‘Ali Muttaqi’s Memory

Approach the august throne!” The mace-bearer’s voice echoed through the pillared vaults of the divan-e khas, the emperor’s hall of private audience. Before stepping forward, the shaykh bowed low three times, touching the earth with his right hand and raising its dust over his head. Keeping his gaze on the carpeted floor, he walked slowly forward past rows of courtiers standing at attention, arms crossed, until he saw the steps before him that led up to the throne. He raised his eyes only until he could see the emperor’s gold-embroidered slippers. Then he smiled and said calmly, “Peace be with you, oh Light of the Faith and Justice of the World.”

Emperor Jahangir looked down from his high seat while the shaykh waited patiently for a reply, eyes still lowered. Finally, the mace-bearer standing beside the throne broke the deafening silence. “Surely you know the proper adab to approach the throne?” The shaykh answered, “Yes, I have heard that courtiers prostrate. Forgive me, but I am not of the court. Rather, I pay respect to our majestic emperor as the noble companions greeted our holy Prophet.” The emperor laughed quietly, “So you would compare me to the Prophet himself?” The shaykh replied, “Your majesty, there is no greater honor for me than to greet you as our Prophet taught us, since you strive to do justice just as the Prophet modeled for us.” The emperor pronounced loudly, “He is exempted from prostrating to the throne because he does not come asking for worldly favors.” Jahangir lowered his voice and said quietly, “Then, peace be upon you. You are unusually bold for a scholar.” The shaykh took a step forward to reply, “My masters have taught me that one who has already died to himself has nothing to fear from others.”

From beyond a curtain that hung behind the emperor’s throne, a voice
called out, interrupting him. “Must he not present a gift to the emperor, or is he allowed to be stingy?” asked the queen. Jahangir turned his head slightly, acknowledging the presence of Nurjahan behind him. He spoke loudly to the court, “Yes, of course he must present a gift! Wasn’t it also the custom of our Prophet to never visit a house empty-handed?” The shaykh said, “I have heard that his majesty is fond of beautiful things.” Jahangir raised an eyebrow. “What could you give me that I don’t already possess?”

The shaykh drew out from his robe a small book, bound in leather, saying, “My humble offering to your majesty.” Jahangir motioned for the mace-bearer to bring the book to him. The emperor flipped through the pages and mused, “Only words and no pictures?” The shaykh said, “Your majesty’s love for artwork and illuminated books is world-famous, yet this book contains something more valuable. Its words portray the saints: it does not picture their forms, but it evokes their personas and their teachings. They blessed the rule of your ancestors, and now, by their support, your majesty adorns the throne. I entitled it Akhbar al-Akhyar or ’Reports of the Pious.’”

Queen Nurjahan’s voice emerged again from behind the curtain. “This Sufi says that he has documented the lives of saints! Ask him whose saints are in his book? Did he begin with the righteous Imams, or did he exclude them?” Jahangir shut the book with one hand and smiled threateningly. “Answer our queen! Are the twelve Imams counted in your book or not?” The shaykh replied, “My book begins with ‘Abd al-Qadir Jilani, the master of spiritual masters . . .” The queen retorted, “You see, this Sufi is partisan against our Imams, the rightly guided descendants of the Prophet!” The shaykh continued unflustered, “. . . but Shaykh ‘Abd al-Qadir was a Sayyid, descended on his father’s side from honorable Hasan, whom some call the second Imam, and descended on his mother’s side from noble Husain, whom some call the third Imam. So he is a descendant of the Prophet, through the Imams. He met Mu’in al-Din Chishti in Baghdad and encouraged him in his career that led him to settle in Ajmer, blessing the lands that your majesty now rules. My book preserves their lofty sayings, pious deeds, and ardent love for God through only the most reliable reports, sifted and sorted to present the truth of their teachings. Please accept this modest gift from your humble servant! Now, I beg that you dismiss me and allow me to return to my khanqah, where I pray daily that the emperor live long to enforce justice in our land.”

The shaykh bowed again, waiting to be dismissed. He felt the emperor hesitate, as he heard whispering from beyond the curtain that hung behind the throne. Then Jahangir spoke. “Your visit pleases us, as does your gift. So,
accept from me a gift in return—the annual tax revenue from a village not far from Delhi, which will be assigned to your name in perpetuity.” The shaykh replied, “Your excellency is kind, but it is not the custom of this impoverished one to accept money from anyone, no matter how good their intentions. God has told us, *Take provision on your journey but know that the best provision is sincere piety*. I humbly entreat your highness to forgo this kindness and allow me to leave empty-handed.”

In his royal memoir, the emperor Jahangir records how this meeting occurred at the Mughal court: “Shaykh ʿAbd al-Haqq Dihlawi is one of the virtuous people and is among the masters of salvation. Arriving at court, he had the opportunity to serve me. He presented me a book of his, consisting of the lives of Sufi masters of India, for which he took great pains.”¹ The shaykh came to court to present the emperor with a copy of his masterpiece, *Akhbār al-Akhyār fī Asrār al-Abrār*, or “Reports of the Pious and Secrets of the Devout.” It is a memorial (*tadhkira*) that collects and retells the biographies of leading Sufis who were active in South Asia. The book begins with ʿAbd al-Qadir Jilani, who, though he never came to South Asia, blessed and encouraged Muʿin al-Din Chishti, who brought Sufism to that region, and includes biographies of ʿAbd al-Haqq’s own mentors, ʿAli Muttaqi and ʿAbd al-Wahhab Muttaqi. At the end of the collection, ʿAbd al-Haqq appended his own concise biography for posterity.

The emperor did not record what he thought of his gift, but ʿAbd al-Haqq’s persona impressed him. Jahangir continued in his record, “For a long time, he has lived in isolation in Delhi, in a condition of poverty and complete trust in God. His company was not without liveliness. After presenting him with some kindness, I bid him farewell.”² The kindness that Jahangir showed him was an offer of a land-grant (*jāgīr*) that would provide revenue from a village to the southwest of Delhi. The shaykh demurred, but the emperor insisted and forced him to accept it before giving him permission to leave.³

This ominous “kindness” highlights how dangerous it was to go to court. Presenting gifts to the emperor might allow a Sufi reformer access to the most powerful men with tremendous potential for benefit, but it also involved one in intrigues, jealousies, and competitions that could lead to great harm. Meeting Jahangir face to face—and meeting his queen from behind a curtain—exposed ʿAbd al-Haqq to grave threats. This satchel is filled with danger caused by rivalry with his fellow Naqshbandi and famous Sufi reformer Ahmad Sirhindi, who was suspected by Mughal rulers of challenging their
sovereignty. His theological sparring with Sirhindi, preserved in a remarkable private letter, threatened ʿAbd al-Haqq later in life with banishment or imprisonment. As we unpack this satchel, we reach the conclusion of this book, and readers, with all the provisions they need on deck, can set sail.

Justice: Enlightening Advice for Emperors

In the previous chapter, we observed how ʿAbd al-Haqq carefully cultivated certain highly placed nobles in the Mughal court. One of these nobles, Shaykh Farid, was especially instrumental in helping Jahangir to ascend the throne when Akbar died in 1605. As the new emperor’s trusted companion, Shaykh Farid was perfectly positioned to convey ʿAli Muttaqi’s reformist ideals to Jahangir. When the noble agreed to act as a conduit, ʿAbd al-Haqq wrote a short letter to the new emperor. In it, he expanded upon how a just ruler should behave under the guidance of shariʿa. He carefully counseled Jahangir to reverse Akbar’s policies and worldview. He had to be clever and careful in addressing the emperor. When Jahangir was a prince rebelling against his father, he had promised support to Naqshbandi Sufis and Islamic scholars; yet when he mounted the throne, Jahangir showed no real interest in the shariʿa. Yet new rulers need legitimacy, and the approval of Sunni scholars was a traditional key to winning popular acclaim.

