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Rethinking Qawwali:

Perspectives of Sufism, Music, and Devotion in North India

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Rethinking Qawwali:
Perspectives of Sufism, Music, and Devotion in North India

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Rethinking Qawwali:
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Scholarship has tended to focus exclusively on connections of Qawwali, a north Indian devotional practice and musical genre, to religious practice. A focus on the religious degree of the occasion inadequately represents the participant's active experience and has hindered the discussion of Qawwali in modern practice. Through the examples of Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan's music and an insightful BBC radio article on gender inequality this thesis explores the fluid musical exchanges of information with other styles of Qawwali performances, and the unchanging nature of an oral tradition that maintains sociopolitical hierarchies and gender relations in Sufi shrine culture. Perceptions of history within shrine culture blend together with social and theological developments, long-standing interactions with society outside of the shrine environment, and an exclusion of the female body in rituals. To better address Qawwali performances and their meanings, I foreground the perspectives of shrine social actors and how their thoughts reflect their community, its music, and gendered spaces.

Table of Contents

PART I

Chapter 1	An Introduction to Qawwali.....	1
1.1	Qawwali as Ritual.....	3
1.2	Historiography of Qawwali.....	5
1.3	Tradition of Shrine Culture.....	8
1.4	Summation of Text.....	10
1.5	Methodology and Positionality.....	12
1.6	The Importance of Qawwali: Richard Holbrooke.....	15
Chapter 2	The Dominant Narrative.....	19
2.1	Gendered Relations.....	23

PART II

Chapter 3	Qawwali and Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan: Social Exchanges in a North Indian Community and Its Music.....	27
3.1	Living as a Qawwal Bachche: Meraj Ahmed Nizami.....	29
3.2	The Commercial Success of Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan.....	35
3.3	Living as a qawwal Bachche: Muhammad Hayat Khan Nizami.....	39
3.4	Interpretations.....	42
Chapter 4	On the Qawwali Genre and <i>Adab</i>	44
4.1	Meraj Qawwali's Performance in Sathya Sai Auditorium.....	45
4.2	Commercial Performances.....	47
Chapter 5	Qawwali Without Borders.....	51
5.1	Multiple Understandings of Qawwali Poetry: Ambiguity in Themes and Tropes	52
5.2	Multiple Understandings of Qawwali in Practice.....	56
Chapter 6	Intersections of Oral History and Scholarship.....	60
6.1	Musical Performance.....	61
6.2	Political Engagement.....	66

6.3 Concepts of Qawwali's Creation.....	68
6.4 Etiquette and Importance of Poetry.....	69
Chapter 7 Thoughts of Social Actors: Future Possibilities or Hindrances?.....	73
7.1 Living as a Qawwal Bachche: Suqlain Nizami.....	73
7.2 Acceptance of Qawwali.....	74
7.3 A Khadim Perspective: Agra, Uttar Pradesh.....	76
Chapter 8 Further Thoughts: Conjecturing History.....	79
 PART III	
Chapter 9 Struggles for Gender Equality.....	82
9.1 Desires of Women Singers.....	86
9.2 Obstructions to Equality.....	88
9.3 The Verity of Gender Inequality.....	93
Chapter 10 Tradition.....	100
10.1 Education.....	101
10.2 Women and Social Expectations.....	102
Conclusion.....	105
Bibliography.....	109
Vita.....	113

Part I

Chapter 1

An Introduction to Qawwali

Qawwali, a north Indian devotional practice and musical genre, has been a powerful occasion for participants since its beginnings in the late thirteenth century. Scholarship has tended to focus on Qawwali's connections to religious practice and has been written within the historical narrative of South Asian Sufism as the cultivation of *sama'* (listening; musical assemblies). This discourse has struggled to find salient methods to discuss Qawwali in modern practice since a focus on the religious degree of music inadequately represents the participant's experience to the scholastic audience. While researching Qawwali in Indian Sufi shrines mostly in Delhi, I listened to the accounts of social actors within shrines and to their perceptions of Qawwali and allusions to an oral tradition that maintains sociopolitical hierarchies in the Sufi shrine culture. The Qawwali ritual is one manifestation dependent on social structures of Nizam ud-din shrine culture. Controlled by shrine leaders, tradition maintains perceptions of history that blend together social and religious developments, long-standing interactions with society outside of the shrine environment such as commercial performances and other forms of music, and an overall exclusion of the female body in rituals. Paradoxically, shrine practice excludes the female body but males utilize the feminine voice to enhance the poetry's lover-beloved relationship. To better address the nature of the Qawwali

performance I focus on the perspectives of shrine social actors and how their thoughts reflect the fluidity of Qawwali.

This paper draws attention to the sociopolitical relations within the Nizam ud-din shrine culture in Delhi through a focus on the social actors of Qawwali. Qawwals (hereditary musicians) perform qawwalis (songs) in a shrine that offers a space of a fluid intermixing of people from many different backgrounds – rich and poor, orthodox Sunni and mystical Sufi – that allows many different social elements to coalesce. Conversations with social actors within the shrine community (such as devotees, qawwals, and religious leaders) inform my view of the Nizam ud-din shrine as an open environment that continues because of the importance of the saint in collective memory of the social actors, which motivates many to continue service and patronage to the shrine. The forms of devotion are Islamic in nature, Sufi in spirit, and open to change.

