

CONTEXTUALIZING “*LANGER KHANA*”  
IN TASAWWUF: A STUDY OF SOME SELECTED  
*LANGER KHANAS* OF INDO-PAK

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**ABSTRACT**

Tasawwuf is the esoteric part of Islam which has been derived from the Qur’an and Sunnah and Qura’nic term for it is “Tazkiya” and prophetic term for it is “Ihsan”. Both of the terms imply “God consciousness”. Hence Tasawwuf is to fulfill the demands of Islam sincerely and devotionally. The main responsibility of Muslims is “to worship Allah and serve humanity”. For this purpose, the Sufis devoted themselves for the worship of Allah and for the service of mankind. The purpose behind the establishment of *Khanqahs* and *Langer Khanas* is to serve humanity indiscriminately and the *Langer Khanas* are very prominent in Asia. The entire world is aware of the *Langer Khana* at the famous shrine of Khwaja Moin-ud-Din Ajmeeri of India and Data Ali Hujwiri of Lahore. Though, these are two prominent places but there is little information available in the published literature regarding these *Langer Khanas*. The current study is an endeavor to highlight the distinctive features of *Langer Khanas* and their role in serving the humanity irrespective of the color, caste, creed, and other affiliations. The study will follow the historical and analytical methodology to draw fresh conclusions.

**Key Words:** Tasawwuf, Langer Khana, Ihsan, Khanqah, Musafir.

**1. INTRODUCTION**

The human survival on earth mainly relies on food and shelter and for that purpose, the creator has created universe for the sustenance of human beings. Man has been placed as “the crown of the creation” and appointed as “Khalifah” on earth. Here, the term “Khalifah” implies Man as ‘manager’ of earth and not the ‘master’. Human beings are obliged to make the judicious use of the earth’s resources. The world is meant for human beings and human beings for the worship of God. The basic purpose of creating human

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beings is none but the worship of God.<sup>i</sup> Human beings are essentially created for His worship. The worship implies two things; one to worship God and second to serve humanity.

Serving the other fellow beings is the basic responsibility of humankind on earth. God has created human beings with different economic statuses; some are rich and some are poor. It is the responsibility of the rich to feed the poor at the time of necessity. For feeding the poor and the needy, God sent his messengers who created a system in their own times for getting some wealth from the rich for serving the poor with basic amenities. The institution of “*Zakat*”<sup>ii</sup> (Alms Giving) is one of the basic institutions among them. With the passage of time, the institution of “*Zakat*” lost its existence. People, due to their more materialistic lusts, bother now to spend a portion of wealth upon the poor people.

For feeding the poor and the needy, the Sufis established *Khanqahs* and *Langer Khanas*. They established houses where they feed people irrespective of the creed, color etc., and used to invite people towards Islam besides teaching Muslims the secrets of Tasawwuf. These *Khanqahs* and *Langer Khanas* have played a significant role, throughout the history, in providing food for the poor, needy and travelers. Even now these *Langer Khanas* are serving humanity indiscriminately in and around the globe. The most famous *Langer Khana* of India is associated with the Shrine of Khwaja Moin-ud-Din Chisti at Ajmeer and the Shrine of Data Ali Hujwiri of Lahore of Pakistan. The study focuses on contextualizing the “Langer Khana” in Tasawwuf with special focus on these two Sufi destinations.

## 2. CONTEXTUALIZING THE “LANGER KHANA”

Islam—the Din laid great emphasis on the welfare of humanity here in this Dunya and hereafter. For the sustenance of the people, God created natural resources and the ways to acquire the basic necessities. As the universe has been created for man's trial, so the resources (Wealth) have been distributed differently; some people are poor (having less resources) and some are rich (having huge resources). Economically sound ones are obliged to share a part of their wealth to take care of poor and the needy. There are eight types of people which hold their shares in your wealth. For example, Allah says in the Qur'an:

*“Indeed [prescribed] charitable offerings are only [to be given] to the poor and the indigent, and to those who work on [administering] it, and to those whose hearts are to be reconciled, and to [free] those in bondage, and to the debt-ridden, and for the cause of God, and to the wayfarer [this is] an obligation from God. And God is all-knowing, all-wise”.*<sup>iii</sup>