ʿAbd al-Haqq hoped that the advent of a new emperor would give him the opportunity to put ʿAli Muttaqi’s memory into a practical program. He composed for Jahangir a book of political advice based on hadith reports and Qur’anic verses, in the well-established genre of “mirror for princes” literature. This short book fully expressed ʿAbd al-Haqq’s approach to reform, so this study translates its introduction and opening chapter.4

It is proper respect [adab] that when one enters the presence of kings and the court of sultans, one’s tongue must first announce their praise and salutation. One must salute them with adulation and compliments due to the pomp and might of their station. Only after offering this can one stand ready to serve and obey them, fastening the hands of respect before the waist of servitude and devoted submission. Only then can one offer a present that is suitable to the grandeur of the royal court.

As for the exalted presence in which I now stand, any praise or salutation is too small, and recounting its glory is not possible at all. What words of praise could anyone offer to that person whom the mighty creator elevated to be emperor of the world and made ruler of all humanity?
What station is loftier than that of an emperor? What words are suitable to praise his virtue and glorify his position, oh Lord? If I praise his quality of justice [ʿadl] and righteousness [dīndārī] by saying “righteous and just emperor,” then one short phrase includes all good qualities, every kind of praise, and each cause of salvation in this world and the hereafter. It is just like a hadith that recounts the words of the Prophet—may peace and blessings be upon him—who said, “A moment of justice surpasses seventy years of worship.” For me, sitting for one moment in the presence of an emperor who is just and rules with equity and compassion is better than offering supererogatory worship for seventy years. What could be of loftier virtue or higher station than to be called “the shadow of God on earth” or “the successor to the Prophet”?5

ʿAbd al-Haqq first praises the new emperor, Jahangir, as the ruler chosen by God. He then quotes common titles of praise for the Islamic ruler in Sunni discourse. Mughal rulers inherited this discourse from many centuries of Islamic rule in South Asia, from the inception of the Delhi sultanate in the twelfth century. Previous Sultans had, at least in theory, claimed to rule as delegates of the Sunni khalifa in Baghdad, even after he ceased to be an active force.

The Mughals dispensed with such niceties when Akbar arrogated the title khalifa to himself without being appointed by any higher Sunni authority. He did not recognize the Ottoman ruler who claimed the same title; rather, he increasingly fashioned his own imperial authority through universal and multireligious symbols unbounded by Sunni standards. ʿAbd al-Haqq tried to persuade the new Mughal emperor to reverse course.

Because a just emperor is the real vice-regent to the Prophet Muhammad, he must act as the Prophet acted. The meaning of “vice-regent” is just this. The wisdom behind God’s establishing emperors and empowering rulers is that they enforce the shariʿa of the Prophets—may God grant peace and blessings upon them all. Prophets are sent by the Lord to give news of the eternal unseen world and establish religious order. Rulers enable this by applying coercive force [zōr-e bāzū] and establishing just law [qānūn-e ʿadālat]. All members of the community take part in this to assist the rulers in spreading religion. The scholars spread knowledge and expound the shariʿa. The Sufis establish rituals of worship and devotion. The soldiers carry out raids and wars. Other craftspeople and experts in professions—like farming, weaving, building, and trading—help make religion firm by pursuing their expertise through which the world remains and existence stays productive.
Above them all, the emperor commands and dominates. He establishes justice and equity, ensuring that everything in this great chain of being works in harmonious order. In this way, the emperor’s existence is related to the components of the world and members of humanity just like the soul is related to the body. It is said that the mover of the body and that which keeps its components in harmony is the soul. The body is sound only as long as the soul is sound as its foundation. The body gets corrupted if the soul is absent.  

As ‘Abd al-Haqq argued that each class and every profession contributed to building an Islamic society, he echoed ‘Ali Muttaqi’s series of five epistles on “soul training” for each class. Each had its own adab, or way of respectful behavior, and its own suluk, or devotional path of spiritual training. However, in writing for the emperor, ‘Abd al-Haqq emphasized that the ruler was the key to the health of the whole. 

At this point in his introduction, ‘Abd al-Haqq ventured into delicate territory. Akbar had just died, and Jahangir, his mature son of thirty-eight years, took over after bouts of rebellion, intense family rivalry, and fragile reconciliation. Yet the Sufi scholar boldly asserted that every thoughtful person must imagine a time when the reigning emperor dies—a calamity, for sure, but also an opportunity.

May God be praised that, at the very foundation and initiation of this great reign and mighty rule, the lights of the dawn of salvation and guidance are shining clearly, marking the traces of the principles and laws of justice and security both inner and outer. Rational men must think and for a moment ponder about how long the emperor will reign and what disorder will come when he leaves the world. Considering this, all the people of this country, from east to west, tremble in fear and slip into the whirlpool of perplexity, imagining that it is like the calamitous day of judgment. By the perfection of divine power and by the dominion of royal authority, not an atom moves out of its proper place, no person deviates from the circle of just action, and the entire world remains firmly established upon the fulcrum of security and stability.

This is strong proof and clear evidence that the overwhelming power and dynastic might of the emperor is a divine bestowal, from beyond the boundaries of worldly cause and effect, from outside the routine means of acquisition. To present a gift that is deserving of his royalty and suitable for the emperor’s fortune-granting sight is really not possible—not even imaginable! Whatever one might present would be merely like a
drop of water to the ocean or like a speck of dust to the sun. Only the scholars and Sufis can present a worthy gift as they offer prayers and petitions at the court for the preservation of his rule. They can relate to those at court the speech of God, reports of God’s Prophet, sayings of the great religious leaders, and the character of just rulers of the past. These treasures of the hereafter and fortunes of salvation are gifted to those admitted to the exalted assembly of the court.

With this introduction, this humble servant presents himself with his head prostrate in the dust. For a long time, I have been away from the company of the people of this realm. I traversed the wild expanses, laying my head to rest in the wasteland of exile until I came to the holy land of the House of God, that residence of spirits and focal point of divine manifestation in the world—namely, to Mecca, may God increase its greatness and nobility. Then, with an indication from the unseen world, I returned to my homeland, to this plot of purity, Delhi, which is the home of the servants of this path and the residence of those close to the royal court. I have spent my life sitting in isolation with my sight fixed upon God, petitioning for the wellness and wise rule of your exalted dynasty and your noble family, while staying engrossed in praying for the Muslims at large. I present some words from hadith attributed to the Prophet, may God bless him and grant him peace, and reports from his noble companions and followers, along with stories preserved from the great rulers of the past, all of which convey the means to good and righteousness in this world and the hereafter. I translate them [into Persian] and relate them as a way to give thanks to God for divine blessings and wish well to this dynasty, as do all the Muslims.

With this humble introduction, ʿAbd al-Haqq delves to the heart of the matter. He praises the new emperor and offers his book of ethical advice as a gift. The title of the book echoes the new regnal title of the emperor: “Epistle for an Enlightened Ruler.”

The light in the “Enlightened Ruler” is not from sun, fire, or reason, all sources that Akbar had drawn from to elevate himself as a divinely guided king. Rather, ʿAbd al-Haqq asserts that the light is from the Prophet Muhammad’s example as expounded by Sunni scholars. He avers that he would never offer the emperor advice except that some nobles indicated that he desired guidance from the corpus of hadith reports; he implies the mediation of Shaykh Farid but does not spell out his name.
I present this book as a gift to the court of the emperor, the refuge of religion, the greatest sultan, the noblest ruler, wearer of the crown of perfection and light, occupant of the exalted throne of suzerainty and might, generous as the sea, courageous as the sky, enjoyer of fortunate reign, spreader of justice, nurturer of the people, conqueror of the world, dawning-place of the gracious lights of divinity, setting-place of the noble glow of the shadow of God on earth, the protector of the religion from Mecca, Nūr al-Dīn Muḥammad Jahāngīr, the Mughal emperor and pious warrior—may God make his reign last forever in divine contentment and guide his boat through the seas of justice and equity.

