

From Chishtiyya Diaspora to Transnational Sufi Movement

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Introduction

Over the last 100 or so years many South Asian religious/ spiritual traditions have spread across the globe through South Asian diaspora communities and a flow of South Asian spiritual teachers to the West. Some, such as Zindapir Sahib's Naqshbandi Sufi order, which has extended globally from Pakistan, have a largely South Asian diaspora following (Werbner 2003). Others like Inayat Khan's Sufi movement, the Brahma Kumaris, and the International Society for Krishna Consciousness (ISKCON) are not just being practiced by South Asians at home or in the diaspora but have followings among Anglo and Euro Westerners, South Americans, East and South-east Asians, Africans and others. In their global diffusion, a number of these South Asian-origin traditions have adopted formal organizational patterns and become new transnational religious/ spiritual movements with a variety of relationships to their 'home' tradition and country.

This paper¹ reflects on the development of one of these new transnational spiritual movements, the International Sufi Movement (or Inayati Sufi order).² This Sufi movement was founded in the West in the early twentieth century by the Chishti Sufi master, Hazrat Inayat Khan. Today, in the early twenty-first century, it is reforging links with its Indian heritage through pilgrimage, *Urs* celebrations (commemoration of a saint's death day), spiritual retreats, music festivals and social work projects in India. The paper shows how the process of cultural translation from traditional Indian Chishtiyya Sufism to Sufism in the West and the modern world, along with the movement's recent return to India, is giving rise to a variety of relationships that impact the mutual perceptions and identities of overlapping ethnic, religious and cultural communities in the West and India. The intersections of this

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² Inayat Khan used the name International Sufi Movement. In the early twentieth century this was virtually the only Sufi order in the West and did not need to be distinguished from others. As this is no longer the case, I refer to it in this paper as the Inayat Khan Sufi movement/ order or, following the traditional practice in naming orders, as the Inayati Sufi order.

Sufi order with the Chishtiyya Sufis, the Indian diaspora and with India, the diverse ethnic and religious backgrounds of participants, and the liberal ethos of the order make this group an interesting example of a particular kind of transnational spiritual movement.

The paper begins with a brief history of the origins and development of this Sufi order and then explores the return linkages between the order and its Indian heritage. Following this, the paper reflects on the implications of the movement's development for community identities and mutual perceptions. It concludes with reflections on implications for our understanding of transnational religious/ spiritual movements being practiced in, or originating from the South Asian diaspora.

Origins and Diffusion

The Indian musician and Sufi master Hazrat Inayat Khan's journey with his brothers from India to the United States in 1910, and on to Europe in 1912, marked the beginning of the first wave of Sufism in the West (Rawlinson 1997) and the creation of what has been seen variously as a new religious movement (Melton 1986), a Western Sufism (Genn 2006; Hammer 2004; Hermansen 2004), and as a worldwide Chishtiyya Sufi diaspora (Ernst and Lawrence 2002). The order founded by Inayat Khan is now one of the oldest and most prominent Sufi orders in the West. It is a transnational spiritual movement with well-developed formal organizations and groups on virtually every continent.

Inayat Khan was part of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century wave of the Indian diaspora. This early diaspora, a product of colonialism, involved mainly what has been described as 'dispersal' – Indians journeying in search of a livelihood but also elements of 'expansion' – by Indian cultural elites. (Armstrong 1976; Cohen 1997, 26) A small number of the Indian elites such as Swami Vivekenanda and Sufi Inayat Khan became religious figures, voyaging with a mission to bring Indian spirituality to a materialistic West and some, like Inayat Khan, settled abroad.

The Sufism that Inayat Khan established in the West had its roots in his Indian cultural heritage and in the particular development of Islam in India, where the Sufi tradition is pervasive in Islamic discourse and institutions (Metcalf and Metcalf 2002), and where Islam evolved with less distinct boundaries than are commonly drawn elsewhere. The Chishtiyya Sufi order, to which he belonged, reflects this historically pluralistic religious environment and emphasises music and poetry for spiritual attainment. The Chishtis are characteristically inclusive and tolerant of religious pluralism and will accept students (*mureeds*) from non-Muslim backgrounds without first demanding conversion to Islam (De Tassy 1997), an openness rare elsewhere in the Muslim world.