Many social, political, and economic factors imbricate within the Chishti shrine cultural milieu to inform the ritual performance of Qawwali. The shrine creates a geo-cultural hub around which a multitude of elements revolve. It is a physical monument to a Sufi saint, is a Sufi pilgrimage site that many believe to be spiritually charged, and is also a physical reminder of social structures of the past and the present. Social actors of the shrine community interact fluidly while engaging in latent and overt negotiations of power. A distinct shrine culture exists around North Indian Chishti shrines and functions with a hierarchy of officials and servants of the shrine whose long-standing relations to one another temper social interactions. Herein the *sajjadah nashin* (literally ‘sitter on the prayer carpet’) is the head shrine official to which everyone else turns for guidance. The

Nizam ud-din shrine has two elder sajjadah nashins and under them are the many hereditary *khadims* (overseers of the shrine) who descend from their own common lineage and run the day-to-day operations. Under the khadims remain all the other functionaries of the shrine, including the *muezzin* (the one who performs the call to prayer) of the mosque, the qawwals, and *pankhawalas* (those who fan visitors) to name a few. Due to the hereditary and lifetime nature of many of the positions within the shrine, the people who fill positions refer to themselves as servants of the shrine. Qawwals, for instance, do not see themselves as working for the shrine, in the sense that one would work for an office, but as devoting their lives and families' lives to the saint by serving the shrine. The people who live near or in the shrine provide the important role of maintaining certain dynamics in the shrine and their lives and words serve as the central focus of my research.

1.1 Qawwali as Ritual

Ritual ceremonies help maintain the shrine culture of Nizam ud-din through the physical embodiment of hierarchical positions and an enactment of sociopolitical explicit structures of power. Ritual, by its very nature, requires a hierarchy of social actors to perform specified roles in order for the process to be correctly observed.¹ As Turner believes, to take part in a ritual means for the person to adhere to the common principles of social structure yet also adhere to the morphing of this social structure while in the

¹ Victor Turner. *The Ritual Process: Structure and Anti-Structure* (Chicago: Aldine Publishing Company, 1969) 1-4 and 94-130.

liminal state of the ritual.² Social structure refers to “the notion of a superorganic arrangement of parts or positions that continues, with modifications more or less gradual, through time.”³ Structure is cognitive, and ritual acts offer ways to transcend social binds through brief liminal states, but those in the society must return to the social structure. This can be seen during the Qawwali ritual wherein a mystical union with the Divine is the ultimate goal which all participants, though of different social standings, take part to achieve. The ecstatic mystical states that Sufi participants seek represent the liminal place between the material world and God. A social hierarchy maintains the shrine’s processes and provides the structures for rituals; however while in the ritual, all male Sufis support one another in a common, yet individual, goal.

The *sama’* (listening; audition) gathering within the shrine is one ritual that reinforces the traditional order of social roles with a focus on the performance of Qawwali. Qawwals follow the guidance of the khadims who defer to the pirs who look to the sajjadah nashins for direction. Sajjadah nashins oversee the *sama’* occasion when present and sit in the most prominent position next to the left side of the qawwals who gather in a group facing the shrine. The second most important positions in the *sama’* ritual are the spiritual guides who hold office in the Nizam ud-din shrine and will sit on the front row to the left of the qawwals and next to the sajjadah nashin. The pirs arrange themselves in reference to Sufi spiritual advancement and age. Women are not allowed to participate in this structure and sit to the rear, far removed from the action. Though not given a substantial role in the ritual or in public social structure, women do play a large,

² Turner, 125-6. Turner terms this time of ritual as “commuunitas”.

³ Ibid, 127.

albeit mostly silent role in taking care of the children while the ceremony occurs. Exceptions to the structure are made for foreign visitors and more economically affluent people. Though this is the proper setting of the sama' ritual in the shrine, this structure is not always the case since there are varying degrees of the ritual depending on the religious importance of the day and the level of etiquette (*adab*) observed by participants. The sama' ritual reinforces structures of shrine culture by physically embodying the hierarchies implicit in the everyday relations between social actors, while also offering possibilities to briefly transcend the social structures of the material world.

1.2 *Historiography of Qawwali*

The lack of documentation makes a discussion of the history of the shrine and its community quite difficult. Much documentation comes in the form of *tazkiras* (hagiographies), a structured representation of the life, works, and miracles of a Sufi saint, and through *malfuzats* (recorded conversations of the saint). Indo-Muslim writers offer few historically minded accounts until the sixteenth century, and even then, writers did not wish to discuss the popular realm. Most of the references to *sama'* in Indo-Muslim literature engage the debate over its legality in Islam. When Chishti disciples write of their practices they represent the ideal in order to refute those believing *sama'* to be forbidden.

The works of Carl Ernst and Bruce B. Lawrence have expanded the religious perspective of South Asian Sufism, especially the Chishti order's beliefs and practices.⁴ Through a religious studies' lens, Ernst and Lawrence have sought to explain past developments of Indian Sufism by studying court documents combined with Sufi treatises, hagiographies, and malfuzats. In their pursuits to explain the development of *sama'* within the Chishti order, they have arrived at some prominent conclusions. First, older writings of Indo-Muslims focused on legality of practice: "Though it was undoubtedly a multilevel phenomenon, only one aspect of *sama'* can be critically examined in the earliest phase of Indo-Muslim history (1206-1526), because only one was recorded by those Sufi authors, especially from the Chishti order, who defended the practice of mystic music and elaborated its significance for their fellow worshipers."⁵ Secondly, mystics' writings reflect that the mystical realm was off limits to commoners. "Unfortunately, the popular, nonelite, mass sentiment in favor of *sama'* fell outside the scope of their (mystical writers') inquiry: Popularization suggested vulgarization, and for the Chishti theorists, as for most of the Indian-Muslim elite, vulgarization of any mystical institution, including *sama'*, was firmly resisted. Hence, we find but a few, random references to the popular dissemination of *sama'*."⁶ The practice of *sama'* (and perhaps Qawwali) have not been represented in literature until the late twentieth century, which

⁴ Most prominent of their works see, Carl Ernst and Bruce B. Lawrence, *Sufi Martyrs of Love: The Chishti Order in South Asia and Beyond*, (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2002). And Carl Ernst, *Eternal Garden: Mysticism, History, and Politics at a South Asian Sufi Center*, (New York: State University of New York, 1992) 62-96.

