaqāʾiq wa raqāʾiq). Existential philosophy stressed the creator’s continuity with creation by postulating that all of material existence consisted only of the qualities of the divine, in various combinations and permutations that had taken on congealed, physical form. From this perspective, spiritual insight consisted of recognizing the true origin of all material forces and their true composition: all that exists is essentially from God, with God, and in God. The only real existence is God, and the fabric of being consists of the qualities of God. Ibn ʿArabi (d. 1240) had systematized these cosmological and philosophic ideas, framing in them the terminology and practices of Sufi communities. His teachings permeated Persian Sufi poetry and Indic devotional music, as well as Arabic theological works, in a popular form called wahdat al-wujūd or “the oneness of being.”

ʿAli Muttaqi did not oppose these ideas in their essence but rather decried their popularization as an independent religious ideology. He argued that
one’s first allegiance must be to the Qur’an as a whole, while admitting that cosmological speculations were subtle suggestions hidden within a few of its verses. Therefore, he argued, only an elite few should learn cosmology, consisting of those who had studied the Qur’an, hadith, and legal traditions so thoroughly that their loyalty to the outward structure of the shari‘a was beyond question. Only these few were qualified to discourse on subtle cosmological issues. ‘Ali Muttaqi feared that if Sufis publicly expounded them, these ideas might form the basis for a religious ideology in which the physical universe, since it emanated from God and was in continuity with divine being, might be seen as giving direct access to God. This would open the possibility for ambitious religious seekers to claim direct connection to God without reference to the Prophet Muhammad and the revelation he relayed.

“Sugar-coated poison” is how ‘Ali Muttaqi characterized the elaborate theological texts and alluring poetic compositions that elevated this philosophical outlook to a position of prime importance among Sufis. “If you beware of their dangers it is beneficial to read them, though for most they are deadly rather than beneficial.”

Though seemingly derived from Qur’anic verses, such texts could undermine the authority of the scripture itself, if Sufis misunderstood their subtleties and took them as absolutes. More importantly, they sidelined the authority of the Prophet, upon whose veracity the convincing power of the Qur’an depended. While not banning such texts, ‘Ali Muttaqi tried to limit them and to give his disciples the scholarly training that allowed them to read such texts in a reformist context. He eliminated any mention of Ibn ‘Arabi by name, knowing that disciples and scholars bore partisan opinions about him based on his reputation more than his ideas. When quoting Ibn ‘Arabi’s ideas, he would only write, “It has been said,” in order to equivocate and focus attention on the idea itself rather than refer to the ideological debates that might engulf it. Furthermore, he would refrain from mentioning such ideas if he thought his listeners did not have the scriptural knowledge to properly contextualize them or if any were present who might be tempted to adopt extremes.

In a more complicated discursive strategy, ‘Ali Muttaqi sought to appropriate the popularity of Ibn ‘Arabi and channel it into his own reformist Sufism. When he quoted Ibn ‘Arabi by name in his writings, he cited only the simplest orthodox passages that expressed nothing speculative or controversial. He stressed that Ibn ‘Arabi and his followers were simply good Muslims who conformed to the basic values: they prayed and fasted, while starting all their theological works with “In the Name of God.” Therefore, he taught that there was no need to elevate them to positions of ideological importance or
to denounce them as unbelievers. He authorized only those whom he trusted to understand correctly to delve into their existential thought, while general Muslims were best served by a careful silence about their names, reputations, and theories. In this way, he tried to mute the “polemical image” of Ibn ʿArabi and slip past the arguments of both his proponents and detractors. ʿAli Muttaqi saw these polemics as a major obstacle to the rapprochement he so desired between Sufis and scholars.

ʿAli Muttaqi built the foundation of his reformist Sufi community in the safe haven of Mecca and chose ʿAbd al-Wahhab to be his successor and representative there. ʿAbd al-Wahhab took on the nickname “Muttaqi,” as if his life continued the life of ʿAli Muttaqi. In fact, ʿAbd al-Wahhab was himself the embodiment of ʿAli Muttaqi’s reformist teachings: his biographer calls him “not just a reflection of the completeness of his Shaykh but an essential co-participant in his very spirit.”17 ʿAbd al-Wahhab practiced fanāʾ fiʾl-shaykh, or absorption in the personality of one’s spiritual guide, which had been so difficult for ʿAli Muttaqi.

ʿAbd al-Wahhab was born in Mandu around 1536. His father, Walīʾllāh, had the reputation of being saintly and scholarly but died when ʿAbd al-Wahhab was young. The boy moved to Burhanpur, where he lived as an orphan, perhaps studying in a madrasa that would have supported his basic needs. He left in his teens to wander extensively in Gujarat, the Deccan, and South India as far as Adam’s Peak in Sri Lanka. He searched for teachers and spiritual guides but never stayed with anyone for long and never found satisfaction. In 1556, around the age of twenty, he arrived in Mecca for the Hajj. He worked as the scribal assistant of ʿAli Muttaqi and later became his closest disciple. While ʿAli Muttaqi lived, ʿAbd al-Wahhab was his constant companion and amanuensis and considered it disrespectful to marry. He remained unwed until he reached his forties to better serve his master. He returned to Gujarat at least once but lived mostly in Mecca, where he died in 1593.18

ʿAbd al-Wahhab lived in almost complete self-abnegation in his eleven years under the care of his guide. He molded his personality into a replica of ʿAli Muttaqi’s. He considered this abnegation as essential to his personal path to spiritual refinement, but he never made it obligatory for others.19 Like ʿAli Muttaqi before him, ʿAbd al-Wahhab fused his authority as a teacher with his authority as a saint. He spoke of scriptural knowledge as the key to maintaining the most basic spiritual virtue of pious wariness of God (taqwa). “Knowledge is a general and universal good, while dhikr is a specific and conditional good. Dhikr is like medicine that you take only occasionally when you need a cure for a specific ailment. The disciple should take recourse to
dhikr periodically, especially when in isolated retreats [khalwa] during auspicious times to gain peace of mind and freedom of heart. . . . However, being engrossed in knowledge, learning and teaching is a general good and is always relevant [to spiritual advancement]. . . . If one abandons knowledge and neglects learning, then any action one performs will come to nothing.”  

ʿAbd al-Wahhab concealed any miraculous deeds, visions, or spiritual disclosures that would occur to him, though visions at the tomb of the Prophet Muhammad seemed to be a regular element of his spiritual life.  

His admirers in Mecca and Yemen would regularly praise him by saying, “ʿAbd al-Wahhab follows in the footsteps of Abūʾl-Abbās al-Mursī” (d. 1287), who was the second axial saint of the Shadhili Order after Abuʾl-Hasan al-Shadhili. When questioned about the meaning of his identification with al-Mursi, ʿAbd al-Wahhab would only say, “How do I know what others mean by such praise?”  