Because it is a gift to the emperor whose name means World-Ruler and Light of the Faith, I entitle this book “Epistle for an Enlightened Ruler” [Risāla-ye Nūriyya-ye Sulṭāniyya]. It was indicated to this humble servant that the emperor of Islam intimated to one of his friends at court that hadith reports from the Prophet addressing just rule should be written down along with their sources and chains of narration. After diligent search and persistent inquiry, I composed this book in which I recorded hadith reports and sent it as a gift to the court. I make this bold gesture only because of an indication from the unseen and to obey the divine that is worthy of worship. For this reason alone, Sufis approach the door of the exalted royal court: namely, to pronounce advice for you and pray for your welfare. Otherwise, how could one like me stand the majesty of this place and the awesomeness of this court? My prime purpose and essential duty is to pray: “Oh God majestic and exalted, keep all the people—especially the community of Islam—in the shade of his great reign and magnificent rule, safe and secure in the shadow of his protective aid, with welfare and peace of mind preserved from all afflictions and sins, for the sake of the Prophet and his pure family and great followers.” Now, I begin the intended book.

I start with the name of God, who is the creator of the world and all that is in it. I bear witness that Muhammad is God’s prophet and messenger. God is the possessor of dominion, who has made justice to be the essence of generosity and the beauty of existentiality. God made justice to be the element that ensures the continuation of this world and its spiritual existence and to be the cause of the harmonious order in the production house of the cosmos. God granted the salvation of doing justice to good sultans and noble emperors, especially to the rulers of India who manifest the rulings of Islam, spreading the light of faith and
dispelling the darkness of infidelity, making the world more enlightened and pure, for those are the ones who rule with truth and justice.⁸

After the personal introduction, ʿAbd al-Haqq begins his discourse in earnest. A just ruler is part of the salvific plan of the cosmos; he joins this world to the hereafter, manifesting divine qualities of power, harmony, and order in this ephemeral and chaotic world.

In ʿAbd al-Haqq’s exposition, the bifurcation between two realms—the seen and the unseen—is bridged by both prophets and just rulers who follow them. He expands on his classification of people into four classes, which he had sent to Shaykh Farid in letters. He gives more details about the most blessed of these four classes, those who rule in the world with justice, which earns them the hereafter.

God, the creator of the cosmos and the fashioner of humanity, has made two realms: this world, which is ephemeral and phenomenal, and the hereafter, which is eternal and spiritual. For each realm, God made a perfection and happiness that is suitable to it, and to humanity God granted authority [ṣulṭanat] and dominion [dawlat]. To some people, God grants authority and dominion in both this world and the hereafter. To others, God withholds authority and dominion in both this world and the hereafter. And to others, God grants authority and dominion in only one but not the other—either in this world or the hereafter. The authority to grant or withhold is God’s, for God does whatever God wills [Qurʾan 14:27] and God gives to whomever God wills [Qurʾan 3:26].

So according to this division, there are four kinds of people. Those who have power and dominion in this world and the hereafter are the just emperors. In this world, they have pomp and power, ability and command, while in the hereafter they earn eternal reward through their justice, mercy, care for their subjects, obedience to divine commands, kindness, and compassion to the servants of God. They join [jāmiʿ] the blessings of both this world and the hereafter, earning perfection both inner and outer. They were created as actual members of the human species but bear the special responsibility of exerting leadership and power, which disciplines their character and regulates their political life; the work of the world and the order of human needs cannot be solved without their presence.

If everyone would renounce the world, sit in isolation, and worship in quiet devotion, the ways and means of the world would fall out of balance! The structure of the world and life in it would veer toward ruin.
Thus, the masters of political fortune [arbāb-e dawlat] must remain engrossed in worldly affairs and their management, while training their spiritual life informally [bi-tariqat sulūk] in such a way that does not damage their worldly responsibilities, while they conduct themselves such that they earn fortune and authority in the hereafter as well, doing nothing that would alienate them from that higher goal. With the emperors especially, in whose power rests the affairs of all people and the harmonious ordering of the cosmos in general, they must enforce and promote their power and rule in such a way that it becomes the very means to achieve authority in the realm of the hereafter. The emperor must become one who joins both realms [jāmiʿ-ye dawlatayn] and attains happiness in both realms [saʿādat-e dārayn]. That is divine bounty that God gives to whomever God wills, and God possesses great bounty [Qurʾan 62:4].

With this Qurʾanic verse, ʿAbd al-Haqq concludes his introductory chapter. He sets up a parallelism between his reformist program for Sufism and his strategy for political reform. The Muttaqi method for reform of Sufism elevates a kind of scholarly saint as a jamiʿ who “joins” spiritual training with scriptural knowledge. Similarly, his political program requires an emperor who rules with justice, as defined by shariʿa, who “joins” secular power to religious ethics.

His introduction to “Epistle for an Enlightened Ruler” explains this scheme in general. He gives details in five chapters, quoting copiously from hadith reports and narratives about the salaf, or pious early Muslims. His chapters follow this plan: Section 1 explains the various essential pillars of political rule, namely supplying the treasury, raising the army, maintaining coordination in the army, and enforcing justice by desisting from oppression and coercion against the common people. Section 2 explains how the pillars of rule are acquired. Section 3 describes some respectful manners (adab) through which rulers treat their subjects for the perfection and beautification of virtue. Section 4 discusses some moral points, knowledge of which promotes the affairs of state. And section 5 relates some stories about Islamic rulers of earlier times who displayed forbearance, clemency, generosity, charity, justice, strength, and bravery.

This book reached Jahangir, but we do not know if he read it. He certainly did not follow its advice. As his rule progressed, the emperor earned a reputation for rage and cruelty tempered only by his keen observation of birds, beasts, and flowers, along with refinement in court aesthetics, painting, and architecture. Yet the channel of communication was open for ʿAbd
al-Haqq to the highest echelons of the Mughal administration. He subsequently collected forty hadith reports about good government and translated them into Persian, titled “Tarjamat al-Aḥādīth al-Arbaʿīn fī Naṣīḥat al-Mulūk waʾl-Salāṭīn” (“Translating Forty Prophetic Reports on Advice to Rulers and Royal Courts”). This short book was for Jahangir’s son Prince Khurram (later Shāhjahān, ruled 1628–58). The ambitious prince was sent to conquer the Deccan south of Khandesh, and his successes vaunted him to the position of heir apparent. Perhaps ʿAbd al-Haqq hoped that the father’s failings would translate into the son’s success.

Jahangir showed little inclination to follow ʿAbd al-Haqq’s ethical advice. After six years as emperor, he married Nurjahan, a strong-willed woman from an Iranian Shiʿi family who would become his favored queen. She swiftly took control, elevating members of her family to authoritative positions and ruling as partner to her husband. She conspired to sideline Prince Khurram in favor of his stepbrother Shahriyar (the son of one of Jahangir’s concubines) whom she married to her daughter. Queen Nurjahan’s manipulations drove a wedge between son and father, and Prince Khurram was pushed into open rebellion.

As his queen’s authority expanded, Jahangir’s authority receded. He slumped into alcoholism and drug addiction. In the fourteenth year of his reign, ʿAbd al-Haqq met Jahangir at court and perceived with his own eyes that the emperor did not fit his ideals. That encounter with the emperor—outwardly ruler of the most powerful empire in the world but inwardly riven with conflicts—would force ʿAbd al-Haqq to make one last journey. It was a journey that involved controversies about the millennium that persisted even after the Mahdawi movement had died down. It was a journey that almost cost him his life.

