SUFISM: ITS ORIGIN AND EVOLUTION.

Even before the ushering of Islamic order saints existed in Arabia and were respected by the common population for their pious way of living. They were known as ‘Hanifs’. Like Christian ascetics they preferred to live a life of complete seclusion, away from the world. They were against sensual indulgence. They were satisfied with little worldly possessions; with minimum food and clothing to keep the life going. They were intoxicated with the love for the creator the Almighty — God.

In the early stage of Islam, the believers and followers of Prophet Muhammad believed in Tauhid; the fear of hell in life-after and the belief of going to paradise by a pious living made them surrender their will to the Will of God. Thus by surrendering their will to a higher entity, they began to love Him.

The Prophet was regarded as the true spiritual guide who declared: your God is one God therefore to Him should you submit yourself. He further emphasized on regular prayers for cleansing the mind and purifying the soul: - Keep up your prayer at early morning, at the close of the day and in the first hours of night; surely good deeds drive away bad deeds. Further The Quran says: Remember thy Lord within thyself humbly and fearing with low-spoken words in the morning and evening, and be not of the headless ones.

These basic detrines of Islam were preached by four caliphs who were accepted as true guides of Islam. They were: Abu Bakr (A.D.634), Umar (A.D.644) Ulman (A.D 656) and Ali (A.D.660). Among the four the first and the fourth were popular in spreading this mystical aspect of Islam; ma’rifah. Abu Bakr gave stress on contemplation; Mustahada. He declared: Our abode is transitory, our life therein but a loan, our breaths are numbered and our indolence is manifest. Abu Bakr preferred voluntary poverty to compulsory poverty.

Thus the whole sect of Sufis had made him their ideal in negating themselves worldly possessions, eagerness in accepting poverty and renouncing authority. He is the Imam of the Muslims in general and of the Sufis in particular. The second caliph Umar (644A.D) preached the need for seclusion, contemplation and austerity. Ulman (656A.D) the third Caliph gave stress on true devotion by
surrendering one’s self and ego to Alah. The fourth Caliph, Ali (660 A.D) was an eminent spiritualist and was acclaimed to have possessed mystical experiences with regard to the practical side of saintliness.

FORMATIVE YEARS (800-900 A.D)

Hasan of Basra (728 A.D) was a follower of second Caliph Umar and fourth Caliph Ali. He followed Sha’ria and was regarded as the most important Shaikh of his time. He advocated three basic principles for saint- hood :-(a) Study of religious law (b) following those laws and leading an austere life (c) and by practicing these two, development of absolute faith in the inner being towards God. He spoke very highly about the spiritual value of patience. (Sabr) i.e patience in misfortune and affliction and patience in negating oneself the worldly enjoyments. He declared: A grain of genuine pity is better than a thousand fold weight of fasting and prayer. He emphasized on pure love for God, without any other desire whatsoever.

Hanifa Nu’man (707 A.D) and Ibrahim C Adham (777 A.D) preached austerity (Zeehd) and faith in God (tawakkul), and complete abstinence from worldly possessions. Rabi’a al- Adawiyya (810 A.D) detached herself from the phenomenal world and desired nothing except God. She also emphasized that the soul comes from God and is to be united with Him if it is purified through the process of mortification. She stated that self introspection results in subjugation of lower desires. She felt that love was the ground for spiritual progress. Thus she introduced the concept of disinterested love of God to Sufism. Abi Ali Shaqiq (nineth century) explained the concept of true saintliness in one of his sayings: God had made the pious living in their death and had made the wicked dead during their lives.

Ma’ruf al- Karkhi (815-16 A.D) was such God-intoxicated saint that he saw nothing but God everywhere. He also advocated generosity as a prime necessity for spiritual progress. He said: “There are three signs of generosity i.e to keep faith without resistance to praise without being incited and to give without being asked”.

Abu Sulayman al-Darani (A.D 830) was well known for his aloofness from mankind and for propagation of the doctrine of Unity of God. He said : “when the gnostic’s spiritual eye is opened, his physical eye is closed”.