Before he met ʿAli Muttaqi, it was reported that ʿAbd al-Wahhab performed miracles and showed interest in alchemy and enchantment. His discipleship under ʿAli Muttaqi, though, purged him of any such displays of spiritual power, which he later considered “selfish.” When asked why he ceased performing miracles when he joined the circle of ʿAli Muttaqi, he replied,  

Everything I have is from the blessing of ʿAli Muttaqi as a gift that I do not deserve. He established my sense of religion and straightened my ability to follow the law. He placed me firmly on the foundation of Islam. Before I met him, I vacillated between many different spiritual methods and states. God knows where I would have ended up if I had not met ʿAli Muttaqi! In his company, I discovered the way of religion, faith and worship, and learned the importance of following shariʿa steadfastly. This is the key to everything one can achieve, and it is the final stage on the path of spiritual refinement.  

In this tribute to his master, ʿAbd al-Wahhab recapitulated the basic contours of his reform-minded vision of who the saint should be. Being a saint was the final stage on the path (ṭariqa) of spiritual refinement, and saints were to limit their activities and social status to the role of exemplary teachers. They were to spread scriptural knowledge and demonstrate how to live within the bounds of juridical norms. This was scholarship as the highest form of worship and the true marker of being sincere as a saint. Exile and alienation were intrinsic elements of this sincerity, as ʿAbd al-Wahhab wrote in “Bishārat al-Ḥābib fī Faḍl al-Gharib,” a commentary on the Prophet Muhammad’s recommendation of travel and estrangement (ghurba) in the pursuit of scholarly knowledge and virtuous excellence.
Despite his praise of isolation and estrangement, ‘Abd al-Wahhab lived at the center of the community of Sufi scholars, for the triple tariqa thrived after ‘Ali Muttaqi passed away. The reformist power of this fusion of three lineages is dramatically illustrated in the experience of ‘Abd al-Haqq. His biography reveals how ‘Ali Muttaqi’s reformist Sufism operated in practice. ‘Abd al-Haqq arrived in Mecca for the pilgrimage, already a fully trained Sufi disciple from his childhood, boasting of two initiations into the Qadiri Order and zealously devoted to Shaykh ‘Abd al-Qadir Jilani. He imbibed a South Asian vintage of Qadiri devotion, steeped in emotive love, Persian poetry, and existential philosophy. ‘Abd al-Wahhab Muttaqi first accepted him as a student of hadith, without mentioning any Sufi terminology or advice. After a period of study, ‘Abd al-Wahhab initiated him in the triple tariqa, to wean his disciple from overbearingly clinging to one lineage and its founding saint, Shaykh ‘Abd al-Qadir Jilani. ‘Abd al-Haqq later admitted that

I used to be excessively and zealously devoted to ‘Abd al-Qadir Jilani. I used to never look to other masters or even mention their names, so absorbed was I in turning toward Shaykh ‘Abd al-Qadir, for he is always present for those who turn their attention toward him. Shaykh ‘Abd al-Wahhab had told me, “You are certainly from among Shaykh ‘Abd al-Qadir’s disciples and servants. However, it is the duty of one who seeks the truth to learn from every beneficial source, and also to teach whoever can learn from you [regardless of their lineage]. Never close upon yourself the door of seeking or bar the way of learning from others. From whatever source you may draw benefit, you may ascribe the blessing to the presence of your Shaykh [‘Abd al-Qadir].”

His master insisted that ‘Abd al-Haqq not reduce his triple tariqa into just one of its lineages, for such partisanship committed him to some rituals that the reformist Muttaqi community was trying to pare away. He criticized ‘Abd al-Haqq for being too eager to learn any new litany or ritual from the Qadiri Order. Instead, he taught that one order should balance and temper the others: “One should never believe that absolute perfection lies in one place and one place only; whoever claims this will induce others to denounce him and weaken his own faith.” ‘Abd al-Wahhab argued that one could have a constant spiritual orientation to Shaykh ‘Abd al-Qadir without that preventing oneself from taking initiation into other lineages, for each lineage had a spiritual method that was beneficial.

‘Abd al-Wahhab’s own Qadiri style was very moderate compared with the other Qadiri masters whom ‘Abd al-Haqq met and admired, for its fusion into
the triple *tariqa* tempered it against exaggerations and accretions. ‘Abd al-Wahhab Muttaqi urged ‘Abd al-Haqq to disavow Qadiri extremists who would modify their statement of faith to attest, “I am satisfied with God as Lord, with Islam as religion, with Muhammad as prophet . . . and with ‘Abd al-Qadir as master.” These Sufis would supplicate ‘Abd al-Qadir while facing his tomb in Baghdad, which ‘Abd al-Wahhab found to be an inauthentic practice that distracted dangerously from ritual orientation toward Mecca.29 In addition, he tried to curb ‘Abd al-Haqq’s eagerness to read the texts of Ibn ‘Arabi and his admirer ‘Abd al-Karīm al-Jīlī (d. 1403, a descendant of Shaykh ‘Abd al-Qadir), which expounded existential philosophy and an emanationist vision of the cosmos.30 In his final testament, he firmly prohibited ‘Abd al-Haqq from discussing with others in South Asia “cosmic existential realities” and other such expressions of existential philosophy.

In this way, ‘Ali Muttaqi hoped that his community’s fusion of three Sufi orders would become a powerful resource for purging Sufi communities of what he regarded as extremist practices, political partisanship, and burdensome ritual. The tension between ‘Abd al-Haqq and his master, ‘Abd al-Wahhab, illustrates the strategies for reform within the Muttaqi community and the resistance to it from other Sufi groups. As a hadith scholar and as Sufi master, ‘Abd al-Wahhab stepped into ‘Ali Muttaqi’s shoes and perpetuated his ideals of reform. His later followers recorded intimate interactions and conversations with him and were proof that ‘Abd al-Wahhab never demanded personal subjugation from his disciples or signs of formal allegiance. He spoke principles that would convince disciples rather than pronouncements that would subdue them. He trusted his scholarly training, limitation of textual sources, and institution of the triple *tariqa* to achieve these reforms. He never exercised absolute control over the mind or heart of his disciple, for he believed that—as ‘Ali Muttaqi and Ahmad Zarruq asserted before him—the method of Sufi training by domination and submission was no longer valid.

Expansion: Seeds of Social Reform

The personality of ‘Abd al-Wahhab and his interactions with ‘Abd al-Haqq vividly illustrate the triple *tariqa*’s reform of Sufi training. Through it, ‘Ali Muttaqi intended to promote the ideal of the scholar-saint as the ideal center of Islamic society. From this center, his reformist vision expanded beyond the saint, his circle of immediate disciples who aspired to sainthood themselves, and the circumference of a Sufi community that admired him. He hoped that reform within his Sufi community would continue to expand, affecting
classes throughout society. His reform aimed to eliminate specialized rituals that held disciples distinct and separate from other people in society. By fusing the role of saint with the roles of hadith scholar, jurist, and administrator, ‘Ali Muttaqi sought to limit the role of saints and to intensify their effectiveness. He embraced the apparent contradiction that in making saints more disguised within their overt role as teacher or jurist, their spiritual potency would have a wider reach and a deeper effect in society.