Moderation: Sparring with Ahmad Sirhindi

Toward the end of his reign, Emperor Jahangir ordered ʿAbd al-Haqq into exile. Exactly what angered the emperor remains a mystery, one partially resolved here. In 1619, the emperor summoned the elderly ʿAbd al-Haqq to Srinagar, where the court spent summers, to answer for unstated misdeeds. He had previously ordered the shaykh’s son Nur al-Haqq to be banished from Delhi to provincial Kabul. Together, the shaykh and his son traveled as far as Lahore, where they were racked with anxiety as their paths diverged—the younger to banishment and the elder likely to imprisonment. In Lahore, ʿAbd al-Haqq met a fellow Qadiri Sufi with close ties to Mughal nobility, Shaykh
Miyān Mīr (d. 1635). ʿAbd al-Haqq complained of having to leave country and family behind, but Miyan Mir assured him that he had nothing to fear from Jahangir. As ʿAbd al-Haqq he set off for Srinagar, news arrived that Jahangir had died. Both father and son returned to Delhi together, with the threat of danger averted.

What caused this close brush with royal displeasure? It was a controversy over moderation (iʿtidal), an ideal at the heart of the Muttaqi reform project. ʿAbd al-Haqq’s own writings do not explain why Jahangir got angry with him, but other Mughal sources shed light on the matter. The eldest grandchild of Jahangir, Prince Dara Shikoh (d. 1659), was at court in Kashmir and took a keen interest in Sufism. He and his sister Jahānārā were Qadiri disciples of Miyan Mir, and both authored biographies of important Sufi masters. Dara Shikoh wrote, “During the time that Emperor Jahangir was in Kashmir, some people said untrue things about Shaykh ʿAbd al-Haqq Dihlawi—who was the leading hadith scholar of his age—and Mirzā Ḥusām al-Dīn—who was an accomplished disciple of the fiery and charismatic Shaykh Ahmad Sirhindi. They were both called to face the Emperor.”

Who were the “some people” who slandered ʿAbd al-Haqq? Scholar Khaliq Ahmad Nizami speculates that Queen Nurjahan circulated false accusations because she disliked the shaykh. It is true that Nurjahan was from a Shiʿi family that had grown immensely influential as Jahangir’s competence faded and that ʿAbd al-Haqq had authored a book about the twelve Imams from a Sunni perspective, which might have contradicted some points of Shiʿi dogma. It is also true that ʿAbd al-Haqq was accused of some wrongdoing along with a disciple of Ahmad Sirhindi, who took a strident stance against Shiʿism. Nizami suggests that both ran afoul of Queen Nurjahan, who slandered them and urged the emperor to punish them.

Yet Nizami offers no textual proof of this theory. There was no love lost between Dara Shikoh and Nurjahan, his grandfather’s wife who schemed to get her relatives on the throne in place of Dara Shikoh’s own father. If Nurjahan had slandered ʿAbd al-Haqq, there would be no reason for Dara Shikoh—himself a Qadiri Sufi—to hide that unflattering fact by vaguely saying “some people said untrue things.” If both ʿAbd al-Haqq and Ahmad Sirhindi’s disciple were accused of anti-Shiʿi statements, they most likely would have traveled to Kashmir together to face the emperor. However, ʿAbd al-Haqq traveled with his son and was anxious of traveling alone after Lahore when they had to part ways.

It appears that ʿAbd al-Haqq and the Sufi disciple of Sirhindi remained separate during the journey: this suggests an alternative theory. It could be that
ʿAbd al-Haqq and Sirhindi’s disciple were disputants rather than comrades. Jahangir may have heard exaggerated reports about rivaling Sufi masters and called them to court to answer and clarify their disputes. Jahangir had jailed Ahmad Sirhindi previously, due to allegations that he claimed to be the Mahdi, a claim that the emperor saw as a political challenge. Those allegations against Sirhindi originated with ʿAbd al-Haqq, for he wrote a letter to Sirhindi accusing him of various kinds of exaggeration and self-aggrandizement.

Both ʿAbd al-Haqq and Ahmad Sirhindi were disciples of Khwaja Baqi Biʾllah in the Naqshbandi Order. Both sent letters to Jahangir urging him to support the shariʿa as a proper Sunni ruler. Yet ʿAbd al-Haqq carefully distinguished his own style of reform from that of his colleagues who followed Sirhindi. ʿAbd al-Haqq’s approach emphasized scholarly acumen and political moderation; in contrast, Sirhindi was charismatic and brash in his theology. ʿAbd al-Haqq advocated reform that spread through a Sufi community, with the saint as the prime agent of reform; as such, the figure of the saint was also the central subject of reformist limitation. He conflicted with Sirhindi over the latter’s claims to transcendent spiritual authority. His critiques of Sirhindi were much like those that ʿAli Muttaqi had launched against the Mahdawis and Shattaris two generations earlier.

Ahmad Sirhindi absorbed the fiery piety of the Mahdawi movement, as implied by his title Mujaddid-e Al-f-e Thānī or “Renewer of the Second Millennium.” The Mahdawi movement had by then cooled significantly, for the Islamic millennium passed in 1591 just before ʿAbd al-Haqq returned to Delhi. Mahdawi partisans altered their dogma to reflect the new reality—they built a solid community around the slogan that “the promised Mahdi has come and gone” in lieu of the expectation that the world would end or radically transform with the millennium. Like the Mahdawi hero Sayyid Muhammad Jawnpuri, Ahmad Sirhindi similarly claimed to be not just a saint who achieved that status through allegiance to and initiation from earlier saints. Rather, he asserted that he inherited authority from the Prophet himself because he shared the Prophet’s nature and substance. He called himself the heir to the source of Prophetic inspiration as opposed to one who simply followed the sunna in outward obedience to the Prophet’s example, for although the office of prophecy came to an end, the perfect followers of the prophets had a share in the perfections of prophecy. He observed that the system of disciple and saintly master was becoming irrelevant. What was once the inner training ground for spirituality was now merely external trappings; he located the source of his attaining sainthood beyond contemporary saints.
In Sirhindi’s metaphysical schema, he was suffused with the Prophet’s essence. In his speculation, Muhammad had not just one individuation (ta‘ayyun) but two, which coexisted during his lifetime. These were a bodily human individuation (haqiqa-te muhammad) and a spiritual individuation (haqiqa-te ahmadi). Since the death of Muhammad, the bodily manifestation grew steadily more elevated, subtle, and freed from worldly affairs; this was in accord with the nobility of the “Essence of Muhammad.” Yet its steady diffusion left the Muslim community in dire need of continual guidance. This need was fulfilled by the “Essence of Aḥmad,” which was the renewing spirit of divinity that served as mediator between the source of revelation and the Muslim community. Sirhindi took seriously a famous hadith qudsi, a report in which the Prophet declares what God says, but not through revelation; in this report, God says, “I am Aḥmad without the m.” This means that God is Aḥad, absolutely one, but manifest uniquely in the form of Aḥmad. “Aḥmad” was one of the many honorific praise-names of the Prophet Muhammad. Sirhindi speculated that the m stood for Muhammad’s human form, which lingered with his body at his tomb in Medina; his body faded with time but his spiritual essence in the form of Ahmad persisted and actually grew stronger as the body-in-history receded. Through that spiritual essence, the absolutely single God—signified by the divine name al-Aḥad—continued to manifest guidance to the community of believers.

Between the embodied Muhammad and the noncorporeal God was the spiritual essence of Ahmad. Sirhindi speculated that after a thousand years, the bodily manifestation of Muhammad would fade in importance while the spiritual manifestation of Ahmad would persist, energizing the next thousand years of the “second millennium” that began in 1591 (AH 1000). His wordplay on the term “Aḥmad” hinted that Ahmad Sirhindi himself was the new personal locus (or bodily individuation) of the Prophetic spirit, which had passed beyond its previous individuation in the Prophet of Mecca and Medina, namely Muhammad.