Abu Abdullah al- Antki (835 A.D) led a life of voluntary poverty and said “the most perfect sincerity is that which keeps you away from pretence, dissimulation and embellishment”.

Bishr al- Hafi (A.D. 841) was a bare-footed ascetic who considered his shoe to be a source of separation from God. He said: “The earth is His carpet and I deem it a privilege to walk on His carpet as there is nothing between my foot and His carpet”.

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Asad al-Mauhasibi (A.D 857) of Basra was largely influenced by the spiritualism of Christian monks. He like other early Sufis believed in a saintly life, renunciation and abstinence from worldly possessions. He was the first Sufi who introduced self-analysis for realization of pure self. He felt that *nafs* (carnal desire) is the soul cause of impurity and compared it with the action of satan. He further said that meditation (*Muraquba*) and remembrance of Divine Name (*dhikr*) lead to Divine Knowledge (*marifat*). He preached that meditation and repetition of Name which he called recollection, were the best means to achieve nearness to God.

Thus the experience of a Sufi is a ‘Divine Experience’ and is beyond the reach of a Psychologist.

Sufis believe love of God as the sole means of reaching the goal of unification with God. Unification of the inferior soul with the Supreme soul is the goal of spiritualism. Dhu'l Noon al-Missri the father of Sufi mysticism said: “They (Sufis) are people who have preferred God to everything, so that God has preferred them to everything”\(^\text{11}\). According to some Sufi saints love of God can be attained only when there is complete detachment from sensual desires. So it is said that a Sufi is “absent from himself and present with God”\(^\text{11}\). Abu Bakr laid much stress on this aspect of Sufi’s relationship with God vis-a-vis the world. He said that the servant of God is who agrees to accept a life where afflictions are regarded as the ordain of God and hence are welcomed, treating them as gifts from his beloved. Shaykh Abdullah Khalif prescribes patience as the ideal attitude of a Sufi; “Tasawuf is patience under the events of destiny, acceptance from the hand of the Almighty God and travelling over the deserts and highland”\(^\text{12}\). It is also prescribed that for true proximity to God a Sufi has to leave the common folk behind i.e to get himself separated from the mankind and then only union with God takes place. So mansur al-Hallaj declared “a true Sufi is essentially unique, non turns towards him nor does he turn towards any one”\(^\text{13}\). Shaykh Muhammad al-Mayahani defined that “Sufism is the subsistence of the heart with God without any mediation”\(^\text{14}\). At this stage the seeker entirely leaves himself on the mercy of his beloved, since he passes away from himself. However this should not mean that the Sufi goes away from the mankind and severs all his relationship from the world.

As Shyak Abu Sayd clarifies “A Sufi is a true man of God, who sits in the midst of his fellowmen, and rises up and eats and sleeps and buys and sells and gives and takes in the bazaars amongst other people and who marries and has social intercourse with other folk and yet is never for one moment forgetful of God”\(^\text{15}\).

Sufis, following the Quranic teachings of Unity of God (*tawhid*), are to discover the ultimate Truth which is only one; the Unity of God. The early
Islamic mystics had seriously followed such a monotheistic doctrine. The spiritual state of unification with God varies from person to person. As the realization is subjective, it can only be experienced but can not be expressed or explained. The procedure a Sufi follows is self mortification for the training of the soul. "Tasawwuf is to let one's self be laid to the Truth". Tasawwuf is based on three qualities; a tenacious attachment to poverty, a profound sense of sacrifice and renunciation and absence of personal volition. Because a Sufi’s existence is due to his ecstacy, the highest state of Divine Consciousness. Thus it becomes clear that the mystical system practiced by a Sufi has three dimensions: ethical, Psychological and Philosophical. The ethical aspect induces the Sufi to live a virtuous and pious life. Thus a Sufi follows "Shari‘a" - the law of religion, as a means of reaching ethical perfection for attainment of marifa-Divine Knowledge. For cleansing the mind a Sufi moves for experiencing mortification of self; Mujahada. So a Sufi’s journey is a journey of cleansing of the heart. Philosophically as a Sufi discovers the intensity of his love towards the Supreme Being, his ego shrinks. The Muslim mystics developed various theological notions on the basis of their spiritual experiences.