⁵ Ernst and Lawrence, 36.

⁶ Ibid, 36. Most of the information about Indian Sufis comes from the Mughal period and after; see Richard Eaton, *Sufis of Bijapur 1300-1700: Social Roles of Sufis in Medieval India* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1978), 117-27 and 157-64.

may be due to the unwillingness of mystical writers and elite to lessen the sanctity of *sama'* experiences by detailing the practice for all people to read.

These conclusions infer that the shrine space and *sama'* rituals were for mystically inclined, elite Muslims and not open to common people. Writings of the period reflect a desire to spread and validate Sufi beliefs, but not to disseminate mystical institutions like *sama'* because the popular was also vulgar to beliefs and practices. Ernst and Lawrence have prolifically produced a vast catalogue that utilizes theological writings of mystics to address the subject of Indian Sufism, the Chishti order, and the institution of *sama'*. They do not intend for their works to comment on the modern practices of Indian Sufis; on the contrary, they provide a substantial background to the developments and dissemination of Indian Sufi ideology and practices. These works hold value in their historically inclined discussions of theology but one would be mistaken to assume that historical or theological ideals of practice represent modern incarnations of Chishti practices in the Nizam ud-din Awliya shrine.

The work of Indian historian Khaliq Ahmed Nizami during the mid to late twentieth century also holds great value for historiography.⁷ He was able to authoritatively address historical concepts of the Nizam ud-din shrine because of his genealogical connection with the overseers and thus, be familiar with literary works, practices and oral traditions. Nizami's work remains limited since he addresses the history of the saint's life in relation to the Chishti Sufi order and to the shrine itself, but

⁷ Khaliq Ahmed Nizami, *The Life and Times of Shaikh Nizamuddin Auliya*, (Delhi: Idarah-i Adabiyat-Delhi, 1991). 60 and 74. See also the work of religio-historian, Syed Athar Abbas Rizvi, *A History of Sufism in India: Early Sufism and its history in India*, Vol I. (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 1978). 114-189 and 241-300.

heavily relies on hagiographies and malfuzats. Nizami's *The Life and Times of Nizam ud-din Awliya* comprises a compendium of the saint's life, with a focus on everyday practices within his living area and interactions with devotees. This narrative, however, does not address modern practices within the saint's shrine or how they developed.

In the latter twentieth century one significant monograph published by ethnomusicologist Regula Burkhardt Qureshi entered the archive of writings about the Nizam ud-din shrine.⁸ Qureshi is the most prolific writer on the topic of Qawwali and her thorough work has greatly enhanced the quality of scholarship about Muslim north Indian and Pakistani non-classical forms of music. Qureshi emphasizes the musical structure more than the social actors that influence the performance and does not address certain issues as gender or negotiations of power. This author's wide scope though not specifically historiographic includes examinations of inner-shrine music and performers that provide a platform for new research about the Nizam ud-din shrine. Aside from Nizami and Qureshi little has been written about the Nizam ud-din shrine or the nature of Qawwali music and performance.

1.3 *Tradition of Shrine Culture*

Tradition is a process of making sense of the present by interpreting what has been inherited from the past. To delve into the sociopolitical dynamics of those interacting in the shrine environment and details of how this old structure has survived through the myriad political changes in Delhi I found it necessary to look for another

⁸ Regula Qureshi, *Sufi Music of India and Pakistan: Sound Context, and Meaning in Qawwali*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995). First published by Cambridge University Press, 1986.

method than a focus on written texts. The strength of an orally transmitted tradition is one prominent theme that shined through my discussions with social actors during research. People retell common tropes and themes about the shrine, about their lineages, and about the past and present legacies. Such an oral tradition of historical experience informs this discussion of the Nizam ud-din shrine culture and its focus on the qawwals, their lineages, and the history of Qawwali ritual performance. Pandian believes that tradition suggests a composition of many fragments coalescing into one mode of moral and social formation.⁹ These fragments include an inheritance of past social roles and ethics, local and temporally specific narratives of selfhood, and present collective practices. It can dominate present orientations of social life in shrine culture, being informed by more than one fragment of the inherited past and multiple interpretations meanings in the present. In shrine culture, Islamic theology and perceptions of historical experience are some fragments that inform tradition.

Listening to the qawwals' speech becomes an important text for piecing together family histories in relation to the Nizam ud-din shrine and community. Qawwals tell living stories of how families became related and how each one came to obtain affiliation to the Nizam ud-din shrine. Chishti Sufi shrines in north India loosely resemble a feudal hierarchy in which positions are hereditarily filled. The overseers of the Nizam ud-din shrine claim to continue from a lineage said to stem from the original caretaker of the

⁹ Anand Pandian, "Tradition in Fragments" in *American Ethnologist*, Vol.35 No. 3 (Aug. 2008) 466. And Saba Mahmood, *Politics of Piety: The Islamic Revival and the Feminist Subject*, (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005); Edward A. Shils, *Tradition*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1981) who addresses tradition as a "drag" or "weight" on culture; Eric Hobsbawm, Introduction in *The Invention of Tradition*, Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger, eds. Pp. 1–14. (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1983).

saint's *khanqah* (gathering place for Sufis) since Nizam ud-din never married and did not have children to succeed him. In other Chishti shrines, the overseers of the shrine may claim a lineage directly from the saint. Most other positions within the shrine, such as qawwal musicians, are also inherited. The speech of elder qawwals offers insight into past developments in and changes to Qawwali music, performance and musicianship, while the younger generations of qawwals conjecture possibilities of the future.

