INTRODUCING THE DISSERTATION
Sufism represents the inner aspect of Islam in its doctrinal sense, while as an experience it is a spiritual journey of the individual from a limited understanding of his own self towards a more limitless quest for the realisation of the Divine. But this rather simplistic interpretation in a single sentence tends to hide the nuances of spirituality and belief that underlines the life and activities of those who embark on this journey towards the ultimate Truth. It is a journey where the Path is uncharted, the boundaries limitless and the goal elusive. In a sense Sufism represents a deep yearning and quest for Divine realities, with the ultimate aim of spiritual union with God. But this is just one of the many senses in which we understand Sufism. Or rather it can be said that we do not understand it at all. Collating whatever little understanding they have of the subject, scholars have, over the time, tried to interpret Sufism along parameters of historical enquiry, religious confrontation, decline and flourish among others.

In the sense of an historical enquiry Sufism has seldom been studied beyond the so called Master Narrative, woven so intricately around the personality of the ruler and the performance of the court. The persona of the ruler was supposed to tower over all and sundry in his empire. Under such a hegemonic structure it was all but natural that individual voices however organised and inspirational must remain subsumed under those of the royalty. Actions and decisions of the ruler constituted the royal performance which the courtiers witnessed with a sense of awe and scribes put them to paper with an even greater degree of agility. Under such circumstances events and developments that do not fit into the grand narrative are left aside to languish under the cacophony of the royal courts.

Sufism, essentially signifying an interpersonal relation with God, with the ultimate aim of spiritual union through a rigorous practice of meditative exercises, aimed primarily towards the moral and spiritual elevation of an individual by purging the soul of all insidious and materialist tendencies. It
was then that states of prolonged austerity bore fruits with the mystic becoming aware of Divine realities, thereby graduating himself from an ascetic to a Walî or 'friend of God'. He is then the 'chosen one'—honoured above the rest of His worshippers, after His messengers and prophets'. Such liberal ideas germinating within the folds of Islamic thought sounded alien to the puritanical guardians of the faith. Instead they chose to remain wedded to the literal interpretations of texts and beliefs. Islam to them represented an exclusive, politicised and closed arena, where external influences and meaningful 'diversions' are to be strictly abhorred. Eventually such an inward looking mentality developed into a confrontational attitude where Sufis were portrayed as individuals' contra to theologians and religious leaders. The twain shall never meet.

Such forceful diatribe by religious bigots, who 'represented an extreme face of Islam, came to act, in the long run, as a qualifier for the mystical dimension of the religion. Sufism began to be characterised more and more as an ideal that was opposed to the essential tenets of religion. Sufis are individuals who preach Islam in the wrong sense, and practice a faith that has little or no resemblance with the creed of Muhammad (SAW). In turn they contribute little but harm enormously the beliefs of common individuals who follow them in search of a pure faith. This unequivocal hatred quite unfortunately undermined the possibility of any independent voice that may be heard from the side of the mystics themselves. With conservative Islamic trends being largely overestimated, there continues to be an underestimation of the size and vigour of the mystical voice.

Examing Sufism through such a lens of confrontation has been the fallout of an organised attempt to convince us of the fact that the mystical traditions of Islam have little or no voice of their own. Their relative mellowness is often taken as an indicator of their deficient tradition which,
although operating within the broader tradition of Islam, must be relegated to the periphery of social experience.

Recognising Sufi orders as a phenomenon within the Islamic tradition runs the risk of being strait jacketed into historical patterns considered as universally applicable to all Sufi orders, across time and space. Such is the notion of Orientalist scholars who find it difficult to free themselves from the tripartite formula of ancient-medieval-modern. However since Sufism corresponds to the so called ‘medieval’ phase of this categorisation, the above can hardly be applied to elaborate the development of Sufism. Rather being a social phenomenon, rising from within the folds of religion, it was thought prudent to apply the parameters of civilisation to analyse the mystical tradition of Islam. Thus the theory of ‘classicism and decline’ comes in to shape our understanding of Sufis and their exploits and teachings.