Conversely, ‘Ali Muttaqi hoped to infuse other social classes with some semblance of Sufi training. The authentic saint should cast reflections in every corner of the social world by performing beneficial acts that would not be recognized as “miracles” but rather as duties fulfilled. The saint who had died to his own self-will was granted a new life; his selflessness made him the axis around which daily life pivoted and revolved. The renowned ‘Abd al-Qadir Jilani addressed such a transformed person with the following commission: “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.”31 To radiate the light of sainthood among all levels of society, ‘Ali Muttaqi tried to provide reformist Sufi guidance to people of all types and classes. His tempered Sufi practice, pared of its baroque accretions and specialized ritual forms, could weave more effectively into all levels of society. Insinuated into the daily lives of common people, this reformed Sufi teaching would reinvigorate the moral fabric of Islamic society.

This project is evident in his five-part series on soul training (sulūk), or how to pass through life with spiritual sincerity and ethical integrity. All five of these treatises have a common theme: people achieve salvation by carrying out their common duties in this world, not by rejecting the world or transcending it. This theme is commensurate with ‘Ali Muttaqi’s insistence that performing one’s duty with sincerity is dhikr, whether that duty be outwardly religious, apparently professional, or simply charitable. Spiritual advancement comes not from opposing the world or the ego but from orienting the ego in the world so that one does not act out one’s own selfish will. In these five small treatises, ‘Ali Muttaqi tried to find simple ways that various classes of people could limit their own will to power through their everyday duties, illustrated with examples from the Prophetic hadith.

His ulterior motive was to limit the social purview of Sufi institutions. While encouraging piety in all classes of people, he tried to discourage overtly virtuosic exertions. He discouraged classes of common people who were not scholars from renunciation and asceticism that might pull them out
of their routine and into a social movement. He further tried to discourage common people from seeking vicarious benefit from emotional attachment to a saint, whether buried in a shrine or alive at the helm of a social movement. Instead, he recommended that people learn contentment with their lot in life. ʿAli Muttaqi argued that only those who know the limits set by the Prophet and the revelation he delivered could negotiate the path to sainthood. More simply, one must be a scholar first and a saint second. In this way, his deeply held conservatism comes out clearly through these five treatises, for scholars are necessarily an elite minority.

After summarizing the first four treatises, this book will focus only on the fifth and last one about soul training for rulers because it explains how ʿAli Muttaqi aimed for direct intervention in the political and social order of Gujarat, as he became the advisor to Sultan Mahmud Shah III. The first class whom ʿAli Muttaqi addressed was common young men who were reaching maturity, as the young sultan would have been had he not been destined to rule. ʿAli Muttaqi encouraged them to marry and instructed them how to live a devotional life while supporting a wife and raising a family. He wrote that marriage is a religious duty, despite the fact that he terminated his own marriage, telling his wife she should separate from him after their infant son died. He noted that in the hadith, working to support a family is a lofty form of worship equivalent to staying long hours in the mosque or fighting jihad. Married men should earn their upkeep through labor and spend spare time with his wife and children; ʿAli Muttaqi left no room for married men to visit saint’s tombs, attend devotional music, or isolate themselves for contemplation.32

From the class of common men, ʿAli Muttaqi then turned his attention to women in the second treatise, the longest of the five. Women played a largely unacknowledged role in both Islamic scholarly circles and Sufi communities. Most Sufi hagiographies included stories about saintly women, many of whom were relatives of publicly revered male saints, who often extolled the role of female relations as spiritual guides. Ibn ʿArabi is one illustrious example.33 Closer to ʿAli Muttaqi’s heart, Ahmad Zarruq’s grandmother was a saintly jurist who inspired him at an early age.34 More germane is the example of ʿĀʾisha Bāʿūniyya (d. 1517 in Damascus), a female jurist, poet, and Sufi master in the Qadiri Order who wrote books and issued fatwas in the same circles in Arabia that ʿAli Muttaqi inhabited two decades later.35 Few Sufi authors have written analytical treatises on the topic of how women participated in the largely male world of Sufis, despite these examples. ʿAli Muttaqi addressed
this intriguing question, but his patriarchal conservatism hindered him from dealing squarely with how women could become saints or play active roles in Sufi communities.36

‘Ali Muttaqi’s patriarchy affected his view of men in addition to women. He asserted that “real men” were those who rejected worldly ambition and mastered their selfish impulses. Men who fulfilled other patriarchal goals—like sexual prowess with women, virility in fathering children, success when competing with other men for power, or status in amassing wealth—were really “eunuchs” from the spiritual point of view. His third treatise in this series addresses “soul training” for real men (rijāl).37 In his oral discourses, he taught that “the work of real men is to take control of their own hearts.”38 Such men provide for family out of duty but do not rely on family for spiritual fulfillment, which comes only from complete absorption in God and teaching religious knowledge. ‘Ali Muttaqi’s rigid patriarchy was shared with most scholars and jurists, as members of an elite male class. In his conception, only a clear hierarchy of power could ensure social stability and religious sincerity. He quoted a hadith, saying that women in their homes are under the command of their husbands, but women who step out of the home are under the command of the tempter (shayṭān). This he juxtaposed with the statement that a man who has not submitted himself to the authority of a spiritual guide has submitted to the authority of shaytan. In equating these two statements, ‘Ali Muttaqi reinforced a hierarchical authority structure, setting up a continuity from patriarchal authority of men over women and children to spiritual authority of a Sufi master over his disciples. The master is like a husband or father for the men who submit to his religious authority, while the man is like a master for his wife, who submits to his social and legal authority. This pervasive hierarchy set up reciprocal relations of command and compliance, active assertion and passive obedience.

It may seem strange on the surface, then, that ‘Ali Muttaqi tried to move the social role of Sufi master out of this economy of power by equating him with a teacher. As noted earlier, a teacher’s authority was in continuum with students; their experience in a common field separated them, but they were not distinguished by an incommensurable gap of power like that which separated a master from disciples or a saint from followers. By insisting that the Sufi master act as a teacher of scriptural knowledge, ‘Ali Muttaqi had tried to curtail access to charismatic authority and dramatic displays of social power (whether through miracles or through leading social movements). He even insisted on the right of a disciple to evaluate the rectitude of
publicly acknowledged masters and thereby judge their sainthood as sincere or inauthentic.

Such a move may seem to disrupt the hierarchical power structure outlined above. However, ʿAli Muttaqi had not intended to empower disciples or liberate students. Rather, he meant to limit Sufi masters by curbing their ability to claim authority from a transcendent source. Just as he placed women under the social authority of men, and men under the religious authority of masters, he placed saints under the scriptural authority of the Prophet and thereby curtailed their will and ambition. He wanted to give disciples and saints a set of common standards that would set limits upon the behaviors of saints and bring them in line with his model, derived from the Prophet’s example.

ʿAli Muttaqi turned his attention from the domestic domain of marital duties and gender relations to the more public domains of the state and administration. He wrote his fourth treatise on soul training for soldiers and military men. His audience included mercenaries as well as the nobility of Gujarat, who were military commanders as well as courtiers. ʿAli Muttaqi praised them as embodying heroic qualities, upon whom the security of the people depended. However, ʿAli Muttaqi argued that martial and heroic characteristics like courage and self-sacrifice must take on a transcendent reference if they were to be virtues, and not merely the instrumental qualities of hired mercenaries. They must die to their own self-will before they risk their actual lives in fighting.39 ʿAli Muttaqi pictured soldiers as the most obvious social analogy to saints (in the long Islamic tradition of elevating military martyrs to the status of holy persons). They provided a natural illustration of his will to embrace death in order to achieve a transcendent goal.