Dhul l-Nuh Misri (859 AD) divided knowledge of God in to three categories: theological, philosophical and mystical. Theological knowledge is perfected by faith on the principles of Islam. Philosophical knowledge is realized through application of reason. Mystical knowledge is highly subjective and remains beyond description. At this state of gaining mystical knowledge the Lord becomes the ear, the tongue, the hand of a Sufi. He is completely and overwhelmingly possessed by the love of God. Abu Bistami (874AD) of Iran realized that love of God is the sole means for establishing man’s identity with God. Bistami says that renunciation of the world by itself is valueless unless it leads to the unification with God. He laid great emphasis on the subjugation of the lower self; mujahada - freeing oneself from sensual desires. Bistami out of his mystical experience told of a profound realization that in pure Love, the devotee experiences God’s Love towards him, prior to his own love towards God”. In a remarkable passage he says “I concerned myself to remember God, to love Him, to know Him and to seek Him. When I had come to the end I saw that He had remembered me before I remembered Him; that His love towards me existed before my love towards Him, that His knowledge of me had preceded my Knowledge of Him, and He had sought me, before I sought Him”.

Abu Sayyad Ahmad Kharraz (A.D 899) of Baghdad was another Muslim saint who considered the worship of God as the best means for the realization of spiritual affinity with God. He says that the Gnostics are the treasure house of God; He deposits in them the knowledge of mysteries and information concerning wonderful things. If God desires to be united with a servant of His, He opens to him the gate of worship, and if he takes delight in worship, He opens to him the
gate of proximity, then He raises him to the station of fellowship, then He seats him on the throne of unification”.

Abu’l Hasan Summun (905 A.D) the most learned Shaykh of his time stressed on ‘Pure Love’ for God realization. It is the foundation of the way to God. Further the path of Love is full of distress, and afflictions so that every common man may not claim for His Love and may run away seeing its agony. Ahmad Abu’s Hasan al- Nuri, another spiritualist of the same century regarded gnosis as a very high stage where the devote receives direct communion from God. This he stressed is achieved by Love of God, as seeker’s will is merged with the Will of God. The Gnostic is he who speaks about the knowledge of God when he ceases to exist in himself. Nuri says; “there are two rarest things in our time i.e. a learned man practices what he knows and a Gnostic who speaks from the reality of his state”.

So truth can not be known by rational knowledge, which a philosopher arrives by deduction of reason. It is Love of God which leads to true knowledge which comes by “His Grace”. Nuri in a famous statement says : “Union with God is separation from all else, and separation from all else is union with Him”. Ulhman al Makki (909 AD) wrote volumes about love or mahabba, soul’s contemplation or mushahada, and knowledge of God or Ma ‘rifat. But lastly he says there could not be any befitting explanation because “ecstasy does not admit explanation as it is a secret between God and the true believers”.

From the above discussion it becomes clear that a Sufi’s proximity to God and his realization depends upon the soul’s progress on the path of love. In loving God, the attributes of God become the attributes of the lover of God in a state of mystical ecstacy. The desire to behold God pushes one to the sphere of knowledge which is not dry knowledge by reading of books. Abu’l al-Junyad (A.D.910) mentioned that unification with God happens when the devotee completely surrenders his individual will to Him. As the mystic surrenders, he enters in to a new life of ‘baqa’ or the unitive life of God. Passing through the life of ‘baqa’ the devotee reaches the ultimate stage of ‘tawhid’, where he realizes the oneness of God and the secrets of His creation. At that state his senses do not guide his mind and he has no action in his agenda. God fulfils in him, what He has willed of him,