The classical phase of Sufism begins with the foundation of the institution, centered on the life and actions of the saints themselves. It was argued to be an unpolluted period of personal brilliance of the saints together with their natural expressions of spirituality and mysticism. This flourish found its continuation through the genius of the master saint, and the rigorous initiation of his disciples. In turn the path was laid for Sufism to emerge as an institutionalised form of belief and practice, locating its essence in the norms of piety and austerity, discipline and rigor, faith and practice. This seemingly unpolluted state of affairs came to lose its form and content with the saints’ establishments and tomb complex becoming centers of devotion in return for material wealth and state affiliation. The principle of hereditary succession came to add to the spiritual malaise, thereby resulting in the fading out of the spirit of pure mystical pursuit that had been the very essence of the institution. This notion of decline therefore comes as
an inevitable phenomenon in the historical span of Sufism which ceases to be a glory of the past, while degenerating to a decadent present.

While going through the above modalities of studying Sufism one cannot possibly miss the attempt at studying Sufism with relation to certain parameters and contexts. It may be through the lenses of court history, or from the eyes of puritan religious leaders claiming their own slice of sanctity and pureness of approach, or lastly through the parameters of western civilisation limiting itself to the binary growth-decline. In none of these approaches does Sufism manifest itself strongly as an independent phenomenon divorced from the crutches of interpretative contextuality. Rather it is always tied down to a specific pretext, which then acts as the qualifier helping us understand the complexities of Islamic mysticism.

It is precisely on this ground that this thesis counts its novelty. However it is not to be believed that a dissertation can fulfill its aim by situating itself only on claims of novelty. Even if we reject the Orientalist theorisation of growth-decline, yet one cannot possibly disagree that thirteenth century witnessed the beginning of a slow but definite process of institutionalisation of the Islamic mystical tradition. This was precisely carried out through the formalisation of the master-disciple relation, the founding of numerous, and often finely built, Sufi hospices known as khanqahs, and most importantly the codification of mystical doctrines for the future. This was precisely the same time that Sufism made its foray into the Indian subcontinent, slowly making its presence felt in the midst of a little civilisation and society.

It is against such a socio-religious context that my search begins at unearthing the 'voices' of an institution which seemed to provide the most dynamic face of Islam in the Indian subcontinent. In this search towards an 'expression' of Islamic mysticism in the subcontinent, one cannot possibly overlook the mystical rituals and devotional practices that characterised their
beliefs and traditions. My work sets out to study these rituals and practices as a way of mystical life, taking together the enormous variety of its discipline and exuberance, etiquette and spontaneity. At the same time the study tries to move towards a possible conclusion that such esoteric rituals and religious practices seemed to provide the most comprehensive means of expressing Sufi ideologies and spiritual beliefs.

Rituals and practices, within a single mystical order or spanning across orders, are primarily the means of upholding the individuality of the order — in the mystical circle, but also in the face of being subsumed by court histories. In this context it may be mentioned that the greatest irony attached to Sufi studies of the subcontinent is that little attention has been paid, if at all, towards the fact that apart from the royal house, Sufism is the only institution of that period that has generated a history of its own. Its intellectual productivity is as varied and diverse as the royal accounts themselves. And the irony remains that inspite of this large collection of sources, the entry point to studying south Asian Sufism, on most occasions, has been the royal court and the immediate political environment. Thus through an analysis of south Asian Sufism from within its own voices, a sincere attempt is made to expunge the institution from the royal canopy, and examine its values and contributions on its own merit.

In the process of engaging with the myriad manifestations of the ritualistic aspects of Sufism in the subcontinent, this work limits itself to two earliest and most influential orders of the region — the Chishtia and the Suhrawardia, and the mystical rituals and practices associated with these orders. Here again two most important practices have been dealt with regard to the two orders — the exercise of audition with music (sama) for the Chishtia; and the remembrance and recitation of Divine names (zikr) with regard to the Suhrawardia. The choice of the orders may seem a bit dated. But it has been made keeping in mind the fact that apart from dominating
the arena of Sufism in south Asia, these two orders, and to a large extent their sub-orders, have produced a range of historical and literary accounts on the mystical tradition, its antecedents and spread in south Asia. A close analysis of these bring forward the commonality, and to a great extent the diversity, in mystical ritual and practices. The subtle portrayal of internal strategies of practices together with relations of knowledge and power hopes to enrich the ensuing narration. Seen through the lenses of these texts, the details of which follow, it is possible to discern a clear tradition behind these rituals and practices, which then no longer remain as 'signs of morbid inwardness in those who undertake it.'