As in his earlier treatises, ʿAli Muttaqi elevated daily routines to the status of religious rituals. For a soldier, the highest form of spiritual training was the apt performance of duty and constant practice in arms. Any appeal to devotional activities to escape the rigors of that military life was a sure sign of hypocrisy and vice. He instructed them to hide their spiritual aspirations: they should not wear distinctive clothes or markers of spiritual dedication. He advised against soldiers wearing the garb of devotional communities, as Catholic orders did in the Crusades and during Portuguese naval expansion. He avoided building a special Sufi ritual that would pervade the whole military, as in the Ottoman Empire where the Janissary corps took allegiance to the Bektāshi Order.

Sufi allegiance could have built cohesion among the soldiers of the Gujarati kingdom, who came from widely divergent ethnic groups (East Africans, Yemenis, Turks, and indigenous South Asians), just as it did among the slave
corps of the Ottoman polity. However, ʿAli Muttaqi chose to take a psychological approach focusing on the death of self-will. He emphasized how the limitation of self-will channeled the vocational courage of soldiers into self-transformation. Externally, this transformation would take the form of legal rectitude and scrupulous performance of professional duties.

ʿAli Muttaqi may have intended this spiritual advice and strategic thinking especially for the personal slave army of the sultan. ʿAli Muttaqi’s friend the minister Asaf Khan built up a corps of soldiers loyal only to Sultan Mahmud Shah III. These special corps were free from court partisanship and political ambitions.40 This project alone restored independence to the sultan after bitter civil war. ʿAli Muttaqi may have entrusted Asaf Khan with transmitting these teachings among this elite corps of the military.41 This leads us to his final treatise in this series on soul training.

ʿAli Muttaqi wrote the fifth treatise in this series to admonish the sultan to refine his spirituality by staying within the bounds of Islamic law and social justice. ʿAli Muttaqi was concerned to protect the sultan from his own military corps and also to protect him from his own royal ego. Society depended on a just sultan at the political level, exactly as it had to center on an authentic saint at a popular level. In a more dramatic way than with any other class, the spiritual ambition and ethical cultivation of rulers affected the salvation of society as a whole.

This is a treatise designed to give advice to rulers, to show them how to behave with a view to their spiritual fulfillment. Whoever puts this advice into practice, God may elevate him to the status of a true ruler in this world and the next. By the natural law of divine will, every land is ruled by a prince: subject under him are his ministers, their nobles, and then common people. If not for rulers and their hierarchy, common people would come to pieces and foreigners would conquer the land. Therefore, someone must guide the rulers to elevate and enlighten their conduct in wielding worldly power, benefiting them in the next world as well. If they do not accept wise guidance, then not only will they lose the benefit of the next world but even this world will come to naught in their grip.42

Returning to his common theme, he portrays the sincere and just performance of one’s duty as the surest means of spiritual fulfillment and the firmest guarantee of salvation.

ʿAli Muttaqi offered worldly kings the model of the first successors of the Prophet Muhammad (al-khulafāʾ al-rāshidūn) as their exemplars for combining worldly power with spiritual fulfillment. Rather than praise the successors
for being kings in a golden age that can never return, he asserted that any ruler can achieve their exalted status by administering justice within the limits and norms of the shariʿa. In this way, he tried to guide the ruler away from making radical claims to religious authority granted directly from God, as some Gujaratis feared from the Mahdawi movement if it would turn to politics. In addition, Shiʿi rulers in the Deccan claimed to administer justice on behalf of the occulted Imam by rejecting the first three successors. ʿAli Muttaqi, as a staunch Sunni, tried to block the ruler’s recourse to such transcendent claims.43

All people belong to one of four categories. There are those who have power in the other world but none in this world: they are the Muslims who suffer impoverishment [fuqarāʾ, an epithet for Sufis] yet have patience in their lack of material means. There are those who have authority in this world but none in the next world: they are rulers who travel the path of oppression and coercion with no sense of justice. There are those with no authority in this world and none in the next world: they are the poor who have no patience in their poverty and deny that their Lord cares for them. Lastly, there are those who have authority in this world and authority in the next: they are the four rightly guided successors to the Prophet, those kings who are just, and those who follow in their ways. To achieve such a lofty status, you must follow the advice in this treatise and put it into practice.44

ʿAli Muttaqi positively assessed the role of the sultan in wielding worldly power. Not only was the sultan’s personal power necessary for the good of society, but his manner of wielding power was also the key to his own spiritual success. This contrasted with other Sufis’ attitudes toward rulers in South Asia. Chishti Sufis usually refused to defer to worldly rulers, lambasting them as tyrants. Chishtis extolled the saints as the true rulers whose power was their poverty and whose grandeur was their modesty. They praised the paradigmatic saint Muʿin al-Din Chishti as the true “sultan of India” who cared for the needy, unlike supposed worldly kings.

Such idealization of a saint as “the true sultan” contains implicit condemnation of worldly rulers. Later Chishti Sufis struck a truce with rulers who were eager for legitimacy by accepting state patronage in exchange for veneration and patronage. Others charged that the only value of worldly power lay in renouncing it as a condition for personal salvation and as an ethical lesson for others. This was the approach of the Mahdawi movement, which grew out of the Chishti Order.45 All of these various responses to worldly power projected the saints as the real successors of the Prophet.
In contrast, ʿAli Muttaqi saw wielding worldly power as potentially good; it was the key to salvation of the society as a whole and for the sultan himself. The ruler must use his conduct in wielding power in this world for justice, in the hopes of earning merit in the next world as well as benefiting those he ruled. Therefore, ʿAli Muttaqi tried to rationally lay out the four foundations of political power, so that the ruler could control and deal justly with each.

The four foundations of worldly power are the treasury, the army, distribution of money to the army, and the administration of justice without oppression. Each foundation has different levels to it, with differing importance and priority. The army is more important than the treasury, since nobody can collect treasure or taxation without an army. Distributing money among the army is actually a more powerful force than the army itself, since a small army that is well maintained and well motivated can defeat a much larger army that argues among itself over scarce funds. Ruling justly and avoiding coercion is actually a stronger force than distributing money among the army. A large army that is well paid by money coerced from the people can be easily vanquished by a smaller army that is well paid by funds raised by just means [and therefore supported by the common people].

Such advice on capturing and maintaining political and financial power has been common in the genre of “mirror for princes” since classical times. Authors of this genre were mainly ministers, courtiers, or literati who urged rulers to maintain a firm grasp on power, administer it justly for the common people, and grant the author position as an invaluable advisor. ʿAli Muttaqi’s short treatise is different in that its author was a Sufi scholar. His intent was to urge the sultan to be just in exercising his absolute power and also to care for his own spiritual fulfillment through such just administration.

ʿAli Muttaqi did not order the ruler to show deference to Sufi saints, patronize the custodians of saint’s tombs, or revere holy madmen (who sometimes took the liberty of mocking rulers as “court fools”). He recommended that the ruler acquire virtues himself rather than seek the mediation of saintly figures. The only way the ruler could do this would be to voluntarily limit his absolute power by following the limitations of the shariʿa in waging war, collecting taxes, and running courtly ceremonies. This would be the best insurance of justice in the administration.