Sirhindi explained his saintly qualifications by claiming to hold a direct allegiance to God, transcending any allegiance he may have had to a human master or a Sufi lineage. Although he admitted that Khwaja Baqi Bi’llah was his master in the Naqshbandi Order, he effaced this relationship by claiming to be the disciple of God.

I am both a disciple who desires God [murid allah] and one desired by God [murad allah]. The chain of my discipleship [irada] is connected with
God without any mediation. My hand is a substitute for the hand of God. I am a disciple of Muhammad connected with him through many intermediaries: in the Naqshbandi Order, there are twenty-one intermediaries in between; in the Qadiri Order, there are twenty-five; and in the Chishti Order, there are twenty-seven. However, my relationship with God as a disciple is not subject to any mediation. Hence, I am both the disciple of the Prophet Muhammad and his co-disciple [ham-pirah]. Though I am a parasite [tufaylī] at the table of this wealth, sitting near the Prophet, yet I have not come uninvited. Though I am a follower, I am not without a share of genuineness. . . . Though I take initiation without human intermediary [uwaysī], I have an omnipresent and all-seeing instructor [murabbi-ye ḥādir o nāzir]. Though in the Naqshbandi community my instructor is ʿAbd al-Ḥaqq [Khwaja Baqi Ilī], yet the one who has undertaken my instruction is the everlasting One [al-Ḥaqq]. . . . I am a divine disciple.19

Sirhindi veered alarmingly close to equating himself with the Prophet. He claimed to re-embody the Prophet’s presence, bringing the Prophet’s spiritual guidance back in the realm of human affairs.

ʿAbd al-Ḥaqq challenged Sirhindi’s self-aggrandizing speculations. He charged that Sirhindi’s position showed intense disrespect for the Prophet and disparaged the Sufi masters from whom he gained training and authority. ʿAbd al-Ḥaqq sent a letter to Sirhindi, repeating what the latter had claimed in his writings and what others reported from hearing him preach. ʿAbd al-Ḥaqq cited his own son Nur al-Ḥaqq as a source of information since he had sat in Sirhindi’s assemblies. His letter to Sirhindi is a model of tough-love critique and subtle Sufi analysis. He pointed out the contradictions of Sirhindi’s claim to be follower who enjoyed authority unmediated by the leader he followed.

These words are written with the goal of investigating the case, discovering the truth, preventing any suffering, and settling matters of controversy that divide this body [the Naqshbandi Order in South Asia]. I intended to write whatever is required to settle my conscience. Its first principle is to give you good advice, wish you well, and discover the truth of your state; as the Prophet said, “Religion consists of good advice.” I do this after several sittings during which I made a special prayer for guidance [istikhāra] before setting pen to paper, asking for deliverance from the evil of selfishness and turning to God alone for support. Only having done all this do I write to you. I hope that any shortcomings will be forgiven and any right doings will be rewarded.

I hold a very high opinion of you, O Shaykh. My love for you is not less
than anyone else’s! But it is just as [the great Sufi scholar] Hujwirî wrote in Kashf al-Mahjûb about Manṣûr Hallâj: “God be praised, as a person he is dear to my heart, yet his spiritual teachings are in no way acceptable!”

Thus, this humble writer says, “You are dear to me, yet what you say about the Prophet (upon him be peace and blessings) has no worth, even if what you say about other Sufi masters must be endured, however painful. It is beyond my patience’s capacity to bear hearing these words from you.” … Considering the reputation that you have developed, I pray, “Oh God, this man is making public claims to have spiritual perfection! If he is sincere in these claims, please show me proof of his sincerity, give me insight into his actual spiritual rank, and let me witness his miraculous deeds so that any confusion or ambiguity may be removed. If he is not sincere, then bring him to justice and prevent him from persisting with such claims.”

ʿAbd al-Haqq compares Sirhindi’s discourse with the “intoxicated” speech that Sufis had used in the past to express spiritual states of union. The most famous of these is Hallaj (d. 922), who was executed for ecstatic preaching in public as he declared, “I am the Truth.” ʿAbd al-Haqq mentions Junayd, the paragon of sobriety (sahw), who disavowed Hallaj when the latter had cited him as a teacher. Pointedly, ʿAbd al-Haqq also cites Bayazid Bistami, an important early Sufi whom the Naqshbandis claimed in their lineage. Bistami was a paragon of ecstasy (sukr), yet ʿAbd al-Haqq states that he recanted his ecstatic boasts at the end of his life, as Sirhindi should do now.

In examining Sirhindi’s state of mind while making extravagant claims, ʿAbd al-Haqq cites Sirhindi’s famous Maktūbāt, his book of letters. In it, Sirhindi states that he does not speak from spiritual intoxication or ecstatic union but rather from considered sobriety in his full faculties. For this reason, ʿAbd al-Haqq analyzes these statements with theological rigor.

Adversity is caused by speech that reveals the secrets of existential unity and proclaims spiritual boasts [shāṭḥiyyāt], for it diverges from the words’ evident meaning and is not understood by common people. Such speech is called “obscure imaginings” [mawhumāt mubhamāt]. There are many examples from previous Sufis. Yet none has ever witnessed the type of speech that has come [from you] about the saints and, most especially, the Prophet Muhammad, as you make false claims of equality and identity. … The evident meaning of your speech is disrespect and insult [bē-adabi a gustākhi] to the Prophet, and there is no interpreting them away from their evident meaning.
'Abd al-Haqq asserts that all good qualities, virtues, and spiritual states come from following the Prophet and in no other way. He takes exception to Sirhindī’s claim to surpass the status of other saints, though he took initiation from them and especially from Khwaja Baqi Bi’llah. ‘Abd al-Haqq takes special umbrage at Sirhindī’s assertion that he gets spiritual guidance from God directly without even the mediation of the Prophet.

Glory be to God, what confusion and delusion is this? . . . He is the Prophet of God, so how can any claim equality with him? There has been discussion over whether or not the saints are superior to the prophets—upon them be peace. That needs no repetition here. Yet it bears repeating that you claim to need no mediation from the Prophet Muhammad. None has claimed this before! Muhammad is the beloved of the Lord of all creation and the purpose of this world and religion itself, yet you call him “a veil” [parda] and “a separation” [ḥijāb]. Yet many realized sages have explained that they witness God only as reflected in Muhammad! May our souls be sacrificed for such a “veil.” Glory be to God, it is hardly an incapacity to be veiled or separated from God by the Prophet Muhammad. What perfection could be greater than this, that one witnesses the perfection of God in the perfection of Muhammad? For this purpose, God created Muhammad, that the divine essence should be seen in his beauty and perfection. God allowed Muhammad to enter the intimate chamber of spiritual reality, to display union with the divine essence and attributes so that all would know that whatever exists, exists with him and through him. A sage has said, “The light of God does not illuminate any human heart except through the reflection of Muhammad’s secret for he is the divine light [al-nūr al-muṭlaq].” The veils that separate us from God are veils of darkness, veils of spirit, veils of ego, and veils of materiality—these are properly understood as veils and separation. But when you call the essence of Muhammad a veil which you claim to throw off from between yourself and God, you utter something that one should never say!