Oral tradition also exposes certain aspects about a socially gendered reality that surrounds the shrine. These common beliefs about social structure and relations to others outside of the community create the role of women in families and in shrine culture. Most notably, women are not allowed to enter the shrine itself or perform music within the shrine complex. This social standard permeates the collective memory of social actors who reference tradition to explain why the shrine is a gendered space and should remain that way. In the absence of written proscriptions and prescriptions, tradition as interpreted by the leader of each generation has become concrete. Held by the community, concepts of the saint's life, the saint's beliefs, and past cultural developments fuse together under tradition.

1.4 Summation of Text

Overall, the discourse on Qawwali as practiced in north India has limited the expanse of this musical genre and its plurality of meanings to participants and, in this categorizing process has overlooked women's roles and agencies in the performance. This thesis aims to expand the concept of the Qawwali musical genre in two ways.

Firstly, it argues against limitations arbitrarily set on the Qawwali genre by providing examples of the Qawwali experience and viewpoints of participants. Secondly, this paper explores women's roles and expectations within the Qawwali ritual and how this reflects Nizam ud-din shrine culture. Through addressing the fluid nature of the Qawwali genre and the roles of women, I highlight the actual experience of Qawwali performances in north India so that the reader can better imagine the everyday life of Qawwali in Delhi; how people interact with Qawwali in its many forms and what place Qawwali holds in their lives and minds.

The present study expands previous scholarship to include other styles of performance conducted under the Qawwali name and to enter in the discourse gendered spaces and roles. The first part provides a background and discusses the limitations of a dominant Qawwali narrative. In the second part, the example of Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan highlights the commercial commodification of cultural aspects such as musical performances. Commercial commodification denotes the transformation of hereditary arts into a substance that can generate monetary profit. I then introduce social exchanges between musicians and their music in order to foreground the non-exclusive, open to interpretation, nature of Qawwali as a musical genre. For this, I utilize a didactic style alternating between narrative reconstruction and academic analysis in order to better represent the qawwals' viewpoints of their hereditary professions and commercial performances. Through a series of recreated narratives of experiences I had with qawwals, entitled *Living as a Qawwal Bachche*, each narrative will relate a different qawwal's perspective. Interpolated analyses include a discussion of the power

negotiations at play in shrine culture, the perspectives of social actors, and examinations of intersections between oral tradition and historiographical writings. The third part foregrounds the control of tradition by examining a *BBC.com* radio article that provides women's perspectives on gender inequality in Qawwali and in the Nizam ud-din shrine. The authority of the shrine's tradition foregrounds gender politics, gendered spaces, and inner-gender power negotiations. Each chapter highlights different meanings and social aspects of north Indian Qawwali that combine to inform the modern Qawwali ritual ceremony.

1.5 Methodology and Positionality

Based on field research conducted from August 2005 to August 2006 on an IIE-Fulbright Fellowship and in the summer 2009 sponsored by the American Institute of Indian Studies, this thesis concentrates on socioeconomic influences and sociopolitical practices through a methodology that follows a manner of authorial inclusion in a narrative that positions my presence within the society I lived. My close interaction with the musicians and others in the Nizam ud-din shrine community provided me with access to many quotidian details. I am also a musician and studied in the adjacent Sufi Inayat Khan Shrine's music classes with Meraj Ahmed Nizami in qawwali singing, Muhammad Hayat Khan Nizami in Sufiyana Shashtri classical singing. My relationship to Meraj and his family also included travelling and staying with Meraj's entourage to performances at pilgrimage festivals around North and South India.

I additionally studied with my friend, musical interpreter, and sometimes translator Yateesh Acharya for lessons on singing and playing the harmonium. Yateesh invaluablely helped by introducing me to many people in the music community and taking me to many concerts I might not have been aware of or able to attend. This includes many qawwals in Delhi – Ghulam Hussein, Haji Idris and Haji Ilias Qutubi, and Farid and Chand Nizami to name a few – and other professionals such as the ghazal singers Ghulam Ali and Habib Ali, Nusrat’s uncle Ustad Baray Ali Khan and nephew Rustam Fateh Ali Khan, and Bollywood recording artist Majid Sola and composer Kalyan Sen.

I recognize that my physical presence influenced how people perceived and talked with me. I cannot know to what extent my physical presence alone affected the people of Nizam ud-din community, qawwals, or others I contacted. By appearances it seemed that most found my research and me a little strange, meeting me in the beginning with looks of suspicion. Perhaps I confused people while they believed me to be even more confused. I tried to make minimal my impact by being respectful of customs and not forcing anyone into unwilling conversations about my research. I waited until people felt open to my presence and willing to talk to me. Toward this end, Yateesh helped his friends with whom I conversed – and me – to feel comfortable during interviews and initial encounters.

Following the methods of Karen McCarthy Brown’s narrative of Haitian American voodoo practices in *Mama Lola*, I participated in practices of the community of hereditary qawwals and their families and now relay their words through mine. Brown includes herself, feelings and attitudes, in her field journal and ensuing book, and finds

that this “was an acknowledgement that ethnographic research is a form of human relationship. When the lines long drawn in anthropology between participant-observer break down, then the only truth is the one in between.”¹⁰ Though I disagree about the revealing of “truth,” McCarthy’s concern for the movement between cultures is important since it follows the interpretative anthropology tradition that includes Clifford Geertz and his belief that “humans are suspended in webs of significance they themselves have created.”¹¹ I do not invent characters or stories as Brown does, but agree with her and Geertz that “ethnographic writing has its greatest integrity when it stays close to the small slices of social interaction that provide it data.”¹² I place myself in the narrative in relation to the people, community, and music about which I write.