In the West, Inayat Khan taught in English and did not require his students to convert to Islam. This made Sufism, for the first time, widely accessible to Westerners. Inayat Khan was a Muslim but he was less concerned with orthodoxy or conversion than with conveying what he described as ‘the religion of the heart, the religion in which one thing is important, and that is to seek God in the heart of the human being’ (Khan 1973, 38). Key aspects of his Sufi message were the ‘unity of religious ideals’ (Khan 1963) or respect for the unity and diversity of the world’s religions, and ‘spiritual liberty’ (Khan 1979), or the individual’s right to freedom of thought and choice in religious matters. He also introduced full gender equality within his order and recognised women in leadership positions, well in advance of such equality in India or the West.

Nonetheless, Inayat Khan held that spiritual development required the inner purification and transformation of individuals and for this he used a number of traditional Sufi institutions. The order he established retained a hierarchical structure, the central role of the spiritual teacher (*shaikh*, *pir* or *murshid*), the *murshid-mureed* (teacher-disciple) relationship, and the concept of *pir-bhai* or the brotherhood/ community of disciples. He also continued the Chishti use of *sama* (music) and *zikar* (or the practice of the remembrance of God) as key spiritual practices.

Inayat Khan’s intention was to formulate a vision of Sufism that could be practiced in a modern and increasingly secular social environment. He made Sufi training available to everybody, not just Muslims and redefined the relationship between Sufism and the exoteric traditions and practices of Islam. In this first stage of developing a new and ‘modern’ or ‘western’ form of Sufism, Inayat Khan did not replicate traditional Indian Sufism but drew on strands within the Chishtiyya order and Islam as well as other Indian spiritualities. This was a particular form of adaptation with changes that were, for Inayat Khan, an integral part of his vision for religion in the modern world (Genn 2004).

Inayat Khan proceeded at first by just giving instruction to interested people and forming Sufi Societies in the various countries he visited, but administration and co-ordination of his work soon required an organization. In 1923 he incorporated the International Sufi Movement in Geneva as a formal organization with a constitution and hierarchical transnational structure. Unlike the other adaptations made by Inayat Khan, this was a practical innovation, unprecedented in Indian Sufi orders, but necessary for working in the West.

By the time of Inayat Khan’s death in 1927 in Delhi on a return visit to India, there were several thousand mureeds in Europe and America. The Sufi work was, at first, continued in Europe by his brothers and then by a grandson until the 1980s. In 1993, after a period of co-operative leadership, Hidayat Inayat-Khan, the founder’s younger son, was recognised as the Representative General and

Pir-o-Murshid. He is the current leader of the branch known as the International Sufi Movement. Two smaller branches, Sufi Way in the United Kingdom, and Sufi Contact in Holland also emerged in the 1980s.

In the United States the order was led by Inayat Khan's first *mureed* in the West, Murshida Rabia Martin, but collapsed after her death in 1947. In the 1950s, Inayat Khan's elder son, Pir Vilayat, revived this branch as the International Sufi Order, and his son, Zia Inayat-Khan, is the current leader. Another branch, the Sufi Ruhaniat International also formed in the 1960s and is led by an American, Pir Shabda Kahn. The three main branches are all well-established transnational organizations with groups worldwide, and together with the smaller more localised branches, constitute the Inayat Khan Sufi movement or the Inayati Sufi order.

Inayat Khan's Sufi movement first came to Australia in 1927 with Friedrich Elliot Von Frankenberg (Shaikh Momin) (d. 1950). He was a *mureed* of Inayat Khan and established lively Sufi groups in Sydney and Melbourne in the 1930s and 1940s. In the 1950s, Karel Frederik Jansen (Murshid Sharif) (d. 1990), a Dutch immigrant and *mureed* of Musharaff Moulamia Khan, the younger brother of Inayat Khan, became the National Representative and further pioneered the Sufi work in Australia. Today, all three main branches of the Inayati order are represented in Australia with groups in most major and some smaller cities. Classes, retreats and summer schools are held on regular basis.

Return Links to India

For the first fifty years after Inayat Khan's death, the Sufi order he established developed transnationally but independently of its Indian origins. It is only in the last thirty, and particularly the last ten years that its hitherto loose bonds with India and the Chishtiyya Sufi tradition have been strengthened by a variety of links.