In course of the work questions have been raised with regard to the process and functioning of these rituals, their essentiality within the mystical order. What is most intrinsic of these practices? Why are they so crucial in the spiritual journey of the mystic? Though it has been argued that spiritual rituals are the principal forms of expression among Sufi orders of the subcontinent, the justification for labeling them as expressions of Sufi spirituality has been looked in more detail in the pages of the thesis itself. Together with this attention has also been placed on the experience of spiritual states (ḥāl) and stations (maqam). Although they do not find themselves in the core of mystical practices yet their study is imperative if one is to measure the experience of mystical rituals. In doing so they have been explored with due regard to the context and focus in which they are operative. While talking of context it has to be kept in mind that when one religious institution moves from one cultural space to another, an intrinsic necessity involves that of adaptation, required by followers of the immigrant religion. Such an exercise occurs at multiple levels: interaction with local society and culture, dependence on the native population, ritual practices and worship. Although this work explicitly chooses to concentrate on the last two dimensions, the fact that social processes are not hermetically sealed
experiences ensures greatly that the other mentioned factors also find relevance in the pages of the work, discernable if not dominant.

Any methodological intervention and newness in argumentation locates its roots in the pages of recent scholarship on the area of research. Within the arena of Sufi studies in south Asia, few works have dealt with the dynamics of rituals. And it is through a closer analysis of such shortcomings that plague this historiographical tradition, does the current work attempt to locate its historical significance in the area of south Asian Sufism. Over the last decade one of the earliest works to deal explicitly with the area of Sufi rituals was that of Richard Ian Netton's *Sufi Ritual: The Parallel Universe* (2000). Starting out with the claim that Sufi rituals form a parallel universe to Islamic religious practices, Netton engaged in an examination of a variety of rituals in the context of two orders - Naqshbandiyya and Ni'matullahi. Although both these Sufi orders fall beyond the scope of my study, the theoretical premises attempted in the book seek to provide a multi-perspective discussion drawing on theology, phenomenology, anthropology and semiotics - though the application of these standards remain quite uneven. But inspite of all the ambitious aims and claims, the work suffers from two crucial shortcomings. The first being methodological. It shies away from working on the original works (read sources) produced by and on the Sufi masters and their activities. The actual sources consulted being almost all in English translation; it is unfortunate that the author sets on to base his hypothesis on these. Secondly on the area of argumentation Netton feeds on the Orientalist misconception that Sufism as an ideology is distinct from the larger Islamic tenets. In my work it has been argued, through an analysis of primary texts and accounts, including words of the masters themselves, that Sufi rituals are essentially embedded in the substratum of Islamic religious practices, and cannot in any way be divorced from them. The entire premise of rituals being a 'parallel universe', thus largely falls flat.
Thirdly the argument that Sufi rituals lead to a fundamental alienation in terms of adhering to regular religious norms and practices is intrinsically against the doctrine of Sufism. Again it has been argued in the current thesis that in the context of the subcontinent, both the Chishtia and the Suhrawardia orders practiced and emphasised on the importance of Islamic religious practices, primarily prayer along with fasting. The above argument of alienation can hardly be considered as justified when we move deeper into the corpus of mystical rituals especially the practice of remembering the Divine through the act of reciting the Divine names (zikr). Such a ritual forming the core of Suhrawardi spiritual exercise is in direct consonance with the words of God as revealed in the Holy Quran ‘Their hearts in all humility should engage in the remembrance of God.’ (57:16). In the above context it has been argued in the course of my work that Sufi rituals, rather than alienation, strongly upheld the bonds of compassionate relationship, through the medium of rituals and practices, with the disciples and inmates of the hospice as also with fellow mystics, even if it may be from a different order.