Besides, the obligatory duties of spending a portion of wealth for the sustenance of the poor and the needy, there are other non-obligatory duties to feeding the needy ones. For the larger benefit of the deserved people, Sufis established a system called “Langer” (free food). *Langer Khanas* are the places where food used to be distributed among the needy ones. Considerably it is a gift of food given in the name of God. As an act of generosity in the service of God, *Langer* implies free distribution of food. The distribution of food offered to the public in the name of God or Sufi Saint imposes neither any proprietor nor any kind of obligations on the receiver. Within the parlance of Tasawwuf, the *Langar* ‘objectifies the moral community embodied by the saint himself as a figure of infinite generosity’<sup>iv</sup> Feeding the poor has a special place in gift-giving practices. According to Mary Douglas, ‘gifts of food are flows of life-giving substance’.<sup>v</sup> It operates within ‘multiple symbolic systems at the same time to convey a combination of material, moral, social, and spiritual messages’.<sup>vi</sup>

Islam as a *Din Fitrah* is very much concerned about the basic necessities of mankind. Hence encourages and emphasis more on feeding the poor and the needy. The scriptural texts of Islam are so impregnated with the teachings to feed the indigent. Qur’an frequently order Muslims for feeding the poor;

*‘And they feed, for the love of Allah, the indigent, the orphan, and the captive’*<sup>vii</sup>

The Prophet Muhammad is reported to have ﷺ said,  
*‘Feed the hungry, visit the sick, and set free the captives’*.<sup>viii</sup>

The heavy emphasis on providing the hungry in religious tradition thus gives cosmological value to acts of charity. For this sensitivity, Islam made it imperative to acquire a phenomenological experience of the hunger by prescribing fasting during the holy month of Ramadan. The spiritual exercise of fasting cultivates a sense of starvation—an everyday reality for the millions of oppressed. It motivates a person to feel the pain of others, to develop empathy for the hungry, and cultivate an ethical sensibility. The Quran strongly encourages believers to feed the indigent in the name of God and do not expect a return either in reward or gratitude. A pertinent verse from the Qur’an summarizes the ethics of giving.

*‘We feed you for the sake of Allah alone: no reward do we desire from you, nor thanks.’*<sup>ix</sup>

An individual feeding the destitute feels immediate gratification for recovering a body from suffering. It gives a sense of joy and satisfactions—a singular experience that other acts of goodness do not offer. Giving life to a person in need by feeding the starved generates a feeling of greatness and warmth.

### 3. ESTABLISHMENT OF *LANGER KHANAS* IN INDO-PAK SUB-CONTINENT

Tasawwuf enumerates a special position in the spread of Islam in undivided India. Numerous Sufi centers, Khanqahs and *Langer Khanas* were established for the welfare of people. Certain *Khanqahs* and *Langer Khanas* are still there busy in serving the humanity. After partition, the *Langer Khana* of Moin-ud-Din Chisti in India and of Data Ali Hujwiri in Pakistan are two constant *Langers* which provide food to the hundreds and thousands of people on daily basis. These two play significant role in feeding the poor. Due to the current services of these *Langer Khanas*, many organizations and individuals were influenced so much so that they started at their own free food providing kitchens and restaurants.

In pre-modern India, *Langar* was a revolutionary practice which liberated low-caste people from the guilt of contaminating food—a perception that had held the upper caste in a constant higher moral status. Hence, food and sharing meals functioned as identity makers, created community and solidarities.<sup>x</sup>

In Indian subcontinent, the most exceptional spokesperson of Sufi movement was Moin-ud-Din Chishti<sup>xi</sup> of Chishtiya order. The Chishtiya order was initiated by *Khawaja* Moin-ud-Din Chishti who founded the first Sufi order in Indian subcontinent. He started its center in Ajmer where the order extended far and wide. Today, the Chishti order is one of the most widespread Sufi orders of Islam in the Indian subcontinent.<sup>xiii</sup> It is established to be the most prominent Sufi order of India and Pakistan.<sup>xiv</sup> Chishti Sufi masters expanded the well-organized system of their *Khanqahs*<sup>xv</sup> all over Indian subcontinent with single universal aim of serving humanity at all levels.

In Pakistan, the extra-ordinary influential personality of Tasawwuf is Data Ali Hujwiri. He left indelible marks in the history of Tasawwuf. Indeed, the shrine of Ali Hujwiri is a living and vibrant institution in spreading the message of religious pluralism and peaceful co-existence besides serving the people with basic necessities of life. It has been researched and surveyed that hundreds of thousands of people on daily basis are getting free food at the shrine of Hujwiri. During the particular days (Festivals etc), food is being provided to lakhs of people.

#### 3.1 AJMER

Ajmer marks the famous Shrine of Khwaja Muin-ud-Din Chisti Ajmeri. It is considered as one of the prominent destinations which serve food to innumerable people on daily basis. Being a Sufi of great repute, Khwaja Gharib Nawaz considers the religion not merely based on rituals and ecclesiastical formalities but “service of humanity” as its

sole raison d’être. Describing the qualities which endear a man to God, Gharib Nawaz referred to the following attributes:

*amwal sakhawate chun sakhawate dariya, dom shafqat-e-chun shafqat-e-afab, simam  
tawazo-e-chun tawazo-e-zameen.*

(First, river like generosity; second, sun-like affection, and third earth like hospitality.)