Hussayn al Hallaj (922 A.D) talked of true love which is the essence of God. He said, “In His perfect isolation God loves Himself, praises Himself, and manifests Himself by love. And it was this first manifestation of love in the Divine Absolute which determined the multiplicity of His attributes and His Names. Then by His essence, He desired to project out of Himself, His supreme joy, that love in aloneness that He might behold it and speak to it. He looked in to eternity and brought forth from non-existence an image, an image of Himself
endowed with all His attributes and all His names: Adam, the man'. So Hallaj said "I am the creative Truth, I am God". This utterance laid to some controversy and he was branded as a pantheist, which he was not. What he meant was the realization of the mystic, the Divine Attributes of God by which he reaches a state of unicity (wahidiyya) at a very high spiritual stage. The height of his realization could not be understood by the orthodox ritualistic Muslims and by the Western scholars of Islamic spiritualism. This is evident from the way he describes God out of his high spiritual realization: "'Before' does not limit Him, 'after' does not interrupt Him 'of' does not vie with Him for precedence, 'from' does not accord with Him, 'to' does not join with Him, 'in' does not inhabit Him 'if' does not consult with Him, 'over' does not overshadow Him, 'under' does not support Him, 'opposite', does not face Him, 'with' does not press Him, 'behind' does not take hold of Him, 'is' does not bring Him to being, 'is not' does not deprive Him of being".

Abu Bakr al-Shibali (945 AD) was a close associate of Hallaj. He advocated self-introspection and complete control over the lower self. He preached the concept of pure love or Love of God for the sake of God. Abdal-Jabbar al-Niffari (965 AD) preached that Love of God is achieved when the devotee slowly renounces the world. He also stressed on recollection and repetition of God’s Name (dhikr) because it leads to conversion of human qualities into Divine Attributes.

Shaykh AbuBakr al-Kalabadhi (995 A.D.) was famous for his authoritative treatise on the mystical doctrines. He was the first mystic scholar who related the Sufi’s mysticism to Islamic Orthodoxical ideas. Prayers; yes, submission to Allah, yes, respect for all scriptures, yes, honesty, yes, the zakat yes, care for the aged parents, yes, protection of women, yes. But all these will not be sufficient unless there is detachment from the world. Kalabadhi writes in *kitab al ta‘arruf*: “the meaning of detachment is that one should be detached outwardly from accidents and inwardly from compensations, that is one should not take anything out of the accidents of the world nor seek any compensation for one has thus forsworn, whether it be temporal or eternal but rather, one should do this because it is a duty to God and not for any other reason or motive". He laid much emphasis on the realization of gnosis. He distinguished between intellectual knowledge and mystical knowledge. Intellectual knowledge is limited to human faculties and is concerned about the creation, but mystical knowledge or gnosis deals with creator and the Divine Attributes. Intellect is a thing originated in time, and serves as a guide to things like itself. According to him a true Gnostic is never aware of his own attributes like hope, fear, awe, love etc. for he is concerned with God alone. He has passed away all passions, he is no longer bothered for knowledge, justice, gratitude etc. Kalabadhi preached the Islamic concept of oneness of God, explained the concept of *tawhid* in his
book Kitab-al-ta 'arruf that God is one alone, single, eternal, everlasting, knowing, powerful, living, hearing, seeing, strong, mighty, majestic great, generous. There is no eternal but He, and no God beside Him, that He is neither body nor shape nor form, nor person, nor element, nor accident, that with Him neither junction nor separation neither movement nor rest, neither augmentation nor decrease, that He has neither parts nor particles, nor members, nor limbs, nor aspects, nor places in.

Another eminent Sufi scholar who influenced ardent Sufis like Jalal al-Din Rumi was Abu Talib Mukki (996AD). He elaborated in his famous work Qut-al-qulub (The food of hearts), the doctrines of patience, and love. He said; “patience has three stages; first it means that the servant ceases to complain and this is the stage of repentance; second, he becomes satisfied with what is decreed and this is the aim of ascetics; third, he comes to love what ever his Lord does and this is the true stage of friends of God”.

Thus there is no distinction between love of God and knowledge of God. In this context freedom from lower qualities i.e. (Sifat-ibashriyya) is an essential qualification in the path of mysticism.

