INTRODUCTION

More than a century has passed since scholars began to realize the need for interpreting the history of Sufism in terms of contemporary historical science. The progress that has been made since then in many directions is undeniable. Yet every advance has thrown into sharper relief that we have a long way to go in understanding just how large a part Sufism plays in terms of recording history.

It is a general phenomenon worldwide that commoners were never a subject for thought, discussion or writing of in political chronicles. The authors of these historical and political texts did not deem commoners ‘interesting’ and rarely visited the dwellings of those who made up the majority of the kingdom. To an historian, these people seemed non-existent, persona non grata. It is not surprising then that the theme of their works centred around the state, its ruler, and the ruling class. Many historians were in fact employees of the ruling classes; they spoke the language of their patrons, and were paid for the very activity of chronicling their lives. What do these source books provide then in terms of realistic information about life during that period?
It is with great thanks to the Islamic mystic movement of Sufis, who paid importance to the human being rather than materialism in the form of power and assets.

In the beginning of the 14th century, a distinct type of literature was born in the khanqah of Sufi saint Nizamuddin Auliya. This is the only literature where ruling classes were not the main subjects, and in fact, many malfuzaat do not even make mention of these classes. Except Iltutmish\(^1\), one cannot find names of any ruler of medieval India on the pages of malfuzaat.

During the 14th century, Amir Hasan Sijzi decided to disseminate the teachings of his master, Nizamuddin Auliya, recording Nizamuddin’s discourses a year before his master was aware. Finally he took formal permission from Nizamuddin to record him, and the first conversation was recorded on Sunday, 3 Shaaban A.H. 707 (January 27, 1308)\(^2\).

Understanding the malfuzaat requires an appreciation of its philosophy and the era when it was penned down. In a seminar on the “Relevance of Sufism in the Contemporary World” (New Delhi, January 2002), Khwaja Hasan Nizami Sani’s\(^3\) lecture was academically useful but failed to offer satisfactory explanation to questions of the audience. Why? The audience

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\(^1\) Iltutmish (1210-1236) was disciple of Qutbuddin Bakhtiyar Kaki in whose memory he built Qutub Minar in Mehrauli (Delhi).

\(^2\) Sijzi. Amir Hasan, Fawaid-ul-Fuad p. 176

\(^3\) Khwaja Hasan Nizami Sani is the Sajjada Nashin (spiritual successor) of Shaikh Nizamuddin Auliya.
may have been too scientific in temperament to entertain stories of miracles. Indeed, malfuzaat is rich with parables and miracles that will have little value to a human mind with a scientific temperament. Yet it is not the parables or miracles that are important, but the messages hidden in it. These messages are indispensable if we look the way contemporary world is taking shape.

A semiotic\(^4\) approach can be adopted for reading malfuzaat. Semiotics is deeply rooted in popular culture and relies on the play between denotations and connotations associated with ideas. The role of the semiotician is to ‘read between the lines’ and look for new meanings in age-old ‘signs’. It should be noted that meanings which society assigns to a ‘sign’ is not constant and evolves with time. Semiotics is used to decipher those meanings which the society assigned to a particular ‘sign’ in a certain era. In this study, I have attempted to read between the lines in order to arrive at an understanding of life in the times of the Delhi sultanate with particularly reference to the malfuzaat.

\(^4\) Semiotics is the science of the study of signs and symbols, what they mean and how they are used in texts. (Dr. Ashish Agnihotri, School of Language, Literature and Cultural Studies, Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi, provided illuminating illustrations on the various methods of reading texts that helped me a gain deeper insight in the malfuzaat).
The translation of the malfuz texts follows in the pattern of K. A. Nizami and Bruce B Lawrence, two eminent experts on Sufism and medieval Indian history.

In Chapter One, A Brief Historical Account of Sufism, a backdrop is given to the 14th century Sufis and context provided for the birth of the malfuzaat.

In Chapter two answers to questions such as what, when, why, and how relating to the malfuzaat. The author has traced the origin and development of this literature, its historical, religious and literary importance in ‘correcting’ history written under the patronage of ruling dynasties.

Chapter Three is a reading of the socio-cultural aspect of the sultanate period, based on two malfuz texts, Nizamuddin Auliya’s Fawai-ul-Fuad, and Nasiruddin Chirag-i-Delhi’s Khair-ul-Majalis.

Chapter Four contrasts the information provided in chapter three, by examining the themes and attitudes within other historical sources of the sultanate period.

Sufism is then put under the spotlight, in comparison to it’s Hindu counterpart, the Bhakti movement, in Chapter Five.
The concluding remarks suggest that this area of study has much scope, and given the information gleaned from this research, it is an exciting prospect that there are still many more *malfuz* texts which are waiting to be analysed.