When Inayat Khan died in early 1927 in Delhi, Khwaja Hasan Nizami, a prominent Sufi and custodian of the *dargah* (shrine complex) of the well-known thirteenth century Sufi saint, Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya, donated nearby land as a *waqf* (a religious endowment under Islamic law) for his grave. That the founder died and is buried in India has been a key factor for linkages between this Sufi order and its country of origin. Parallel with other migrant experience, it is an example of how the life trajectory of an individual produces diasporic relations by attaching meaning to places in a homeland and abroad. When that person is a 'holy' person or Sufi saint, as Inayat Khan is regarded by his followers, their geographical presence is understood to plant 'divine grace' in the earth itself (Friedlander 1975), constituting a 'sacralizing of space' (Werbner 1996) that intensifies this factor. This factor also

accounts for the location of the Sufi Temple in Holland in the sand dunes in which Inayat Khan meditated.

However, it was not until the 1970s and increasing ease of international travel that Sufi movement and family members begin to visit India regularly. Concerned by the poor condition of Inayat Khan's grave and poverty in the surrounding area, European mureeds established the Hazrat Inayat Khan Memorial Trust. In the 1980s the Trust built a *dargah* by enclosing the *waqf* land with a marble room, and, in the 1990s, it acquired additional land and built a centre for social work, music hall and school, library, courtyard and caretaker home. In 2003 a retreat house was added. Also responding to the poverty, Pir Vilayat established the Hope Project Charitable Trust in 1975. Today, the Hope Project has fifty Indian staff members and runs a community health centre, a crèche, a school, vocational courses and income generation projects. Further strengthening the links, in 2004 Pir Vilayat was at his request buried nearby in the Nizamuddin *basti* (village).

Since the 1990s, Inayat Khan's *Urs* (a ceremony commemorating his death on the fifth of February) has become a major event at the *dargah* attended by Indians and mureeds from all over the world. Traditional Sufi ceremonies and rituals are held with a procession to the nearby Nizamuddin Auliya *dargah* where the Pirs bless the new *chador* or cloth that will cover the grave. For the ceremonies and associated *qawwali* performances Western *mureeds* adopt traditional shawls and head coverings and mingle with Indian *mureeds*, devotees and other visitors to the shrine. The celebration is held over several days and combines a traditional Sufi *Urs* with new rituals introduced by Inayat Khan. For example, as part of the commemoration, the Universal Worship Service (a ceremony created by Inayat Khan in the West, in which candles are lit to honour each of the world's religious traditions and their scriptures are read) is held in the Sufi Hall.

Mureeds attending the *Urs* often make additional pilgrimages. Many will visit the tomb of Salim Chishti in Fatipur Sikri (near Agra), and of course, the *dargah* in Ajmer of the founder of the Chishtiyya order, Hazrat Khwaja Mu'inuddin Chishti. Inayat Khan's Sufi order is also being further institutionalised in India by links with, and pilgrimage to his birthplace of Vadodara (Baroda) in the state of Gujerat. Since the early 2000s, annual musical festivals have been held in Baroda to honour the musical accomplishments of Inayat Khan and of his grandfather Maula Bakhsh, and the house in which Inayat Khan was born is being developed as a retreat centre.

Implications and Mutual Perceptions

Over nearly one hundred years, Inayat Khan's Sufi movement has become an increasingly multi-site phenomena with headquarters in the Netherlands and the United States, Sufi temples in the Netherlands and South Africa and the sacred site of the *dargah* (tomb) complex of Inayat Khan in India. It is a transnational spiritual movement that includes people from a wide range of religious, ethnic and national backgrounds. While members of the Inayat Khan family and some other participants are of Indian and/ or Muslim background, most *mureeds* (outside India) are not. There are groups in the United Kingdom, Europe, Russia, North and South America, South-East Asia, Africa, Australia, New Zealand and India. Mureeds from all over the world attend annual summer schools in Holland and more recently, Inayat Khan's *Urs* and retreats at his *dargah* in Delhi.

The burial of the founder of this Sufi movement in his native land is drawing members of the group back to India, literally as pilgrims and supporters of social programmes and metaphorically in their desire to understand more about the Indian heritage. The full implications, and the extent to which this will influence future development of the movement remains to be seen, but the 'return' is already impacting the mutual perceptions and identities of a range of overlapping communities involved with this transnational Sufi order.