Abu Saiyd Abi-il Khayr (1048A.D) believed in the service of humanity. He felt that a true saint always remains friendly and affectionate towards his fellowmen. A spiritual recluse, who ignores mankind and remains involved merely in ascetic practices is not a true seeker of God. Abu Saiyd followed the teachings of Abul - Abbas Bashshar who said “when a disciple performs an act of kindness to dervish, it is better for him than a hundred genuflexions, and if he gives him a mouthful of food it is better for the disciple than a whole night spent on prayer”.


Evolution of Islamic mystic thought took a turn in the beginning of twelveth century. Abu Hamid-al-Ghazali was its pioneer who brought Sufism close to orthodox Islam. In forty Chapters of his main treatise on Sufism i.e. Ihyaulum al-din (The revival of Religious Sciences), he aimed to reconcile shariat (the law) and tariqat (the spiritual path). Ghazali’s mystical system was influenced by neoplatonism, and Christian asceticism. From Plotinus he learnt the concept of ‘One God’ as the sole cause of everything. The news of the Christian mystics with regard to gnosis influenced him. He was also guided by the doctrine of “Self analysis” profounded by early Muslim saints. He accepted the difference between rational knowledge and mystical experience. He observed: ‘that the Sufis are men of feeling, not men of words’.

He also accepted the Sufi’s assertion that dissociation from the visible world is necessary for control over carnal desires and lust because they hinder the spiritual progress of the mystic.
Ghazali realized that true austerity is gained by a mystic who practices self-mortification. The lower self or the “nafs” is to be subjugated because it is the major cause of impurity. He wrote: “you ought to know yourself as you really are, so that you may understand of what nature you are and when you have come to this world, and for what purpose you are created and in what your happiness and misery consist”.

Ghazali informs us that there are five kinds of love: (i) loving the self, family and society (ii) love for personal gains and advancements (iii) selfless love for doing good to others without any expectation or return (iv) love for moral values (v) love between the self and the absolute on the basis of pre-existing harmony. The mystic according to Ghazali experiences all kinds of love. The mystic soul is naturally drawn towards God on account of pre-existing fellowship. He emphasized on the disinterested love of God, preached by the early Sufis like Rabi and Shibli that God should be loved for His own sake because green things and running water are loved as such and not for the sake of providing drinking water or green vegetables. The genuine lover of God does not fear death, because in death he merges with the beloved. In passionate love for God the soul of the Sufi cries for His vision and union with Him. He also distinguished between intellectual knowledge and Divine knowledge. Ghazali mentioned; “Man loves God because of the affinity between the human soul and its source, for it shares in the Divine nature and attributes, because through knowledge and love it can attain to eternal life and himself become God like”.

In the book “Miskhat al anwar” Ghazali describes the final state of a true devotee termed as ‘fana’ - absorption of the soul in God. He states that when the mystic enters into pure and absolute unicity, in to the kingdom of the One and Alone he reaches the end of the ascent. Ghazali has described the various attributes of God: He is Exalted, Almighty, Supreme, neither mortality nor death has domain over him. He is the power and the kingdom and the glory and the majesty and to Him belongs creation and to rule over what he has created. He alone is the giver of life. Not the smallest atom on the earth or the heaven, but is unknown to Him. He is aware of how the ants creep upon the hard rock in the darkness of the night.

Ghazali’s mission of reconciliation of the orthodox Islam and Sufism was carried on by Shaykh Abdul-Qadir Jilani (1166AD). He founded Qadiriyya sect of Sufis. During his time scholars (Ulama) were facing the serious problem of the synthesis of law of religion (shariat) and the various Sufi doctrines. Jilani summarizes the mystical qualities to be acquired by the saints: “Three things are essential for every believer of God. First to submit to God’s decree, second, to safeguard from that which is forbidden (in law) and third, to remain satisfied with fate.”
In his attempt to develop Quaranic mysticism Jilani laid emphasis on the control of the lower-self for realization of true state of devotion towards God (ubudiyat). Control of the lower-self is achieved if one sincerely follows the path recommended by the Prophet, particularly the teachings regarding observance of the religious law: pass away from creatures thy carnal desire and thy individual will by the command of God. Then thou will become worthy of the abode of the knowledge of God. The sign of thy passing away from creatures is thy detachment from mankind and dissociation from their gatherings and thy aloofness towards their belongings. The sign of controlling your passion is that you do not seek any benefit from anyone nor dose suffer any lose for anyone. The sign of passing away of thy will into the Will of God is that thou does not determine anything and there remains no desire or need or purpose within thee.