I conducted few arranged interviews throughout my relationship with qawwals, listeners, patrons, and shrine leaders and combine our conversations into my narrative. I made apparent my research intentions to all who participated in this study and provide dates from certain discussions. I privilege conversations with the elder qawwals of the Nizam ud-din shrine in Delhi, Meraj Ahmed Nizami (who Regula Qureshi primarily interviewed in her research) and Ustad Muhammad Hayat Nizami, and also include discussions with other qawwals, their sons and grandsons about their thoughts on the music, inherited positions and life ambitions. I contrast the international, commercial

¹⁰ Karen McCarthy Brown. *Mama Lola: A Voodoo Priestess in Brooklyn* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London: University of California Press, 1991), 12.

¹¹ Clifford Geertz. “Thick Description: Toward an Interpretive Theory of Culture,” in his *The Interpretation of Cultures* (New York: Basic Books, 1973), 5. And Brown, 14.

¹² Brown, 15.

popularity of a musical genre with perspectives from social actors in one of the prominent Qawwali communities in north India.

I limit this thesis to this one region and do not want to imply general conclusions. This focus serves as one perspective of Qawwali particular to Delhi, while other regions in India and Pakistan have their variant and equally valid traditions, which are too vast for the scope of this study. The preeminence of the Nizam ud-din shrine for Qawwali in India possibly effected how people in this community spoke to me since they had a reputational concern for how they portrayed themselves and other musicians. I try to not take their words about the community and music at face value, but only present what they say if others in the community also reinforced their views. This thesis is part of a continuing study into the interaction of social issues and the development of one north Indian Sufi ritual.

1.6 The Importance of Qawwali: Richard Holbrooke

Qawwali remains an important fixture in the capital of Delhi as shown by a recent decision of Richard Holbrooke to visit the Nizam ud-din Awliya Sufi shrine on behalf of the United States government. Thursday afternoon in Delhi has been a time of great excitement for me ever since I began researching Indian Sufi shrines, and upon my return to India in the summer of 2009 I looked forward to another riveting gathering. Sufi shrines swell with large numbers of devotees and I have come to enjoy traversing the small winding alleyways to the shrine courtyard that become tight with people arriving at, leaving from, or drinking tea near the shrine. In the Nizam ud-din shrine of Delhi, this is

especially the case due to its eminence among Indian Sufis and others wishing to receive the saint's blessings. On this particular Thursday, June 4, 2009, I had not returned to the shrine for some time and was hoping to enjoy an evening of Qawwali, exuberant musical performances associated with large groups of forceful singers, hand-clapping and cyclical melodic rhythms. I arrived within the shrine to the hustling-bustling crowd watching the musicians perform and stole a seat closer to the front on the marble courtyard.

This night, though, was not destined to provide the performance I wished to attend. Three men in blue blazers, rolled-up khaki pants, and bare feet – not the most common devotee attire – walked in followed by an entourage. They were given the best seats in the gathering on the right side of the singing group. The eldest, and apparent leader, sat talking on the phone, and everyone seemed to be waiting for his direction. With mobile phone closed, the man stood up, turned to face the musicians (thereby turning his back to the saint's shrine) and the proceedings grinded to a halt so that he could present official documents to one of the overseers of the shrine. An abundance of cameras and bright lights buzzed around the scene and the throngs of devotees were pushed away from the spectacle. I later discovered, the man was the recently named United States Special Envoy for Afghanistan and Pakistan, Richard Holbrooke.

As the US Envoy left the shrine I saw one of my friends within the group, Anjum Naim, the Urdu editor of *SPAN* (an American Center periodical published in South Asia). I said hello to Mr. Naim, who quickly introduced me to Mr. Holbrooke, and we talked while walking to their waiting cars. Naim informed me that the US envoy's intention to come to the shrine was to reinforce United States President Barack Obama's words by

presenting regional Muslim leaders with a written copy of the speech. President Obama sought to create better US relations with people who adhere to the Muslim faith and with countries having a significant Muslim population by delivering his speech entitled “A New Beginning” in Cairo, Egypt on this day.¹³ After the envoy had driven away some questions remained with me: why had they chosen the location of the Nizam ud-din Sufi shrine and why did they conduct the presentation during the busiest time of the week, during Thursday evening Qawwali?

While acknowledging that the planning of this spectacle could be wholly haphazard and have occurred by chance, some amount of forewarning to security personnel and to the shrine overseers probably took place. Possible factors influencing the US envoy’s choice include a perception of Sufism as benevolent, the eminence of the Nizam ud-din shrine in the history of Delhi, and the popularity of Qawwali in this shrine.

The busiest time in the seven hundred year old Nizam ud-din Awliya shrine occurs shortly before sunset on Thursday afternoons prior to the fourth prayer of the day, *maghrib*. Throngs of devotees believe this time auspicious to visit the shrine since it is the night before Friday, the holy day, and because the qawwals are guaranteed to be performing. When devotees visit the shrine they want to hear the qawwals singing because devotees believe that qawwals’ voices carry prayers that add to the charged atmosphere and can help the listeners talk to the saint and to God. The Nizam ud-din shrine is famous in India as the location of the best Qawwali performances that have large numbers of singers and musicians and many people also come to hear how well the

¹³ President Barack Obama, “A New Beginning.” (speech given in Cairo, Egypt, June 4, 2009).

qawwals perform. Legacy attributes the cultivation of Qawwali to the Chishti saint, Nizam ud-din Awliya Mehboob-e ilahi (d. 1325) and his disciples. The large gathering of qawwals fills half of the small courtyard of the shrine for a few hours on Thursday afternoons for this is when all thirty five musicians might come to take turns singing for the saint and to the crowd.