The *Urs* ceremonies for Inayat Khan are being attended by a growing number of Indians, and musicians regard it as an honour to play at his *dargah* and at the music festivals in Baroda. Many Indians visit the *dargah*, though there are, as yet, only a few studying as *mureeds*. Globalisation and modern communications are changing Indian culture, but the study and practice of Sufism in India is still generally embedded in the exoteric practice of Islam and within the Muslim and Indian cultural community. Even though the Chishtiyya order has historically accepted *mureeds* who were not Muslim, for many Indians the 'universal' version of Sufism practiced by this order is still regarded as something for 'foreigners.'

The presence of these 'foreigners' of both Indian and non-Indian background at the *dargah* is providing challenges as well as benefits for 'locals'. While I was told that the *mureeds* of Inayat Khan are generally perceived favourably in the *basti* (village) and nearby Nizamuddin Auliya *dargah* because they dress appropriately and behave respectfully, there have been difficulties. The culture in the *basti* is very traditional and conservative in social matters of gender as well as in religion. As a result, Memorial Trust and Hope Project educational programmes for girls as well as educational programmes on HIV and AIDS, have disturbed some *basti* residents. In one case this led to

demonstrations at the Inayat Khan *dargah*. The programme at issue was withdrawn, but communication between the different cultural perspectives is an ongoing challenge.

For *mureeds* from outside India, returning to the spiritual homeland also poses risks and challenges, as well as opportunities. As one leader commented ‘some people smell the spices and think it is Sufism ... or think that wearing a headscarf or prayer cap somehow makes them a more authentic Sufi.’ More positively, some *mureeds* told me that contact with India made it possible ‘to understand the Sufi teachings in ways that you can’t sitting in Europe.’ One of the Pirs at the nearby Nizamuddin Auliya *dargah* has, in a sense, adopted the group, and many of the visiting *mureeds* spend considerable time with him and in meditations at the shrine there. While not common, this experience has led a small number of the foreign *mureeds* to formally convert to Islam.

Revival of the historical and organizational links of this spiritual tradition to sacred places and persons in India is creating a new dimension within the Inayati Sufi movement, with India becoming a spiritual, if not literal, homeland for some members. The participation by non-Indian *mureeds* in *Urs* celebrations and devotions at the *dargahs* of Inayat Khan and other Chishtiyya saints introduces into this Sufi order a number of traditional South Asian Sufi practices which Inayat Khan had not transplanted or made a part of his teaching in the West. There is also evidence of some acculturation in food, dress, music, ritual and ethos back home. For example, at a 2006 Sufi Movement gathering in Australia, *salwaar kameez* (traditional Indian clothing) were offered for sale, for the first time, along with the usual books, CDs, DVDs, and *tasbeeh* (prayer beads). From the other side, participation by Indian *mureeds* in the rituals and practices developed by Inayat Khan in the West such as the Universal Worship Service, introduces a new dimension within Indian Sufism.

In India as elsewhere, new global and ‘glocal’ forms of identity are being created through transnational and diasporic interactions facilitated by modern communication technologies and increasing ease of travel. Most of the literature on religion in the Indian diaspora and on Indian-origin religious movements overseas focuses on the practice, functions and purposes of religion within Indian immigrant communities including community and identity formation within a host society, links with political agendas in the homeland, and concerns for future generations or gender relations (Coward et al. 2000; Jacobsen and Kumar 2004; Kurien 2001; Vertovec 2000; Warner and Wittner 1998). The influence that migrants are having back on their homelands is a related theme with scholars identifying reciprocal patterns of influence changing religious structures and practices in the countries of origin (Ebaugh and Chafetz 2002).

But Indian religions are no longer just being practiced by ‘Indians,’ at home or in the diaspora. Overviews of the diverse range of current usages of the concept of ‘diaspora’ show that the term resists precise definition and is being stretched to accommodate various ‘intellectual, cultural and political agendas’ (Brubaker 2005; Fludernik 2003). Nonetheless, Ernst and Lawrence’s labelling of Inayat Khan’s mureeds outside India as ‘diasporic Chishtis’ in their recent book about the Chishti order ‘in South Asia and beyond’ (Ernst and Lawrence 2002) is useful in drawing attention to the links and processes whereby the developments of recent decades appear, to some degree, to be ‘Indianising’ the Inayati Sufi movement, as they are simultaneously ‘Westernising’ or ‘modernising’ practices at its significant sites in India. Although this Sufi tradition is practised somewhat differently in the West and in India, shared spiritual affiliation, similar spiritual practices and even commodity culture (as in the *salwaar kameez* example) are creating a transnational social and religious space and a transnational identity formation process in which increasing numbers of people are now participating irrespective of their ethnic or even religious histories.