On the day of judgment, Muhammad will appear in person before us, God willing, or even before that in the intermediate realm after death. If I should leave this world before you, the first complaint about you that I will lay before Muhammad will be this. God alone knows best if he may even appear to me before I die in a spiritual vision, for that is possible. It is my discipline and habit, like that of all those belonging to our Naqshbandi Order, to concentrate upon God’s essence by contemplating
the noble beauty of the Prophet Muhammad. By contemplating his noble presence, one gradually achieves union with the divine essence [dhāt-e ḥaqq], meaning total absorption and conscientious presence, which is how our order defines “union with God.” . . . When I survey all the sages, mystics, saints, and lovers of God, I see that they all affirm—by word and state—the practice of seeking favor [tawassul] from the Prophet, humbly begging [gadāgīrī] and asking his help [istimdād]. They show no attitude toward the Prophet except obedience [bandagī], submission [niyāz], humbleness [shikastagī], servitude [ghulāmī], and doggish loyalty [sagī]. Facing him in this way, I cannot elucidate the doors of spiritual insight that have opened for them such that, in facing him, they witness God. Considering this, I cannot account for your discourse. It is evident that you have been deceived, but I cannot say who has deceived you. God alone knows best. . . . Without belaboring the point, you may simply say that all spiritual outpouring and opening—from beginning to end, inwardly and outwardly, both before achieving union and after it, for seekers and masters, for lovers and beloveds—all of it comes from adhering, following, and beseeching mediation with that noble presence, the Prophet Muhammad. Nothing else need be said. Nothing more can be said. 25

ʿAbd al-Haqq alleges that Sirhindi disparages other Sufi masters, even his own Naqshbandi master, Khwaja Baqi Biʾllah. The issue is whether saints can ascend into God’s presence, based on the Prophet’s model but effacing the Prophet’s efficacy. This first line of analysis mirrors ʿAli Muttaqi’s critique of the Shattaris and Shaykh Muhammad Ghawth in particular. Second, ʿAbd al-Haqq asserts that Sirhindi belittles the Prophet, misunderstanding his cosmic existential being and therefore falling in the error of imagining equality with him. This second line of analysis mirrors ʿAli Muttaqi’s critique of the Madhawis and their claims about Sayyid Muhammad Jawnpuri.

ʿAbd al-Haqq asks how Sirhindi can claim spiritual ascension (miʿrāj) that supersedes the presence of the Prophet. He explains that ritual prayer is a means of ascension—according to a hadith report—yet after every prayer one pronounces blessings and greetings and praise on the Prophet Muhammad. So, the ascension of every believer culminates with offering praise and blessings upon the Prophet, who enables any spiritual ascension of his followers and can never be surpassed.26

How can it be said that a spiritual seeker always travels the path as a servant of the Prophet, moving forward by adhering to him and following him, and yet when he approaches the court of divinity he moves ahead
of the Prophet and goes into the inner chamber leaving the Prophet behind? How could he enter without following, leaving aside the Prophet’s mediation? How could he go in and sit on the throne of intimacy and union and be crowned by divine presence all alone? How could he then say, “You and I are now equals—I came as your servant but now that I am here your authority of mediation no longer remains. Although I am your servant and follower originally and I arrived here only by your mediation, now you have no presence or mediation here.”

This claim, says ʿAbd al-Haqq, degrades the status of the Prophet. Accepting mediation is a sign of vulnerability and humility, while offering mediation is a sign of authority and superiority. It may be possible for one to surpass one’s Sufi master, but it is unthinkable that one could claim equivalence with the Prophet. That is not just moral fault—and he describes it as disrespectful, insulting, and arrogant—but also a metaphysical error.

The Prophet, explains ʿAbd al-Haqq, is not just a person but rather a spiritual presence. The prophetic reality (ḥaqīqat-e muḥammadiyya) is present in all levels of the cosmos, in which it functions as the “spiritual reality of realities” (ḥaqīqat-e ḥaqāʾiq) and the existential light and energizes all being. In this exposition, he follows the formulation of Muhammad ibn Fadlallah Burhanpuri in his al-Tuḥfa al-Mursala ilā Rūḥ al-Nabī (“Gift Sent to the Prophet’s Spirit”), which became popular in Chishti, Shattari, and Qadiri Orders after its composition in 1590.

This text was so prominent that it helped fuel conversion to Islam of many in Indonesia, as the text and its ideas spread from the Deccan to Gujarat to Mecca and from there to the wider Indian Ocean world. ‘Abd al-Haqq employs the cosmological arguments of Burhanpuri, who calls Muhammad “the reality of realities.”

How can you say that the spiritual seeker’s reality achieves union with the reality of the Prophet, which is the reality of realities? That has no meaning and saying that leads you far from the station of respect [adab] and justice [inṣāf]. This is evident insult and disgraceful vanity that is clearly against reason. It is impossible for two things to be united when one of them is partial [juz’] and the other is universal (kull), without the partial becoming universal or the universal becoming partial, so this idea is obviously null and void.

ʿAbd al-Haqq accuses Sirhindi of overstepping the proper bounds of a Muslim saint. He notes that the saying “Scholars of my community are like Prophets
of the Israelite community” circulated as a hadith, but he disparages it as “not authentic [ṣaḥīḥ],” in contrast to “Scholars are the inheritance of the Prophets.” He claims that his son Nur al-Haqq heard Sirhindi say in his preaching that “sainthood is superior to prophethood.” This claim, ʿAbd al-Haqq says, transgresses basic Sunni beliefs and, in being quoted, shows Sirhindi’s lack of mastery (tanāquṣ).

ʿAbd al-Haqq says that human beings are always vulnerable to error and slippage. Only prophets are granted protection from error (ʾiṣma). Sirhindi should acknowledge that he has erred, especially in his claim to have surpassed their own teacher, Khwaja Baqi Bīllah.

As for what you have written, that our Khwaja—may God keep his heart sacred—“decided to give me, in the beginning of my training with him, special training to become one whom God desires [murād] [rather than a routine disciple who desires God (murid)].” Our honorable Khwaja persevered with you to a great extent—many people are aware of this, most of all this humble writer. If our Khwaja were still alive today, it is certain that he would be angry at hearing what you wrote. Nobody would be pleased with it, and I hope that you, deep inside, are not content with it. God alone knows best. . . . I admit that you may have received special guidance in the beginning of your training, but it is weak-minded corruption to claim that this special guidance “to become one whom God desires” results in your becoming his equal, such that his mediation is no longer required for you, for this makes you disrespect his honor, the Prophet Muhammad.

With this scolding observation, ʿAbd al-Haqq moves to his second line of analysis. In boasting to have surpassed the mediation of his own Sufi master, Sirhindi also claims to have moved beyond mediation of the Prophet Muhammad. ʿAbd al-Haqq compares Sirhindi’s discourse to that of the Mahdawis, who also veered close to claiming equivalence of their leader, Sayyid Muhammad Jawnpuri, to the Prophet, and that Jawnpuri had come to renew the Prophet’s legacy for the coming millennium.

Any claim to equality with the prophets and especially to the leader of prophets, Muhammad—may peace and blessings be upon him—is void of truth [bāṭil]. Splitting hairs over distinctions between “servant and master” or “original and derivative” is likewise void of truth and full of vanity. There is no need to discuss it further. Discourse of this type is heard from some Mahdawi leaders whose sect, consensus of opinion has
it, controverts the norm. In the creed of Sayyid Muhammad Jawnpuri, which is the origin and growth and location and station of their misguidance [dalālat], it is claimed that every perfection that the Prophet Muhammad possessed—may God bless and grant him peace—was also possessed by Sayyid Muhammad Jawnpuri. They say that the only difference is that the former had them originally [bi-āṣalat] and the latter received them as a result of following the Prophet. This is the very essence of their claim. Likewise, the Shiʿa say that the twelve Imams—may God be content with them—are equal to the Prophet except that they are his pupils and he is their teacher. In any case, a true servant recognizes the rights over him exercised by his benefactor and treats the master in every moment with obedience and submissiveness, never for an instant making claims of equality.36

ʿAbd al-Haqq then turns to a parable to make his point, as he did in the letter to Shaykh Farid Bukhari. An apt story can express a subtle point more forcefully than intellectual argument.