By situating the presentation during the Qawwali gathering the power of the performance was transferred to the US envoy. Holbrooke's participation demonstrates the important status of Qawwali within the shrine. He could have chosen to not recognize the musical gathering as significant, but instead chose to make it the focal point of the proceeding by placing himself in the center. Upon arrival, Holbrooke and his assistants were invited to sit in the most honored position in the gathering, which they did, and the acceptance of this invitation symbolized their participation in the gathering. The US envoy sat patiently for a few minutes observing the musicians before bringing the music to a halt to make the presentation. The US envoy possibly used the pivotal Qawwali shrine performance to emphasize their unity and peaceful relations with people adhering to the Islamic faith in India.

The spectacle attests to the modern importance of Sufism and Qawwali in north Indian society and brings forth certain sociopolitical issues about the shine community. I have seen many occurrences in Sufi shrines that I thought slightly aberrant, but had not before witnessed such an overt, international relations political presentation. This act attests to the importance of Qawwali in north Indian society, politics, and its continued preservation in localized shrine culture.

Chapter 2

The Dominant Narrative

Regula Qureshi discusses the Qawwali genre as the “authentic spiritual song that transports the mystic toward union with God” in her book, *The Sufi Music of India and Pakistan: Sound, Context and Meaning in Qawwali*, and excludes from the analysis “the popular version of Qawwali adapted for entertainment in clubs and on the screen.”¹⁴ This ideal has come to influence the dominant Qawwali narrative, which views this musical genre as sacred, that is to say the music and performance are religious. Qureshi, an ethnomusicologist, was the first to write on the topic of Qawwali in English and most subsequent scholars have adopted her exclusivist position. This author’s many articles about Qawwali also maintain her point of view that the binary opposition of religious and nonreligious motivations and contexts creates a divide between the two practices that the academic dialogue should not traverse.

Sherilee Johnston examines Qawwali through a combination of linguistic and ethnomusicological models and maintains the religious—nonreligious dichotomy by expounding the Qawwali in shrines of Hyderabad.¹⁵ Johnston includes local educated Sufi scholars’ opinions and specific Sufi devotees’ thoughts about Qawwali, and discusses performances outside of the shrine. This author utilizes Qureshi’s work to explain Qawwali structure and references Nusrat’s influence on nonreligious performance; however, she includes audience expectations in differing contexts yet does

¹⁴ Qureshi, 1.

¹⁵ Sherilee Johnston, “Poetics of Performance: Narratives, Faith and Disjuncture in Qawwali,” (PhD diss., University of Texas, 2000).

not engage how Nusrat influenced the hereditary performers. Johnston's examples serve to emphasize linguistic tropes and musical standards of the musicians in order to explain Qawwali as a way of communal being and memory.

James Newell argues through the religious studies discipline for the inter-relatedness of music in religious practice and how Qawwali serves as a case study for understanding music in religious practice.¹⁶ Newell uses Qureshi's premise of the strength of musical sounds in ritual to distance himself from Qureshi by highlighting the difference between the institutional (the author interprets as *priestly*) shrine performance of *mehfil-e-sama* (an assembly for listening) and the performance tradition forming outside of the system (interpreted as *shaman*), which he believes Qureshi overlooks. Newell's study furthers the discourse on Qawwali but remains within a spiritual realm without a discussion of the commercial influence on the music and performance.

Shemeen Abbas introduces Pakistani Qawwali and *sufiyana kalaam* performances through linguistics of gender to foreground how Sufi rituals, whether performed by men or women, include the female voice.¹⁷ Abbas discusses the meaning of the feminine role through the examples of Nusrat, Abida Parveen, and regional devotee singers. Monetary success and popularity have substantially influenced the contemporary Sufi ritual performance, and Abbas highlights the changes each performer makes depending on the context in which they perform. Since Abbas' research focus is on Pakistani musicians' relation to local and international audiences and addresses a different form of Qawwali, it

¹⁶ James Newell, "Experiencing Qawwali: Sound as Spiritual Power in Sufi India," (PhD., diss. Vanderbilt University, 2007).

¹⁷ Shemeen Abbas, *The Female Voice in Sufi Ritual* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 2002).

lies outside the scope of the north Indian Qawwali genre.¹⁸ By examining the female voice in differing contexts of performance, her conclusions conceptually expand how certain South Asian Qawwali musicians are motivated to perform differently for each context in order to better relate to their audiences.

The dominant narrative of Qawwali creates an arbitrary boundary between religious and nonreligious music and performance that is not necessarily the case today. Qureshi's exclusivist study of the Qawwali performed "for religious reasons," while thoroughly discussing the music ritual in the shrine leaves out the exchange of ideas and popular motifs between popular music outside the shrine environment and the ritual performance for religious purposes. Qureshi's emphasis on the music itself directed her study to focus on the musicians and their views of the music without including other perspectives that might have fleshed out the living, changing nature between Qawwali music, Qawwali ritual, and Qawwali performance.