He had no illusions that the ruler could become a saint, in the affective sense of active spiritual authority (wilāya), contradicting the sketch of sixteenth-century South Asia recently drawn by Azfar Moin. That would be impossible without voluntary poverty, asceticism, and contemplative isolation that
would endanger the state and jeopardize the welfare of common Muslims. However, the ruler could gain some saintly virtues through cultivating sincerity and the apt performance of his worldly duties. This would be enough, for it would place the sultan’s worldly authority in harmony with the saints’ spiritual authority. The axial saint is the absent presence in ‘Ali Muttaqi’s treatise. He never explicitly mentions saints (awliyaʾ) in his advice to the ruler, though he mentions holy people (fuqaraʾ) as those who wield authority over the spiritual states of others through their reliance upon God alone.

Despite this apparent absence of the saint, ‘Ali Muttaqi saw social stability as the fruit of harmony between worldly and spiritual powers. The saint and the sultan should not be opposed as contradictory sources of power. The sultan should embody certain saintly virtues that were conducive to a just administration, enough to guide him in his worldly duties without distracting him or leading him to renunciation, abdication, or subjugation before other mediating saints. In parallel, the authentic saint must embody certain postures of worldly authority in the guise of a scholar, judge, and advisor to rulers. The saint must temper spiritual aspiration with social responsibility. The resonance between such a scholar-saint and a just ruler would ensure stability and prosperity for the society that they protected. The just ruler would present the outer form of power, while the authentic saint would provide the inner potency of this power.

‘Ali Muttaqi wrote this fifth treatise, “The Most Superior Station,” as guidance for Mahmud Shah III. He desired to keep the young sultan from the egoistic faults and self-aggrandizement that had pushed the previous sultan Bahadur Shah over the brink into disaster. However, ‘Ali Muttaqi was not content to advise the sultan of Gujarat from afar but returned to visit him and deliver his advice in person. A close friendship developed between them, which opened new possibilities for ‘Ali Muttaqi. He had found stability in Mecca, where he established a reformist method of Sufi training; now, he felt these skills and networks might nourish the spiritual and political regeneration of the sultanate of Gujarat. The next section addresses the spiritual dimension of this regeneration, as he endeavored to limit who could claim the social capital of being a saint in the Sufi tradition.

Discrimination: Sainthood under Analysis

In Mecca, ‘Ali Muttaqi had begun to articulate in writing the criteria by which an authentic saint could be recognized. This would set up a clear framework to valorize his own brand of saints and to critique other, competing demon-
strations of sainthood. Returning to Ahmedabad, ‘Ali Muttaqi’s program for reform led to a critical stance against competing saints, their Sufi followers, and the social movements that grew up around them. He took an assertive stance and offered a forceful critique of popular forms of Sufi devotion that he felt were inauthentic when compared with his reformist Sufism.

From his center in Mecca, ‘Ali Muttaqi embodied the principles of his reformist Sufism. As he prepared to return to Gujarat and project his authority there, he confronted the religious movements that grew out of Sufi orders and pushed certain ideals of sainthood to extremes. ‘Ali Muttaqi critiqued them in a vocal announcement of his own counter-legitimacy, with a theological argument based on his concept of inauthenticity (bid’a). At the same time, his critical opposition to these movements was also an attempt to give new stability to the Gujarati regime that was recovering sovereignty under the young sultan Mahmud Shah III.

‘Ali Muttaqi expounded the criteria for judging the authenticity of alleged saints. He wrote a short text, “The Clear Proof about Recognizing the Saint,” in hopes that people would use it to identify true saints from incomplete Sufis (or worse yet, false and inauthentic saints) by scrutinizing their inner character and outer comportment. This would be the first step in enabling others to become true saints themselves, if they would have the sincere aspiration and ability.

This is a small treatise on how to recognize the fully realized saint [wali], the one who is approaching that state [wāsil], and the one near to approaching it [mutaqarrrib]. All these are names that are very similar and almost synonymous but contain distinctions. The least benefit of this treatise is that a person who has not yet reached the stage of sainthood [wilaya] may read it and understand what that state contains, and thereby know who the saint really is. If one acquires that knowledge, then it is possible that, by the grace of God, one might attain that state of sanctity.49

‘Ali Muttaqi posited that there are many degrees of holiness before a person became fully realized as a saint. Common people may not understand these subtle distinctions, but a person armed with acute reason and scriptural knowledge could distinguish them. Such a person could recognize those dangerous figures who had acquired some semblance of sainthood but had not yet passed beyond the demands of their selfish natures.

The terms used to describe saints have deep resonance in poetry, song, and folklore, but ‘Ali Muttaqi tried to strip them of such popular metaphoric resonance to make them analytic terms as he defined the principal characteristics
of the authentic saint. In honing such analytic terminology, he followed the example of Zarruq; indeed, he quotes several of Zarruq’s principles of being a Sufi. In a short text called “The Greatest Hope in Soul Training and Arriving to God,” he describes how a person actually becomes a saint by overcoming selfishness:

You must all know the true meaning of the terms intimacy with God [qurb] and arriving to God [wiṣāl]. Intimacy with God and arriving to God means worshipping God and nothing but God, by obliterating all the obstacles that separate you from God. Only that is the desired meaning. Individual existences separate from God are so many and so varied, and each is an obstacle to intimacy and arriving to God. However, one can summarize these obstacles into four different classes: the obstacle of the world, the obstacle of people, the obstacle of the ego, and the obstacle of the tempter [shaytan]. Al-Ghazali clearly laid out the method of overcoming each of these obstacles in Minhāj al-ʿĀbidīn. One overcomes the obstacle of the world through asceticism. One overcomes the obstacle of other people through isolation and aloofness (tempered by its legal conditions), by refusing to turn to others with requests and demands except for the bare necessities. One overcomes the obstacle of the ego by grasping firmly the reins of strength and resolve. One overcomes the obstacle of the tempter by acknowledging the snares and devious possibilities of getting tricked. When a person’s heart begins to be purified through these methods, then it begins to empty of selfishness, fill with virtuous qualities, and radiate manifestations of divine qualities. The heart begins to shimmer brightly and become illumined as it enters the intimate presence of God. After this, a person will experience states and stages which have no end. The “death of self-will” eases and facilitates the cure of the heart, which means dying to the self before the self actually dies.

Such internal spiritual development has no outward manifestation except simple ethical benevolence and respect for the actions enjoined by the shariʿa. Any outward displays of seemingly “saintly” behavior is thus a cause for scrutiny and suspicion. Miracles or exercises of power, social or political, are at best a distraction for the true saint and at worst a cause of temptation and backsliding. "The goal is only for a person to remain in a state where nothing remains inside him except for God with no trace of otherness or alienation. It is no loss to such a steadfast person if no miracles or supernatural powers appear in his actions. You must know that such miracles and disclosures do not demonstrate one’s spiritual superiority. Rather, the only cause for superiority
is constant awareness of God [taqwa].” Drawing from the Qur’an 49:13, ‘Ali Muttaqi returned to the theme of taqwa continually in his writings. It was the singular principle of spiritual development and also the explanation for arrested development. Taqwa appeared in degrees in various persons, and those without complete fulfillment of taqwa were the locus for miracles and outward demonstrations of spiritual potency. Such an appearance of miracles was a temptation that could lead to false saints and social movements centered on them, resulting ultimately in personal aggrandizement and social discord.