This is the parable of a servant and his master to whom he makes an insulting claim of equality. The servant accompanies his master to the court of the ruler. They enter the court’s assembly. The noble master goes and sits at his place close to the sultan, and the servant follows him to the same place to stand by him. Seeing himself in this royal assembly with his master in the presence of the sultan, the servant feels proud and haughty. Because of his impotence and lack of awareness, which is the sad condition of all servants, he loses hold over himself and begins to imagine that he is equal to his master and partakes in his master’s authority.

The servant says, “I am a servant of the ruler and am intimate with him!” He does not realize the first principle in training on the path of intimacy and union: that is, that he arrives in the sultan’s court only by mediation and by following his master. His master is his intermediary [wāsiṭa]. The intimacy and union he now enjoys is mediated by this intermediary. However, because of his pride and lack of awareness and thoughtlessness, the existence of intermediaries has fallen from his gaze. He has fallen into the prison of disavowing his benefactor [kufrān-e niʿmat].

If you consider carefully the soundness of this story, oh Shaykh, then you should reassess the meaning of your discourse that I am refuting. You have said, “I was created for the purpose of uniting the perfections
of Abraham and Muhammad.” What does this mean and what is its consequence? The answer is found in my story about the servant and his master. What you have said is in no way sound except for asserting a difference between the original and the follower. Any claim to equality and equivalence by servants and followers is unacceptable and unsuitable to the utmost extent.37

This letter to Sirhindi is full of subtle Sufi theology, but it is really about the content and style of Sunni reformist movements. In the era of the Muttaqi community, reform was driven by Sufi communities, and they argued over its contours and limitations through their own technical vocabulary.

ʿAbd al-Haqq’s poignant letter did not cause Sirhindi to alter his charismatic claims. We have no letter that Sirhindi wrote in response. ʿAbd al-Haqq considered this to be a message between fellow disciples and equal Sufi masters, so he did not include it in his collection of letters. Instead, it was preserved in a massive seventeenth-century collection of Sufi biographies that contains rare texts, letters, and fatwas that, without being included there, would have been lost to history.38 ʿAbd al-Haqq later wrote to jurists in Mecca, whom he had known while a member of the Muttaqi community there, seeking a legal decision against a man like Sirhindi who claimed to embody the perfection of Muhammad. This critique helped to suppress the teachings of Sirhindi for a time by Mughal imperial decree.39

ʿAbd al-Haqq’s critique of Sirhindi was the last pronouncement of the Muttaqi reform movement as a distinct Sufi community. It displayed the common elements that linked it to the critiques launched by ʿAli Muttaqi before him. They all concentrated on the nature of sainthood, delineating who could assert its status, under what terms, and with what social effects. They tried to limit who could claim to embody the ideals of sainthood in Islamic societies and to live their lives as exemplars of their own extremely limited and limiting paradigm of what a saint should be like. Soon this paradigm, along with the Sufi community that upheld it, would dissolve into obscurity.

ʿAbd al-Haqq disengaged the ideals and techniques of reform from the community of ʿAli Muttaqi, which had cultivated them. He hoped to spread these ideals in a diffused way, through his own disciples and students at his madrasa and also through Sufi communities that held allegiance to the Naqshbandi Order. This strategy had the unintended effect of obscuring important aspects of ʿAbd al-Haqq’s personality, as posterity remembers him as merely a Naqshbandi. For instance, Muḥammad Ṣādiq Hamadānī (d. circa 1614), a
disciple of Khwaja Baqi Ba’lallah who memorialized Sufis of Delhi, wrote a biography of ‘Abd al-Haqq. In it, Hamadani quotes ‘Abd al-Haqq as saying, “The Sufi initiation that I received from Khwaja Baqi Ba’lallah is superior to the initiations that I received previously from great masters, just like the spirit is superior to the body.” This ascribed quote cannot be accurate: it contradicts the content of ‘Abd al-Haqq’s writings in books and letters, in which he conveys the Muttaqi method and praises his Sufi masters in Mecca. But posthumously, ‘Abd al-Haqq’s reputation as a Naqshbandi prevailed, partly through memorialization by Hamadani and other Naqshbandi authors. This obscured the personality and reputation of ‘Ali Muttaqi, who also became known to later generations as “Naqshbandi” by association, even though he never took initiation into that order. In retrospect, the distinctive history of his claim to be a scholar-saint and leader of a reformist Sufi community were erased. His successes were absorbed into the later fame of the Naqshbandi community as the preeminent force of reform and revival in Mughal dominions.

Because ‘Abd al-Haqq was misremembered as a Naqshbandi, so were the Muttaqi masters who taught him. The hagiographer Ghawthi noted that people in South Asia knew ‘Ali Muttaqi as a “Naqshbandi.” They, along with
Ghawthi, misrecognized ‘Ali Muttaqi as a Naqshbandi for two reasons. First, ‘Ali Muttaqi’s followers did not preserve his teachings in a discrete Sufi community beyond a few generations. Second, his teachings, along with those of Zarruq, spread beyond the boundaries of a single Sufi community that owed allegiance to him as a founding saint. Reform became the project of other communities centered on different patterns of saintly authority. The substance of reform would be woven into the fabric of other movements, some Sufi and some anti-Sufi, in later times.

Setting Sail: Sufi Journeys, Saintly Lives, and Islamic Reform

Piety is provision for the journey from this world to the next: this maxim guided the life of ‘Ali Muttaqi. It comes from a sermon by ‘Umar ibn ‘Abd al-‘Azīz (d. 720), the Umayyad ruler who was the only pious member of Islam’s earliest power-hungry dynasty. He is credited with ordering the first compilation of hadith books and was a cherished hero of ‘Ali Muttaqi. ‘Ali Muttaqi believed that piety was the best provision from this world to the next, and also from one phase of life to the next. He left his hometown of Burhanpur with this idea, rooted in the Qur’an and reinforced by hadith reports and pious sermons, firmly in his mind and heart. He settled in Ahmedabad to spread this idea among the Sufi communities, hadith scholars, jurists, and rulers. He sailed to Mecca from Gujarat with this idea foremost in his mind. It allowed him to embrace a tenuous future in exile and later allowed him to return to Gujarat empowered as a reformer in scholarship, in communal relations, and in court.

‘Ali Muttaqi’s goals were to organize his own reformist Sufi community, argue against the Mahdawis and oppose the Shattaris, and reform the political order of the sultanate of Gujarat. He did not succeed in organizing a durable Sufi community; after ‘Abd al-Haqq died, there was no identifiable “Muttaqi method” in any Sufi order, let alone a new movement called the “Muttaqi Order.” ‘Ali Muttaqi’s reputation was distorted such that he is not remembered as a Sufi but rather as a hadith scholar. This distortion stems largely from Wajih al-Dīn Alawi’s counter-critique of ‘Ali Muttaqi charging that he was not an authentic saint; the Shattari scholar defended his own masters, and these charges stuck, shaping ‘Ali Muttaqi’s image for posterity. He often appears as an acerbic scholar and ascetic renunciant, but not necessarily as a saint.

‘Ali Muttaqi’s broader mission was to integrate hadith studies into Sufi training. He succeeded, as many Shattaris took refuge in hadith scholarship. Muhammad Ghawth’s boldly transcendent and outspokenly ecstatic style of Sufi devotion did not persist even as his lineage thrived. The persecution in
Ahmedabad drove the next generation of Shattari Sufis toward a more shariʿa-oriented framework, as noted by Carl Ernst.42 Ironically, this is exactly what ʿAli Muttaqi desired as the outcome of his critique in the first place, though he could not have predicted the means and modality of the change.