Shemeem Burney Abbas’s work on The Female Voice in Sufi Ritual: Devotional Practices of Pakistan and India (2002) describes female Sufi rituals as a more recent phenomenon through the use of linguistic anthropological study of the poetic discourses that mark the devotional settings in the subcontinent. While Abbas argues for a more female centric approach to the history of Sufi rituals in the devotional arena of the subcontinent, she rightly argues that the development and flourish of such a tradition is quite a recent phenomenon in the mystical tradition of south Asia. During the period in which the current work tries to locate itself we rarely find any mention of women participation in Sufi rituals. But with the growth of the modern nation state with its agenda on gender emancipation may have been a facilitator towards a easier participation of women in Sufi rituals. In the
midst of such a liberated social space, it must also be remembered that the context Abbas selects for situating her study of women participation is largely tribal, and the shrine of Hazrat Lal Shahbaz Qalandar in Sehwan chosen for the study is also not that of any established mystical order. Added to this is a conscious tendency by the author to regard Muslim orthodoxy and Sufism as opposed to each other. Rather it must be remembered, as I have tried to argue in my thesis, that any sort of spiritual training and practice has its initiation in the religious doctrines of Islam. So that a ritual of *sama* (audition) or *zikr* (remembrance) however effective it may be is never ever considered and accorded a position above mainstream religious practices as *salat* (prayer) or *tilawat* (recitation of the Quran). My work tries to show that the sanctity of any ritual setting has to be, and definitely was, punctuated by Islamic religious practices. So that such practices remained additional to formal religious practices, but never transgressed the ethical standards of religion set by the Quran and the Prophetic traditions. In the light of such inferences it is a fallacy to talk of 'orthodox Islam' being opposed to 'Sufi rituals', while at the same time confuse the essential meanings of the concepts of 'orthodoxy' with Wahabi oriented Islam.

The last of the prominent works that concerns itself with the aspect of Sufi rituals is Kenneth S. Avery's book on the exercise of audition (*sama*) titled *A Psychology of Early Sufi Sama: Listening and Altered States* (2004). Avery sets out to sketch in his work a picture of Sufi listening to music (*sama*) and the act of dancing, particularly in the context of classical Sufism. Concentrating on the particular ritual of audition, Avery examines the kind of language used in describing the characteristics of the spiritual exercise, the essential psychology working behind the ritual, and at the end the variety of rituals that are performed during the exercise. Although the book once again concentrates on the Persian world of Sufism, it fails to overcome certain
loose ends of argument, precisely because of the inability to take into account the multiplicity of sources, while attempting to arrive at a comprehensive deduction with regard to the ritual. South Asian Sufi tradition was dynamic enough, even in its earlier days of establishment, to produce a variety of accounts that provide a vivid picture of the order, or of the particular saint within that order with regard to his theological and ideological viewpoints. Thus there remains a wide possibility of developing the idea of mystical rituals and practices both in respect to the particular Sufi who patronised it, and also from the point of view of the ideology the particular order conformed to. Now the question that again comes forward is whether these two layers of ideas were in unison, or whether they contradicted each other within the larger tradition of Sufism in the subcontinent. The answer lay in the individuality of ideas Sufis projected in the course of their life and teachings. Rituals and practices had the power to spill over boundaries of mystical orders, where the master of a particular order may find himself attracted to a particular exercise, forming the core spiritual practice of another order. This ritual then goes on to the extent of becoming the most evocative form of his mystical expression. Therefore it is precisely from within such heterogeneous trends and possibilities that the current work tries to locate the importance of Sufi rituals as an intrinsic and integrating dimension of mysticism in south Asia. The tradition is by no means homogenous, but rather is conditioned by a distinct possibility of change in its course and also its acceptance as a spiritual exercise.