Johnston's dissertation builds upon the religious-nonreligious dichotomy that Qureshi presented in order to address possible influences on changing audience expectations. By incorporating non-musician perspectives in her study, Johnston expanded the study of Qawwali but remained within the structured meta-narrative binary. Newell also used Qureshi as a foundation in his study of the religious nature of Qawwali

¹⁸ The government nationalized the *waqf* (pl. *awqaf*; Islamic endowments) of Pakistani Sufi shrines in 1960 and effectively bureaucratized shrine culture by controlling personal, hereditary endowments. See S. Jamal Malik, "Waqf in Pakistan: Change in Traditional Institutions," in *Die Welt De Islams*, Vol. 30, (Heidelberg: New Series, 1990) 63-97. And Katherine Ewing, "The Politics of Sufism: Redefining the Saints of Pakistan," *The Journal of Asian Studies*, Vol. 42, No.2 (Feb., 1983), 251-268. India did not interfere with Sufi shrines in the same manner and two parallel South Asian Muslim communities emerged. For India see David Gilmartin, "Shrines, Succession, and Sources of Moral Authority" in B.D. Metcalf, ed. *Moral Conduct and Authority* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1979) 221-240.

in order to further develop the distinctions he perceived between institutionalized shrine Qawwali and the musical performances occurring in rural, non-sanctioned arenas. Such a focused discussion creates more categories for the religious Qawwali genre but does not look to other social exchanges such as the influence of Qawwali for entertainment purposes.

Abbas steps outside of the categorical dichotomy by examining the inclusion of a feminine voice in the singing of commercially successful musicians *and* hereditary qawwal musicians. Abbas explores the syncretism between what Qureshi and others assume to be a stark dichotomy, religious and non-religious Qawwali. In doing so, Abbas furthers the discussion about the nature of modern Qawwali, to which many non-resident South Asians listen for many different purposes and most often not in a shrine. Abbas demonstrates the possibility of opening the academic discussion to new forms of influence on Qawwali without engaging a religious-nonreligious binary.

I, too, have heard in discussions with elder qawwals in Nizam ud-din talk about the pious nature of Qawwali in the shrine and of its differences from a nonreligious Qawwali form. At the root of their speech, however, appears nostalgia for the past golden age of shrine culture and Qawwali music. Qawwals feel a loss of prestige and additionally a hint of jealousy of the fame of nonhereditary qawwals performing a form of Qawwali and becoming famous and rich, and a dislike of how the nonhereditary qawwals perform the music. Elder qawwals are also reluctant to begin to engage the topic of non-shrine performances, but will eventually speak of the topic. The reluctance of elder qawwals to openly discuss the matter of commercially successful Qawwali music

and musicians represents three important issues: 1) the bias of the elders in favor of their form of the music and performance; 2) the protectionist nature of musician lineages (*gharanas*) cum professional musical lineages in north India during the development of capitalism; and 3) the fierce competition between all of the musicians to obtain performances, receive remuneration, and possibly achieve a certain level of fame within and without of the shrine culture.

2.1 *Gendered Relations*

The concept of gender and male to female relations is significant within the patriarchal Nizam ud-din shrine culture, where at the tomb's entrance a large yellow sign warns in bright red letters, *No Women Allowed in Shrine*. Women scholars have conducted much of the academic study of Qawwali music and performance. Qureshi, Johnston and Abbas each address the peculiar nature of their feminine presence near or in the *mehfil* (gathering). Qureshi succinctly states about the gender roles, "women have no part in the Qawwali performance at any stage."¹⁹ Qureshi mentions briefly the nature of her research in the Nizam ud-din shrine as being beneficial since she could gain access to the household of Meraj Ahmed Nizami and talk with women there inside of *pardah* (behind a veil, in a section behind a curtain, or in a segregated section of the home) and as a hindrance since she had to remain predominantly in the women's section, and loosely in *pardah* during the gatherings.

Abbas, a woman of South Asian descent, centers her entire monograph around the

¹⁹ Qureshi, 98.

concept of femininity in the Qawwali music and the South Asian Sufi shrine and proposes that the home and the shrine are the feminine spaces for worship since it traditionally is the women's role to pray for the family.²⁰ In Abbas' view the gendered spaces in Qawwali lyrics and the importance of women in the shrine sphere remains overlooked and she states, "Despite the strong gender component of Sufi ritual discourse, the role of women has been ignored in scholarly work."²¹ Women are significant actors in the shrine community, however South Asian scholars are blinded by patriarchal tradition and Western (male) scholars ignore women because there is "no access to female domains of participation," and "they are handicapped by their lack of knowledge of the indigenous languages."²² The oral instruction through which the illiterate – intended – audiences are informed, contain gendered nuances that Abbas believes Westerners cannot fathom to comprehend. Abbas, as an informed South Asian woman, concomitantly addresses the ubiquitous feminine voices in shrines and in entertainment performances in order to illumine feminine agency in linguistics. Abbas' approach thoroughly foregrounds the female voice in male singing and certain female roles in shrine culture, which illumine the gendered experience of Qawwali yet leave out a discussion of her positionality.

Johnston refers to her positionality more than Qureshi and Abbas and discusses feeling unwanted when she received permission to record outside of pardah and inside the male gathering.

²⁰ Abbas, xvii.

²¹ Ibid, xvii.

²² Ibid, xviii.

Some of the men sitting on the edge of the aisle on the western side were visibly irritated by my presence. The men sitting close were more serious listeners and expressed their feelings to me by suggesting strongly that I should move back into the women's section rather than obviously stand out to the men.²³

Johnston's statement reflects the exclusivity of the Qawwali gathering in a shrine as well as its participant regulatory nature. Though in such a situation where the leaders of the shrine could approve for Johnston to enter the gathering, the bindings of tradition that the male participants hold in their minds outweigh the decision. Even more than not being a male, Johnston finds the presence of the camera to be a greater obstruction. People would act more enthusiastically when the camera was set up in the gathering. The performance would enliven and participants would perform for the camera, leading her to conclude, "I am no longer characterized foremost by my gender, but more singly as recorder whose lens frames the visual 'performance'."²⁴ The camera lens sees the enhanced performance due to the participation of a woman and a photographer. Cameras seem to break of the monotony and bring a high level of prestige to the ordinary, everyday gatherings. Participants, while seeking attention, want to infuse their memories and expectations into the present, possibly to demonstrate what they find special in qawwal or what they believe essentializes a Qawwali performance.