Those traveling the path of spiritual development are in different stages of completeness, according to their level of taqwa. From the disciplines of knowledge [both religious knowledge and rational knowledge] we know that some who strive on the path are still far from their ultimate goal. This separation gives rise to their miraculous workings and wondrous disclosures of spiritual power. We know from the sayings of the great saints that such miracles are not necessary and essential for achieving sainthood. They say that “this world is the place of struggle, preparation and testing, while the next world is the place of reaping fruits of one’s labor and getting rewards for one’s deeds.” Just as the next world is not a place of struggle, so this world is not a place of reward, for rewards are guaranteed only in the next world. Reward for one’s sincere actions, by their very nature, do not need to appear in this world. [If rewards appear,] they show that the person through whom they manifest is lacking full preparation and does not have a full share [of sainthood]. . . . This means that ecstatic states of deep immersion [istighrāq] or actions that yearn toward self-obliteration [istihlāk] do not advance one upon the spiritual path toward sainthood. The sole cause for advancement is effort and struggle. The manifestation of such miraculous ecstasies actually impedes real spiritual work. In fact, such ecstasy should be an experience of the next world after death. If ecstasy does not appear in this life, then surely it will come in the next life [as a reward for sincerity] in complete perfection, free from any trace of trickery or temptation to deceit. People once asked a certain saint why they never saw him performing miracles or revealing supernormal spiritual states. He replied, “I want to meet God and receive my full reward [after death]; I don’t want to lessen my reward by requesting anything here and now!”

Since any outward and socially recognized mark of sainthood was a sign of incompleteness, ‘Ali Muttaqi emphasized the need for discrimination, suspicion,
and scrutiny. He urged his reader to trace others’ actions back to their principles to ascertain the authenticity of the actor. Although the importance of taqwa is common to all Sufi writings, as is elaborating on stages of the path of spiritual development, ʿAli Muttaqi used these motifs for an uncommon purpose. He aimed to limit those who might endeavor to become saintly. He coupled these motifs to lay the framework for a critique of alleged saints.

The urge to critique others’ claims to sainthood may seem, on the surface, to be unworthy of a true saint. ʿAli Muttaqi himself characterized true saints as those whose extensive generosity and forbearance allowed them to critique others by giving a gift or words of blessing. It was this very quality of benevolence that separated them, in inward experience and in manifest behavior, from all other types of people in society.

Society consists of four different categories of people. There are common people who are corrupt, common people who are righteous, special people [who experience an urge toward sainthood], and the most special of the special people [who achieve sainthood]. . . . You can recognize these four types of people by their virtues and ethical comportment manifest in their every action. . . . Imagine that someone spits on the face of another. If he forgives the one who spit on him with forbearance and patience, the man is clearly one of the special people. Yet if he takes delight in being spit upon and repays the one who spit on him even more kindly by giving him a gift or a blessing (if he has nothing to give), then clearly you know that he is of the most special people. With this example, you can extrapolate the criteria of judgment for yourself in any case.55

If such limitless patience in the face of personal injury and insult was the basic behavioral criterion for authentic sainthood, then how could ʿAli Muttaqi justify his own exacting critique of the behavior of other “alleged saints” who certainly never confronted him personally, let alone injured his person or his dignity? ʿAli Muttaqi, at least on the mute level of emotional reaction, distinguished between injury to his person and transgression against a principle. The latter was a matter of truth, not a matter of his person, reputation, or property. He considered his zealousness in safeguarding what he saw as truth (especially religious truth with scriptural foundations) as a clear sign of his sainthood, just as his potentially giving a gift to one who spat on him would be a clear sign.56

This urge to critique alleged saints is consonant with ʿAli Muttaqi’s reformist fusion of hadith studies and Sufi devotion. The discipline of hadith rested on the premise that scholars can distinguish true reports about the Prophet’s
words and deeds from those that are unreliable, weak, ambiguous, or outright forgeries. Scholars performed this act of critique not by referring to the content of the ostensible report but by examining its route of transmission (isnād): how it passed from one stage of narration to the next while keeping its authenticity intact. ‘Ali Muttaqi imported this critical method into the examination of saints and Sufis. He urged others to assess ostensible saints not by the content of their miracles, their social prestige, or the zealfulness of their followers but by their adherence to the fundamental principles of wariness, scrupulousness, and sincerity. Hadith scholars also performed operations of critique against people who claimed to transmit reports about the Prophet, called jarḥ wa taʿdīl, or tearing apart a reporter’s credentials or judging them sound. In Sufi literature, such operations are rare. Hagiographers included everyone they possibly could under the umbrella of sanctity, and saints themselves rarely spoke out in open criticism of each other. In contrast, ‘Ali Muttaqi denounced vociferously those whom he perceived as inauthentic saints and illegitimate religious leaders.

‘Ali Muttaqi’s reform within Sufism addressed what form of training could lead disciples to potentially achieve sainthood and what legitimate forms a saint’s social role could take. He further asserted how the saint’s presence should filter out beyond his person into the various classes of society, transforming the apt performance of duty into spiritual fulfillment. At its most risky apex, his reform measures challenged the political life of the court and the very military-financial foundations of the sultanate of Gujarat. Yet this whole series of reforms rested upon the limitation of who could claim sainthood, leading ‘Ali Muttaqi to critique many of his fellow Sufis who claimed the title of saint through channels other than the reformed training that he advocated. ‘Ali Muttaqi built his acerbic critique of these rivals from the technical vocabulary of legitimacy and authenticity, but its ultimate contest was over love: the saint’s singular love of God and its concomitant expression in love of neighbors and strangers. ‘Ali Muttaqi believed his critique to be an expression of his love and care for his fellow Muslims, whose spiritual destiny and social welfare only his brand of reformed Sufi practice could protect. He authored a short work, “Warning to Lovers on the Signs of Sincere Passion,” in which he tries to debunk the claims of would-be saints to love God out of his own love of the wider Muslim community and his safeguarding of their spiritual well-being.

I have written this treatise because those who falsely claim to be lovers of God and the Prophet have clearly grown numerous in this age. Yet one
finds none of the signs of sincere passion and true love in them. They spend their whole lives in false claims and ignorance. Very few people raise an alarm or complaint so that the people might realize that they are not really lovers of God. Many common and unlearned people place great faith in these false lovers, while those with true insightful knowledge have not confronted them with a straight answer. . . . Therefore, their pride and self-deception grows more intense day by day. If a person has pursued the love of God and the Prophet to its fullest state and has proficient knowledge of the signs and conditions of divine love, he must speak publicly to them with advice, for their own well-being. Still they do not accept such advice. They say, this one who complains about us is not a lover, but we are from the band of lovers! . . . I write these few lines so that you may distinguish sincere love from that which is feigned or self-deceiving.\textsuperscript{57}

While his words of critique may sound bitter, ʿAli Muttaqi insisted that they came from the sweet longing of sincere love of God, the Prophet, and the community of Muslims. When harnessed to his reformist sense of caution, scrutiny, and care, the expressions of love (so vivid in devotional poetry, music, and contemplation) revert to a form at once diminished in size and charged in intensity. They take the form of guarding the rights of God over those who claim divine love and evaluating the criteria of those who claim affective spiritual authority in society.