While the above mentioned works focus exclusively on the aspect of Sufi rituals, mostly beyond south Asia; two other works deal with the two orders this thesis focuses upon – Chishtia and Suhrawardia. Although these works do not emphasise exclusively on the aspect of rituals as an integral characteristic of Sufi orders in the subcontinent, yet they include ample discussion on the same in their analysis of Sufism of the subcontinent.
Firstly, Bruce Lawrence and Carl Ernst’s *Sufi Martyrs of Love: The Chishti Order in South Asia and Beyond*, (2002) sets out to appreciate a ‘centuries-old spiritual journey’ in the history of the subcontinent. Moving away from the period centric models in historical scholarship on Sufism, a typical characteristic of the ‘Western scholarly dossier’, the above work attempts at providing a phenomenological description of the Chishti order, its practices, together with its patterns of mastery and hagiography. Rising above the rhetoric of classicism and decline, both Lawrence and Ernst harp on the continuity of Chishti spiritual practices and models of sanctity. Its argument, already mentioned above with respect to that of the current thesis, concerns the problems of compartmentalising Sufi orders as water tight entities. Rather the researcher thinks it worthwhile to agree that ideas, rituals and practices were held in common and their essential characteristics and style freely adopted from other orders. Such was the instance with both the Chishtia and Suhrawardia orders – which form the focus of this thesis. Although works have frequently recognised the popularity of Islamic music in south Asia, few have attempted to adequately deal with it as a part of the Sufi tradition. This thesis by examining the inextricable connection of music to the spiritual exercise of audition, together with the debate on its permissibility, attempts a more cogent explanation of the underlying philosophical issues that characterise this particular Sufi ritual.

Second is a work by Qamar ul- Huda, titled *Striving for Divine Union: Spiritual Exercises for Suhrawardi Sufis* (2003), which, as the title suggests, works on the dimensions of the Suhrawardi lineage. Like the one above this book too does not restrict itself to south Asia alone, but rather looks beyond the subcontinent. This book presents Suhrawardi ideas and practices interwoven with the larger Islamic traditions. And in doing so in the realm of spiritual practices it naturally provides a fair amount of attention to the relationship Suhrawardi Sufis shared with regard to the mystical practices of
the remembrance of God (zikr) and the recitation of Quran (tilawat).
However the relevancy of the work to the current thesis remains in the
capacity of its detailed and insightful discussion on the Suhrwardi approach
to the spiritual practice of zikr. But the inherent lacuna this work suffers
from is with regard to the correct approach to sources. As a learning curve
the current thesis has made use of perspectives and studies specifically
applicable to the Suhrwardia order in south Asia, rather than building up an
array of inappropriate approaches. Another major area of shortcoming in
the book concerns the relationship of Suhrwardi Sufi rituals and political
strategies with those of the other Sufi lineages. As mentioned above in the
context of the subcontinent both the Chishtia and Suhrwardia had
influences upon each other where mystical rituals and practices remained a
primary area of integration of the two diverse views propounded by these
orders. My work being limited to only these two mystical orders, it is
imperative to unravel such points of interconnectedness, but that too
within the realm of research and primary sources, more so in the production
of the saints themselves.

It is precisely with the intention of solving and putting straight some
of the tensions and argumentative lapses as enumerated above that the
current dissertation embarks on its journey with nervous steps. It is not
expected that a thesis on Sufi rituals should begin with a discussion that has
no seeming resemblance to the broader aims of the work. But the
researcher, with all the pious intentions, dares to take the liberty of opening
the work with a discussion on Quran and Sufism, as Chapter 1. Inspite of all
the ambitious, and at times hegemonic, claims of Orientalist Western
scholars that Islamic mysticism had everything to do with Hellenistic,
Persian and Buddhist thoughts among else, it goes without saying that
Sufism had its roots firmly set in the words of the Almighty- The Holy
Quran. And this fact remains beyond any shade of doubt after a millennium
of scholarship on the subject. Thus an attempt has been made to look into the interpretations of *tasawwuf* and through it the expressive principles of Sufism in the words of the Quran. In trying to measure the spiritual essence of the book an attempt has been made to explicate the mystical ideology and belief contained within. However the chapter sticks to its roots- south Asia. Here the spiritual benefits of the Quran, as discerned by the mystics of south Asia, particularly the Chishtis and Suhrawardis, have been discussed. Drawing upon instances from the life and words of the great saints it has been argued that the Quran held immeasurable benefits not only for the Sufi but also for the commoner, who many a times was led into these benefits by the mystic himself.