When once asked about the highest devotion of God, Gharib Nawaz remarked that it was nothing but “to redress the misery of those in distress, to fulfil the needs of the helpless and to feed the hungry”. Muin ud Din Chishti loved humanity in general and the Indians in particular. Indeed he had a mission to bring a social and spiritual revolution. He ruled over the hearts. The concepts of national integration, composite culture (*Ganga-Jamna Tehzeeb*) originated from his life style and teachings and thereafter were spread by his representative disciples.<sup>xvi</sup>

The most essential element of Chishti *Khanqahs* was the warm hospitality where the *Langar Khana* was operated which was very well organized and worked twenty four hours a day and seven days in a week. *Langar* was generously distributed among the visitors no matter which class they belonged to. According to Chishti sayings, if one pays visit someone as guest and that person does not offer any food to the guest, in that case, it is just like one has paid visit to the dead person. If at some moment there was nothing to offer in food at *Khanqahs* then at least a glass of water was certainly presented to the visitor. The expenditure of the *Langar Khana* was managed by the *Futub*<sup>xvii</sup> and offerings. Chishti *Khanqahs* were used to receive abundance of *Futub* in form of grain and money but it was all distributed by the end of the day. Chishtis did not like to keep *Futub* at their *Khanqahs* rather there was no sound system to keep record of receiving it. However, they maintained a principle regarding the distribution of *Futub*. They were always in a rush to give out all the gathered offerings among the needy and poor. *Langar Khana* at their *Jama’at Khanas* was always opened for the hungry. Chishti Sufis were extensively involved in public interaction.

### 3.2 LAHORE

Abu’l Hassan Ali b. Uthman b. Ali al-Ghaznawi al-Jullabi al-Hujwiri, popularly known as Ali al-Hujwiri or Data Ganj Bakhsh by Muslims of South Asia, was an 11<sup>th</sup> century Muslim mystic, theologian, and a preacher who became famous for composing the *Kash al-Mahjub* (Unveiling the Hidden) which is considered the “earliest formal treatise” on Sufism in Persian. Al-Hujwiri is believed to have contributed “significantly” to the

spread of Islam in South Asia through his preaching<sup>xxviii</sup> Al-Hujwiri died in 1072 C.E. at Lahore now Punjab Pakistan. The Shrine of Data Ali Hujwiri is most venerated shrines in Pakistan and is constantly visited not only by Muslims but by the non-Muslims as well. When Khawaja Moin-ud-Din Chisti visited the Shrine during his stay at Lahore, he meditated at the shrine of Data Ali Hujwiri and composed a couplet paying a glowing tribute to Shaikh Hujwiri

*“Ganj Bakhs-e-Har Do Alam Mazhar-e-Noor-e-Khuda,  
Na Qisan Ra Peer-e-Kamil, Kamilan Ra Peshwa”<sup>xxix</sup>*

(He is a wealth bestowing Saint in this world and hereafter and an embodiment of divine light).

At present, it is Pakistan’s largest shrine “in numbers of annual visitors in the size of the shrine complex”<sup>xx</sup> The site is considered to be the most sacred place in Lahore,<sup>xxi</sup> and attracts upto one million visitors to its annual *Urs* festival.<sup>xxii</sup> The shrine was time and again expanded and many things were added to the shrine as per the requirements especially in 1980, under the rule of military dictator Zia ul-Haq. Designated spaces for musical performances, and new free kitchen were also added during that time.<sup>xxiii</sup> People, irrespective of any differences, were feed freely in this kitchen. It is, therefore, considered as the only places in Lahore where the extremely rich and the extremely poor share space together. Approximately 50,000 visitors per day are offered free food at the shrine. The donations from the people confirm the main source of the free kitchen of the shrine. Patrons facing difficulties frequently donate money or labor to the shrine’s free-kitchen fund. Besides, the shrine also provides for students’ education in nearby schools, and helps fund local hospitals as part of its social mission.<sup>xxvi</sup>

#### 4. CONCLUSION

From the above discussion it can be concluded that, in Tasawwuf, “Langar” is regarded an essential component. Without the service of people, attaining the highest status of Gnosticism is impossible. Hence, Sufis, in their entire life, focused and practiced the service of humankind irrespectively. *Langar*, in context of Tasawwuf, means free public kitchen aiming sharing food with others irrespectively of religion, class, color, doctrine, age, gender or social rank. This kitchen is opened to all and meant to make available food to all devotees and visitors. Thus the concept of *Langar* is to maintain the norm of impartiality among all people of the globe. Moreover the ritual of *Langar* articulates the morals of sharing, community, comprehensiveness and unanimity of all human races. Distribution of *Langar* is a living Chishti and Hujwiri tradition which is still continued with same fervor at all the Chishti Sufis’ Dargahs of India and Hujwiri Shrine of Pakistan.