In succeeding generations, ʿAli Muttaqi’s followers integrated hadith study into Sufism. In South Asia, ʿAbd al-Haqq’s initiation into the Naqshbandi Order accelerated this process, for in the eighteenth century, many Naqshbandis became renowned hadith scholars in South Asia—so much so that most current scholarship identifies the reformist current of Sufism exclusively with the Naqshbandi Sufi order.43 To posterity, ʿAbd al-Haqq and his Muttaqi teachers are commonly remembered as Naqshbandis, even though their affiliations were more complex. For example, today in Burhanpur there is an institution named the ʿAli Muttaqi Madrasa, and it is run by Naqshbandi scholars who teach Qurʾan and hadith. When I met the rector there and asked about ʿAli Muttaqi’s legacy, they referred to him with veneration as “the author of Kanz al-ʿUmmāl,” his most enduring book of hadith. If they also teach Sufism, they do not discuss it openly.

Remembered as a Naqshbandi, ʿAbd al-Haqq Muhaddith Dihlawi looms large in South Asian Islamic cultural history but is often severed from his actual reformist Sufi community. He is pivotal in any assessment of shifts in Islamic discourse toward the shariʿa or between rival Sufi orders during the early modern period, such as the most recent assessment of Islamic reform in the early modern period by Ahmad Dallal. Dallal aptly describes how Sufism spread by the sixteenth century in both elite philosophical forms and in vernacular popular forms: “The emergence of a popular reformed Sufism . . . consciously partook in all aspects of Islamic intellectual life . . . [and] affirmed its conformity with the Qurʾan and Sunna as the ultimate sources of its legitimacy and underscored compliance with the formal obligations of the law as the indispensable prerequisite for deeper forms of Sufi religiosity.”44 Dallal is speaking of eighteenth-century Sufi reformers, but the movement that he describes has roots in the fifteenth century and grew throughout the sixteenth century with the Muttaqi community; then, spurred by millennial anxieties, it blossomed in the seventeenth century with the activities of ʿAbd al-Haqq.

But ʿAbd al-Haqq did not arise ex nihilo, nor did he synthesize elements of Sufism and Islamic scholarship that were current in Delhi where he grew up. Rather, he adopted his ideals from the Muttaqi community. This community was actively engaged in Islamic reform, in the interstices between Gujarat and Mecca, long before the term “reform” gained wide currency and scholarly recognition. Reformist discourse is usually dated to the late Mughal period,
after Aurangzeb (ruled 1658–1707). He began his career as governor of Gujarat and then the Deccan, with his base at Burhanpur, from where he built his resources of power to seize the throne. He oversaw the widest expansion of the Mughal realm to cover almost all of modern South Asia, but by the time he died in 1707 Mughal power had already begun to recede due to internal uprisings and external pressure from European trade that was veering toward colonial occupation.

As Mughal authority wavered, the empire’s reliance on Sufi exemplars and syncretic religiosity had come under question. Scholars forged popular movements to reform Islamic mores and reestablish a new balance of religious and political power in a mood of urgent crisis. However, the Muttaqi community reveals that the quest for reform began in the long sixteenth century, as the sultanate of Gujarat toppled under expansionist pressure from the early Mughal Empire. These political forces drove ‘Ali Muttaqi into exile and gave him...
access to reform recourses in Arabia and North Africa. The new political reality of the Mughal imperium, fed by millennial expectations and syncretic creativity, fueled his spiritual quest and textual project to reform Islamic discourse in order to fuse Sufi ideals and scriptural studies in hadith.

ʿAli Muttaqi’s personality, writings, and disciples shaped several centuries of reform movements in South Asia, giving rise to forces that have become dominant in reaction to colonial occupation. Rapprochement between Sufi adab and hadith study was an enduring feature in South Asia and gained momentum during the eighteenth century as Mughal suzerainty shrunk and crumbled. ʿAbd al-Haqq Muhaddith Dihlawi passed his ideals to Shāh ʿAbd al-Raḥīm (d. 1719), a disciple of Khwāja Khurd (the son of Khwaja Baqi Bīllah), who was educated at ʿAbd al-Haqq’s madrasa. He later established his own institution, the Madrasa Raḥīmiyya (at Kotla Firuz Shah). There, he trained his son Shāh Wali’llāh (d. 1762), who perpetuated ʿAbd al-Haqq’s ideals.

Shah Walī’lāh thus built upon the foundation set by ʿAli Muttaqi, who integrated Sufism and hadith; two generations later, ʿAbd al-Haqq tightened this fusion and integrated it into jurisprudence through his intricate textual engagement with Zarruq. Then Shah Walī’lāh widened this fusion by adding elements of the Hellenic disciplines of ethics and philosophy, as they had been adopted and adapted by Islamic civilization. Modern scholars have exaggerated the importance of Ahmad Sirhindi, picturing him as the reviver of the shariʿa in South Asia who influenced modernity. They have portrayed Shah Walī’lāh as a genius but a dead-ender whose synthesis of hadith, jurisprudence, Sufism, ethics, and philosophy was too complex and “medieval” to influence modernity. Current scholarship on the influential Deobandi reform movement and its emphasis on hadith studies elucidates its Sufi origins. This book demonstrates how the fusion of forces that fed the Deobandi movement had its roots in the Muttaqi community three centuries earlier.

It is easier to write the history of a broad movement than to write a nuanced account of a complex life. This study offers a portrait of ʿAli Muttaqi’s passage through life, with as much nuance as archival sources and literary traces can reveal. It details the Sufi precedents of his childhood, social aspirations of his youth, spiritual quest of his maturity, and political disappointment of his old age. It extends beyond him into the life of his admirers and followers, who expanded the scope of his reform project nurtured within Sufi ideals. It aims to reveal the texture of his thought through translation from rare documents and to expose his interpersonal relations with those whom he trusted and those who betrayed him. With this nuanced portrait now before
us, we can describe how ‘Ali Muttaqi’s obscured legacy developed in modern South Asia and how he might critique its modern manifestations.

In modern times, ‘Ali Muttaqi’s revival of hadith in South Asia led in two directions, neither of which would be acceptable to him. The first direction saw the hadith revival giving rise to anti-Sufi reformist movements, like the Wahhabis and the Ahl-e Hadith. The second direction saw Sufi scholars focused on jurisprudence and hadith to form the Deoband Academy and its pan-South Asian reform movement. All these movements reacted strongly to British colonialism in the nineteenth century as they tried to articulate a counter-modernism, which took on Islamic fundamentalist modalities in the twentieth century.

These modern reform movements seem to be successful; indeed, they deeply shape Muslim communities in South Asia today as they spread globally, not through seafaring but through digital media. They were fueled by the hadith studies that ‘Ali Muttaqi so advocated, yet they lack something basic that ‘Ali Muttaqi cherished: moderation (i’tidal), just balance (‘adl), and refinement (adab). As the centerpiece of his reformist Sufism, he studied and taught “The Book of Wisdom Sayings” of Ibn ʿAtaʾallah, which includes this aphorism: “A seeker’s ignorance results in his display of bad adab, while punishment may be delayed for him such that he might say, ‘If this were bad adab then divine aid would cease and alienation would increase.’ In fact, divine aid does cease in ways of which he is unaware, for, if not, he would not persist in bad adab without a care—he dwells in alienation and never realizes, for God leaves him to that which he devises.”48 Despite their worldly success, reform movements without good adab—adab that comes only through Sufism—is a sign of alienation and impending disaster.

Ideology is no replacement for adab, for only in face-to-face interactions is refinement, virtue, and respect displayed. This is ‘Ali Muttaqi’s real message to us in the twenty-first century and reason enough to rummage through the dusty shelves of archives to search for the contents of his satchels. If we imagine making a journey toward God, it can only be a Hajj to the heart. It is in bringing knowledge, contentment, and care to the hearts of those around us that we find the way, through twisted paths and stormy seas, to the heart that is in each of us.
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