Muhuyiuddin al—Arabi (1240A.D) was well versed in Greek Philosophy, Hellenism, Neoplatonism and theological doctrines of Ghazali. With this background he made strong the concept of ‘One God’ and Unity of Being. His Sufi system is an example of perfect monistic philosophy. He was regarded as a pioneer of the Sufi doctrine of ‘Hama’ost (All is He) in the Islamic world. He mentioned that: ‘He is and there is with Him no before or after nor below, nor far nor near nor union nor division nor how, nor where nor place. He is the one without oneness and the single without singleness. It is necessary that you know Him in this fashion; not by learning nor by intellect nor by understanding nor by imagination nor by sense nor by the outward eye, nor by perception.”

So according to Arabi He is the essence of all. It is one reality appears in the form of multiplicity. The ‘many’ are not independent substances existing by themselves. The one is one (jama) and we consider it to be many (farq) only due to manifestations. So ultimately he came to the most important conclusion about the creator-created relationship: Creator is the source of creation and creation is by the Creator, but Creator is not creation and creation is not the same as Creator.

Ibn al-Arabi did not accept the religious concept of God. A religious man treats his God out of his religious consciousness. He thinks of virtue and sin., reward and punishment and thinks that God is the deciding authority. Arabi regards this concept of God to be finite and imperfect. Further he says: we ourselves are the attributes by which we describe God; this description is bound to be limited and imperfect. God is necessary to us in order that we may exist while we are necessary to Him in order that He may manifest Himself. The creator (al-Haqq) appears in the form of creation (all-Khalq).

Arabi has extensively described the position of ‘man’ (insan) in the scheme of God’s creation. He viewed man as a representative of the entire cosmos. According to him the evolution in to man made the process of creation
complete. He divides human soul in to three categories: rational, animal and vegetative. The rational soul is the perfect soul which is capable of thinking, memorizing and understanding. The animal soul is confined to lower desires. The vegetable soul is concerned with the physical aspects of man. We find that such a division of human soul is similar to Plato’s division of tripatite soul. He said that when we gain Divine Knowledge we realize that our soul is nothing but the Divine Soul only. He did not accept the theory of ‘Unification’ with God, as unification supposes separation. So he viewed man’s union with God as his awareness of the existing identity with God. The Sufi in his perfect state of mystical experience (Warid) knows that his soul is nothing but of the same Absolute Unity. With regard to worldly knowledge it is the intellect which gathers them, sends them to the centre of imagination and then they come to the faculty of understanding. Arabi calls Divine Light as the real source of every form of human knowledge. He further says that mystical knowledge transcends empirical and rational knowledge. It is the Knowledge of God, the Light of Light which is revealed in the illuminated heart of the Sufi by the Grace of God. He said thus: the eye of his creature could not see Him, and if men understood the meaning of this, they would know themselves and if they knew themselves they would know God; and if they really knew God, they would be satisfied with Him and would think about Him alone, not about the kingdom of the heavens and earth.

Divine knowledge leads to the realization of ‘fana’, Arabi explained that ‘fana’ is only a recognition of inmost self or the awareness of the oneness with God. It makes man free from the bondage of ignorance and when this freedom is achieved he becomes a realized person. Arabi in contradistinction to Hallaj, asserted that man does not attain God-hood because there is nothing like, that, he only knows himself.

The Sufi reaches this ‘fana’ or absolute knowledge about the self gradually. Arabi was the first Sufi who developed the concept of universal religion which follows from his pantheistic Philosophy. Since there is one Divine Essence in innumerable forms, God may be worshiped in inumerable ways. God can not be limited to any particular belief or creed. The true Gnostic (arif) follows the Principle of one God and one Religion.

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