ʿAli Muttaqi aimed to prevent the dilution of the social power of sainthood, in the same way that counterfeit coins of impure metal dilute the overall value of a country’s currency, even if some individual coins remain pure. “Un-minted silver will never fit in anyone’s purse. You should be that silver which is minted into pure coin so that the money changer can weigh you and deem you valuable.”\textsuperscript{58} His program for reform shows how widely ʿAli Muttaqi perceived the currency of sainthood to circulate in society, far beyond the bounds of Sufi rituals and explicitly religious affairs. He thought of himself as the ultimate money changer of Sufism, who checked the purity of coinage as it circulated through the markets, certifying what was pure and discrediting what was counterfeit or adulterated.

The next chapter documents in detail ʿAli Muttaqi’s vociferous critique of saintly leaders of popular movements in Gujarat, especially those of the Shattari Order and the Mahdawi movement. His actual confrontations with these leaders were guided by his theoretical conception of sainthood and his reform program for Sufism. In his mind, his critique of other Muslim leaders was eminently justified, for it demonstrated the true mettle of his own
authenticity. Without it and the benefit it might accrue to common Muslims, his sense of being a saint would be a purely subjective state, affecting no one and accountable to nobody. In this way, he set himself up to guide the spiritual regeneration of Muslim rule in Gujarat. Yet his reform program also had political aims, which the next section addresses.

Engagement: Social Reform between Saint and Sultan

ʿAliMuttaqi conceived of himself as an authentic scholar-saint, in a position of social power and ethical sincerity confirmed by his leadership position in a reformist Sufi community. In a patriarchal metaphor and in accord with his treatises, he thought of himself as a “real man.” He illustrated his experiment in governing as a saint to be like a marriage with two wives. His first wedding was to the next world (ākhira), as a saint concerned with virtue. Now, he was getting engaged to a second wife, this world (dunyā) of political power and social competition. He argued that a scholar-saint should be able to hold two wives in equilibrium. He thought that he could act as a channel to bring the divine order of the next world into the political order of this world and to infuse his Gujarati society with the virtue he embodied.

Historical chronicles detail the important role ʿAli Muttaqi played in Gujarat’s political life by supporting Sultan Mahmud Shah III after he was called to the throne in 1538. The new sultan was a boy overshadowed by nobles who clashed in political jockeying unleashed by the assassination of Bahadur Shah, who had no sons when the Portuguese murdered him at sea. As a minor princeling confined by the Faruqi ruler of Khandesh, Mahmud Shah III was extracted by force by Gujarati nobles from Burhanpur who promoted his ascension, since they believed he was a malleable cub. Soon they fought among themselves over who would act as regent. Before him, several claimants to the throne had been installed, but they had all been quickly deposed or killed. One was an exiled Mughal prince who declared he had been adopted by Bahadur Shah’s mother and thus had legitimate claim to the throne of Gujarat; he staged an unsuccessful palace coup in Ahmedabad yet escaped with the treasury while threatening to rouse a Mughal army to take Gujarat by force. Another was a nephew of Bahadur Shah who ruled as sultan of Khandesh; he took the throne of Gujarat but was poisoned after only six weeks as ruler. In the midst of such machinations—fueled by both internal feuds and external threats—the young sultan’s fate did not seem promising.

Although he was just a boy, Mahmud Shah III played the nobles’ ambitions against each other. He prompted one after the other to seize the regency
from his current dominator, weakening one only to fall under the control of another. To end his confinement, he escaped the capital by trickery and appealed to provincial nobles to help him take power for real. With their help, he conquered Ahmedabad, defeating rival forces and executing those nobles who had confined him. He raised his own servants who had been loyal during his weakness to positions of nobility.

Through this bloody path, Mahmud Shah III gained independence by 1540 when he was around thirteen years old. Yet his mind was completely gnawed by suspicion against Gujarati nobles, so he ordered a new city to be built thirty-six kilometers distant from Ahmedabad, called Mahmudabad (Maḥmūdābād). There he centralized his rule, surrounded only by loyalists, safe from palace intrigue and vested interests of the nobles. Until Mahmudabad could be completed, Mahmud Shah III was in a tenuous position, not knowing whom to trust. For instance, he allowed a minister who had exploited him, ʿImād al-Mulk, to govern Surat but still suspected him of conspiring with other nobles to depose him. Mahmud Shah III ostensibly encouraged ʿImad al-Mulk to go on the Hajj, but as the minister arrived at the port of Surat to catch the boat, he was executed. Even after his rule stabilized, the young sultan remained psychologically scarred: he ordered that, if any women in his harem should become pregnant, she should drink medicine to ensure an abortion so that no son would be born to rebel against him.

ʿAli Muttaqi stayed in Mecca during these years of instability, consolidating his own authority and gaining confidence in his ideals of reform. When Mahmud Shah III emerged as an independent ruler, ʿAli Muttaqi returned to Ahmedabad between 1539 and 1541. He gained the confidence of the new sultan, as the story at the opening of this chapter illustrates, by cleansing the sultan of misgivings by teaching him how to wash his face and hands for prayer. As the secular chronicler Ulughkhani wrote,

ʿAli Muttaqi came to Gujarat from Mecca to visit Mahmud Shah III and paid special attention to his psychological needs and fulfilled all his necessities. Once he was present with the sultan during prayer times, and he observed the sultan during his ablution. The young sultan was taking so much time washing that he used a huge amount of water, which would have sufficed others for a full bath with some left over! ʿAli Muttaqi knew what his weakness was but kept silent for a time. Then the shaykh asked the sultan directly about his doubts and misgivings, and the young ruler confided in him and complained of his many anxieties and fears. ʿAli Muttaqi said, “Inshallah, all these will pass away.” The
shaykh stayed with him until the next prayer time came. When the sultan went to make ablution again, ‘Ali Muttaqi took from his hand the pitcher and poured the water for him, showing him how to make ablution according to the Prophet’s practice. The sultan accepted his direction with politeness even though it was very difficult for him to carry out his ablutions with only a minimum of water; still, he forced himself to have patience at the hand of the shaykh and obeyed his advice. . . . ‘Ali Muttaqi would stay with the sultan before his prayers and would pour water for him and help him keep his ablutions within the Prophet’s pattern for a number of days. The shaykh’s blessings were thereby concentrated upon the sultan, and his condition improved under the influence of the shaykh’s powerful determination. Soon the young sultan was taking a full bath with the amount of water that would have barely sufficed him before for washing his face and hands.⁶⁷

This incident marked ‘Ali Muttaqi’s rehabilitation in Gujarat and his entrance into a position of actual power rather than symbolic power. Yet its details are unfathomable unless it is placed in this history of Mahmud Shah III’s youthful and bloody political struggles.⁶⁸

Wasting water stood metaphorically for the blood that the sultan had spilled in coming to power. Whether the issue was guilt over killing many of his kingdom’s nobles or the continuing anxiety that, faced with further machinations, he would have to shed more blood, the young sultan was disturbed by his own rise to power. By inviting the sultan to wash with minimal water, ‘Ali Muttaqi indirectly raised the issue of his own authority in a bid to have Mahmud Shah III accept him as patron and protector.