Conclusions

In this paper I have looked at the development of the Inayati Sufi order from an early Indian Chishtiyya diaspora to a transnational spiritual movement that is reforging links with its Indian heritage. To the extent that a Chishti ‘diaspora-ship’ (Ernst and Lawrence 2002, 144) can be expressed through the spiritual lineage (*silsila*) and retention of the Chishti Sufi emphasis on *sama* and *zikar*, narrowly territorial, nationalistic or ethnic conceptions of diaspora may be too limited. The Inayat Khan Sufi movement incorporates these traditional aspects of Sufism, along with the *murshid-mureed* relationship and *islam* in the sense of surrender to the Divine, and it retains many traditional Chishti Sufi practices. It has however, also made significant changes to how these are understood and practiced and introduced new rituals, and in addition, redefined the relationship between Sufism and the exoteric tradition and practice of Islam.

As Finney argues in a study of ‘American Zen,’ considering Eastern-origin spiritual traditions only or primarily as new religious movements in the West is historically and cross-culturally incomplete, failing to address the importance of the ancient origins of the tradition (Finney 1991). The analysis in this paper includes consideration of the particularities of the original Indian context and Chishti Sufi tradition from which this Sufi movement has emerged. Viewing the group primarily as a Chishtiyya Sufi diaspora however glosses over the extent of the changes and the fresh vision of Sufism and religion that Inayat Khan and subsequent leaders have developed in this new transnational spiritual movement.

Werbner (1996) and Frishkopf (2001) have shown that immigrant Sufi groups in the West are also changing in response to the modern environment, and Howell (2001) has documented innovative forms of practice and organization being adopted by Sufi groups in Muslim-majority countries. Nonetheless, global development of the Inayati Sufi order, beyond the territorial and ethnic boundaries of India and its diaspora, and with a majority of participants from non-Muslim and non-South Asian backgrounds, appears to have provided this Sufi group with a still greater latitude for change.

Examining the case of the Chishtiyya-origin Sufi order founded by Hazrat Inayat Khan in the West raises broader questions about the variety of Indian religions being practiced in the Indian diaspora or which originate from it, and the types of transnational religious/ spiritual movements they are forming. There is a contrast between movements like the Brahma Kumaris that have spread into the Indian diaspora and beyond from a centre in India, and others like Inayat Khan's Sufi movement that have developed from overseas centres and been repatriated to India. Movements adopt a variety of stances toward cultural translation and adaptation and vary considerably in the extent of their cultural continuity with India, and of uniformity or diversity worldwide. For example, movements like ISKCON are 'Indian' and mono-cultural in practice and ethos regardless of location (Rothstein 1996), while others like the Inayati order generally adapt to local customs and cultures.

Indian-origin religious movements also reflect the common polarization of religious response to the challenges of adapting from more 'traditional' social and religious contexts to those of 'modernity' (Beyer 1994). For example, the Muslim Tablighi Jama'at and various Hindu nationalist groups defend their particularisms, and/ or support political agendas in the diaspora and homeland while others such as Inayat Khan's Sufi movement support an inclusive, liberal religious ethic and eschew politics.

As this paper shows, relationships between the diverse and overlapping communities involved in this transnational spiritual movement are impacting their mutual identities and perceptions. In addition, the particular origins and heritage, the extent and type of cultural adaptation, the multi-ethnic composition, the 'universal' or inclusive ethos, and the spiritual, material and family linkages being forged with India, make the Inayat Khan Sufi order an interesting example of a particular type of diasporic spiritual movement and transnational spiritual community. As a spiritual movement that crosses traditional ethnic cultural and religious, as well as national boundaries, Inayat Khan's Sufi movement goes beyond the more usual trans-state particularisms and may be developing a new variant of transnational religion.

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