## NOTES AND REFERENCE

- <sup>i</sup> “And I did not create the Jinn and the mankind except to worships Me.” (See; Al-Qur’an, 51:56).
- <sup>ii</sup> *Zakat* is a kind of payment made annually under Islamic law on certain kinds of property and used for charitable and religious purposes. Normally, it is 2.5% of total wealth and Gold and Silver etc.
- <sup>iii</sup> Al-Qur’an, 09: 60.
- <sup>iv</sup> Pnina Werbner and Helene Basu (eds), *Embodying Charisma: Modernity, Locality, and Performance of Emotion in Sufi Cults* (UK: Psychology Press, 1998).
- <sup>v</sup> Mary Douglas, *Food in the Social Order* (UK: Routledge, 2014).
- <sup>vi</sup> Jon Keune, *Shared Devotion, Shared Food: Equality and the Bhakti-Caste Question in Western India* (Oxford University Press, 2021), 108.
- <sup>vii</sup> Al-Qur’an, 78:8.
- <sup>viii</sup> Imam al-Bukhari, *Sahih al-Bukhari*, Vol.7, Book 70, Hadith 552.
- <sup>ix</sup> Al-Qur’an 76: 9.
- <sup>x</sup> Sidney W. Mintz and Christine M. Du Bois, ‘The Anthropology of Food and Eating’, *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 31:1 (2002): 99-119.
- <sup>xi</sup> Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimension of Islam* (Lahore: Sang-e-Meel Publications, 200), 345.
- <sup>xii</sup> S. M. Ikram, *A History of Muslim Civilization in India and Pakistan: A Political and Cultural History*, 7th ed. (Lahore: Institute of Islamic Culture, 1997), 71. Also see *Encyclopedia of Islam*, Juane E. Campo (New York: Fact on File Inc., 2009), s.v. “Chishti Sufi Order”.
- <sup>xiii</sup> Laxmi Dhau, *The Sufi Shrine of Ajmer* (New Delhi: Rupa and Co., 2004), 103.
- <sup>xiv</sup> S. Fadhlalla Haeri, *The Thoughtful Guide to Sufism* (New Delhi: Bhavana Books and Prints, 2006), 32.
- <sup>xv</sup> Meeting or gathering place of Sufis (See: Oxford Concise Dictionary of World Religions, 314). Generally, the Khanqah is considered a place which is related with Sufism, a place that is reserved for those who search for the pleasure of Allah by way of devoting themselves to Him while detaching themselves from the world. In other words Khanqah was such a place which was dedicated to supporting people who required renovation and wanted to purify themselves of the humiliating transgression. Also see Muneera Haeri, *The Chishtis: A Living Light* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2000), 2-5.
- <sup>xvi</sup> <https://www.sherekhudahazratali.com/2014/12/biography-khwaja-moinuddin-chishti.html>, Accessed on: 29/09/2022
- <sup>xvii</sup> *Futub* is a Persian word and in Arabic its meanings are “gifts or offerings etc.
- <sup>xviii</sup> “Pilgrims of Love: The Anthropology of a Global Sufi Cult”, Pnina Werbner, p.4, Published 2003, C. Hurst & Co.

- <sup>xix</sup> *Tazkirah Salibeen*, [www.dawateislami.net](http://www.dawateislami.net), Retrieved 15 May 2021. <sup>xx</sup> Strothmann, Linus, “*Shrine of Data Ganj Bakhsh*”, in “*Encyclopedia of Islam*”, Vol. 3, Edited by: Kate Fleet, Gudrun Kramer, Denis Matringe, John Nawas, Everett Rawson.
- <sup>xxi</sup> Halafoff, Anna; Clarke, Mathew (2016), *Religion and Development in the Asia-Pacific: Sacred Places as Development Spaces*, Taylor and Francis.
- <sup>xxii</sup> Linus Strothman (2016), Tschacher, Torsten; Dandekar, Deepa (eds.), *Islam, Sufism and Everyday Politics of Belonging in South Asia*, Routledge, 2016
- <sup>xxiii</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>xxiv</sup> Halafoff, Anna; Clarke, Mathew (2016), *Religion and Development in the Asia-Pacific: Sacred Places as Development Spaces*, Taylor and Francis.
- <sup>xxv</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>xxvi</sup> Ibid.