Sultan Mahmud Shah III fought to subdue his impulse toward independence that he had won only through such terrible civil strife; he experienced great difficulty in placing trust in an elder authority. He could not easily transfer allegiance to an authority, after having struggled so hard against regent after manipulative regent. Yet in the end, subjugating himself to a saintly authority augmented his political potency rather than diminished it. Allowing ‘Ali Muttaqi to pour water for his ablutions encapsulated this entire process. From ‘Ali Muttaqi’s perspective, this act was also highly charged with spiritual power.⁶⁹

By encouraging the sultan to change his method of washing from one that reinforced his own fears to one that expressed devotion to the Prophet, ‘Ali Muttaqi freed him from personal limitations so he could grow into a strong ruler. He hoped that Mahmud Shah III’s rule would embody the norms of Islamic custom and law and establish social justice.
As this historical narrative suggests, a relationship of intimacy and confidence grew between the saint and the sultan. It is not clear if Mahmud Shah III became a formal disciple of ʿAli Muttaqi, though historical chronicles imply this. He did defer to ʿAli Muttaqi, refusing to wear rich clothes of state that the shaykh thought were forbidden by the Prophet’s example and bearing the shaykh’s palanquin upon his own shoulder. In turn, ʿAli Muttaqi accepted favors and money from the new sultan, whereas he never accepted money or even praise from others. He clearly saw his relationship to Mahmud Shah III as extraordinary, meriting a relaxation of his previous abstention. There were critical political and social reasons for ʿAli Muttaqi to go so far out of his way to offer psychological support to the young Mahmud Shah III.

ʿAli Muttaqi perceived the need to have a strong ruler in Gujarat, to keep order both on land and in the sea-lanes connecting South Asia to Arabia. After this initial visit to Ahmedabad and his positive reception, ʿAli Muttaqi returned to Arabia. From his position in Mecca, he guided the young sultan to appoint a new governor of Surat to replace the noble whom he had murdered after ordering him to take the pilgrimage. Mahmud Shah III appointed Khudawand Khan (also known as Ṣūfī Āghā Turk), who was known for his opposition to the Portuguese and knowledge of naval warfare. Khudawand Khan built a fortress at Surat to protect the port, despite assault by the Portuguese, who, having failed to stop his fortifications, proffered him bribes to turn it over to them, bribes that were ineffective.

In 1538, during the first year of Mahmud Shah III’s reign, the Ottoman sultan Sulayman the Magnificent sent a fleet to Aden in Yemen; the Portuguese had attempted to seize that port in raids from their South Asian strongholds, and the Ottoman forces needed it to defend their trade through the Red Sea and their claim of legitimacy as protectors of Mecca and Medina. From Aden, the Ottoman fleet sailed to Gujarat under the command of Sulaymān Pāshā to expel the Portuguese from Diu. Sultan Mahmud Shah III delegated Khudawand Khan to cooperate with the Ottoman forces with personnel and supplies. However, the two naval commanders quarreled, and without strong central leadership from the Gujarati government, the siege against Diu broke down. The opportunity to curtail Portuguese interference in the Arabian sea-lanes was bungled at a turning point in world history. ʿAli Muttaqi could not have foreseen that Portuguese incursions would initiate European domination and usher in the modern era; however, he clearly saw their effects in endangering trade, pilgrimage, and scholarly patronage that had kept the connection between Mecca and Gujarat so lively.
ʿAli Muttaqi played a crucial role in this Arabian Sea connection that was so important for legitimacy and prosperity for the sultanate of Gujarat. He promoted pilgrimage to Mecca, offering free hospitality to Muslims from Gujarat who came to Mecca for the Hajj or for extended study of hadith and Sufism. When he returned to Mecca, ʿAli Muttaqi accepted large donations from Sultan Mahmud Shah III to distribute to worthy students and travelers. This started a tradition: the sultan sent a sum of money each year in a ship, so that ʿAli Muttaqi could distribute it to those he deemed worthy of support.74 In addition, Sultan Mahmud Shah III granted funds to build a new compound for ʿAli Muttaqi and his followers in Mecca. The compound had a wide courtyard and many rooms for those who came to stay with him and study hadith, thus integrating the functions of madrasa and khanqah.75 Through these acts of generosity and patronage, ʿAli Muttaqi gained renown in Mecca, which spread to the Sulayman the Magnificent, who assigned ʿAli Muttaqi a yearly stipend from Istanbul. He refused to accept it for himself, agreeing only to distribute money to worthy students and scholars who were not involved with Sufi training.76

In their relationship of mutual trust and cooperation, both ʿAli Muttaqi and Sultan Mahmud Shah III benefited. The young sultan was not slow to translate his newly discovered sense of purpose and confidence into political gains. He gathered around himself a new cabinet of loyal nobles and refurbished the navy after the ignoble failure of Ottoman-Gujarati forces. By 1546, Sultan Mahmud Shah III organized a new offensive against the Portuguese.77 Two years later, he recalled the minister Asaf Khan from exile in Mecca (where he had fled with the treasury and royal harem at the defeat of Bahadur Shah). He reappointed Asaf Khan as prime minister, and the minister organized a personal army, loyal only to the sultan and not any Gujarati nobility; this secured Maḥmūd Shah III’s position once and for all.78 Asaf Khan’s return to Gujarat strengthened ʿAli Muttaqi’s connections to the new court at Ahmedabad, for while exiled in Mecca, he had become very close to the shaykh. Asaf Khan had patronized scholars and Sufis in the holy cities besides acting as ambassador for the sultans of Gujarat.

As ʿAli Muttaqi witnessed Asaf Khan return to Ahmedabad with treasury and royal family, a utopian idea dawned upon him: ʿAli Muttaqi aspired to implement reform directly through the court. He returned to Ahmedabad for a second time in the same year that Asaf Khan arrived. His intention was to place the sultan’s rule on righteous foundations by implementing shariʿa in the court. He imagined that a righteous ruler would be a strong ruler, in
contradistinction to the Mughals, whom he saw as illegitimate marauders with the backing of adventurous but inauthentic Sufi leaders, as we will document in the next chapter.

Upon arriving, ʿAli Muttaqi requested Sultan Mahmud Shah III to appoint him as “enforcer of the Shariʿa” (ḥākim al-sharʿ), who would review court rituals and procedures to eliminate any practices that he found contrary to legal norms and religious custom. The sultan assented and set up ʿAli Muttaqi with a staff of his followers in the court house (mahkama). Other hadith scholars had dreamed of this position, but ʿAli Muttaqi actualized it with both scriptural knowledge and Sufi authority. From this position of power, he intervened in courtly and religious life in Gujarat and encountered deep conflicts that would push him, once again, off the shores of South Asia.