Chapter 2 and 3 looks in great detail into the mystical practices that came to characterise a particular Sufi order. In Chapter 2 the discussion begins with the role of music as a tool of spiritual elevation, among the Sufis. It then connects directly to the development of the exercise of audition (*sama*) as a primary spiritual exercise among the Chishti Sufis of the subcontinent. The distinctiveness of *sama* as the defining spiritual exercise of the Chishti Sufis of south Asia forms the crux of this chapter. Together with this the discussion also accommodates the varying viewpoints of Chishti masters on this particular ritual and their individuality in interpreting and regulating this practice with respect to time and place.

Chapter 3 in a similar vein moves on to explore the spiritual exercise of remembrance of God (*zikr*) as championed by Sufis of the Suhrawardia order. This particular exercise has remained as the ideological core of all mystical exercises around which various orders have framed their own rituals. The Suhrawardia Sufis are consider the leading champions of the practice of *zikr*, and their contributions towards popularising this exercise, while at the same time maintaining the sanctity of the ritual has been instrumental in preserving the worth of this practice as crucial to every Sufi
order. Through an examination of Suhrawardi texts and treatises, though meager as compared to the Chishtis, it has been attempted to study the ideology and emotion of the order towards upholding the value of *zikr* as a primary spiritual exercise.

In Chapter 4 an attempt has been made to present a hypothesis, drawing on various Sufi texts and accounts that challenge the exclusivist argument of Sufi rituals. To make it simpler, as mentioned above, it has been argued that spiritual practices as expressions of mystical ideology are never watertight compartments limited to the spiritual boundaries of a particular Sufi order. Rather they are readily recognised and respected by various Sufi orders. In the following thesis this argument has sought its justification through an analysis of the Chishtia and Suhrawardia attitudes towards the rituals of *sama* and *zikr*, together with the effect they had on the spiritual psyche of the two orders. Thus the Suhrawardia approach to the oft criticised and perennially controversial practice of *sama* has been analysed with regard to the broader ideals of Sufism and the ideological standpoint of the particular order. At the same time the Chishtia order, which stands out for its vigorous support of the practice of audition with or without the accompaniment of music (*sama*), has been examined in the following pages with regard to their views and acceptance of the exercise of recollecting God (*zikr*).

In spite of a plethora of spiritual practices regulating mystical orders across the subcontinent in their eternal quest for the Divine, it goes without saying that almost all the Sufi masters in their words and creations harp on a single most pre requisite without which all efforts towards spiritual realisation is laid waste- Adab. In Chapter 5 it has been argued that the norms of etiquette are absolutely imperative if the mystic aims at spiritual elevation. Most importantly this principle of maintaining a strict sense of etiquette does not limit itself to the realm of spiritual exercises alone. Rather
it has been argued that while mystical exercises should be performed with the utmost degree of *adab*, the realisation of such a pre condition should arise long before the mystic is made eligible to participate in spiritual exercises of intense rigor. It is the path towards the highest spiritual realisation that is conditioned by the quality of *adab* without which all mystical knowledge is laid waste.

In Chapter 6 the thesis draws its curtains with perhaps the most difficult and esoteric aspect of Sufism- mystical experience. Almost all the major treatises on mysticism, in south Asia and beyond have stumbled upon this rock while at the same time acknowledging that mystical experience is the preserve of mystics alone, no amount of language and interpretation can hope to delineate the intricacies of the relation that exists exclusively between God and His lover. Sufi rituals, at one level, are the understanding of experience, which purges the heart of all material tendencies thereby making itself an abode of the ultimate Truth. It is in this journey towards the Divine that Sufi rituals have a crucial role to play. In that sense therefore Sufi rituals are more than just devotional exercises, rather they are experiences in spirituality. And it is towards a search for this mystical experience that the current chapter tries to look into.

It is sincerely hoped that the study expanded through the chapters above will succeed in the goal of providing a precise analysis of spiritual practices and exercise as it developed and flourished in the south Asian context, through the untiring genius of two enigmatic Sufi orders - Chishtia and Suhrawardia and their spiritual masters whose mission set the tone for others to walk the uncharted path of spirituality with challenges and experiences lived in their lifetime and after.