The prior work of Qureshi, Abbas, and Johnston increases our understanding of the gendered dynamics within a Qawwali gathering in particular and in the shrine

²³ Sherilee Johnston. "Performance as Discourse: 'Tamaashaa' in the Articulation of Ecstasy during Qawwali," *Text, Practice, Performance*. 1 (1999): 30.

²⁴ *Ibid*, 32.

community in general. These academics, through including themselves in their research engage some important issues, which add to this present study: the privileged nature of being an outsider in the shrine culture, allowing researchers to obtain permission for acts impermissible to the common devotees and social actors; the shifting of the participants' focus to show-off for the camera; and the stark lines of distinction between male and female people, and their roles as mandated by tradition in South Asian Chishti Sufi shrines.

In my research I chose to predominantly record by hand details about the proceedings in Qawwali gatherings inside and outside of the shrine environment. I found this process more fluid for me and less distracting for participants. This allowed a removal of the camera's lens as a focus in the gathering although my presence remained visible. Many of the same issues that other researchers had to face I also confronted, such as the privilege of being a Western researcher in the shrine community; though a male I was able to take part in gatherings and talk with many of the participants yet I was unable to meet with women devotees and participants.

Part II

Chapter 3

Qawwali and Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan: Social Exchanges in a North Indian Community and Its Music²⁵

The multivalent social perceptions of Qawwali reflect a music that has developed through a fluid intermixing of musical styles, performances, purposes for gatherings, and social and political influences. For example, the commercial performance outside of the shrine setting continually affects the ritual in the shrine. This thereby destabilizes the conventional classificatory schema applied to Qawwali and expands our understanding of this tradition in particular and music in general. Qawwali has multiple meanings to the participants and takes different meanings in different contexts. There are different styles of performers of Qawwali as well as differing meanings of performance. Qawwali's open nature and listener-dependent interpretations for meaning show that an examination of social, economic and political influences is more pertinent to the Qawwali experience than searching for a definition of the music and performance.

The nature of the Sufi soteriological path is to practice ritual within the world and en masse to aid in the individual spiritual advancement of their brethren. Within shrine performances and others the individualist focus manifests in the mind and heart of each listener, from a London doctor to a Delhi Qalandar. People from diverse backgrounds may attend a Qawwali ritual performance in a shrine, non-exclusive public space, for any

²⁵ I presented a preliminary draft of this chapter in the 2008 *Texas Asia Conference* (TAC) at the University of Texas, Austin and am indebted to my peer, Asiya Alam, for her help in developing certain ideas.

number of reasons. Likewise, anyone who can purchase tickets to see a concert in an auditorium billed as Qawwali attends for their own reasons. Many shades of advanced Sufis and laymen could be present in both settings. Though the Qawwali genre encapsulates various styles, languages and performer, this discussion focuses on the north Indian Qawwali genre as performed in the Nizam ud-din shrine in Delhi. By studying the modern example of Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan's influence on the Nizam ud-din Sufi shrine's hereditary Qawwali participants, I aim to contextualize north Indian Sufi devotional practice, question concepts of religious space, and foreground the agency – or lack thereof – of social actors in the shrine.

Qawwali performances differ in participant etiquette, musician-listener interaction, and the choice of instruments and songs. Through conversations with social actors in Chishti shrines – the musicians of Qawwali, devotees who listen to Qawwali, spiritual guides (*pirs*), and the overseers of the shrine (*khadims*) – I became aware of a distinct identity shared by the hereditary musicians and their families. Though of many faces, the shared identity provided impetus for my view of a qawwal community, a collective inner circle within the distinct Chishti shrine culture and greater north Indian society. This unique community has a central hub in the Sufi shrine with changing social peripheries. The social body of peripheries extends into other settings and commercial venues, with the label of Qawwali to signifying a plurality of meanings. To people familiar with the concert hall performance style of Nusrat, and other similar musicians, the term signifies a different setting and affective performance than to people who are only, or also, accustomed to the north Indian shrine context and accompanying religious

affect. The recent example of Nusrat's influence and mimetic musical exchange of different styles of Qawwali can illumine the embedded society of the Qawwali community.

Expanding the dominant narrative, I offer an alternative to Qawwali religious distinctions by examining the influence of Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan's performing career and signature style of recording as one example among many of popular, commercial Qawwali. For a discussion of Nusrat's interaction with commercial fusion music in the global theater, I present the viewpoints of qawwals in the Nizam ud-din shrine. Lastly, I examine the dominant narrative and present expanding points based on the perceptions of those in the qawwal community and supported by textual analysis.

3.1 Living as a Qawwal Bachche: Meraj Ahmed Nizami

Meraj Ahmed Nizami, a soft-spoken 69 year-old man with an encompassing smile, does not have any documentation of his birth, so deducing it was difficult. But Yateesh, Meraj's family and I had a lively conversation concluding 1937 as the year of his birth. He has devoted his entire life to being a qawwal. The prominence of Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan may lead many to believe that all qawwals lead a picturesque rock star life and travel the world playing and recording with other internationally famous musicians. However, if these same people would go to the shrines where the qawwals regularly perform, or to a qawwal family's home, then the rock star personae might change. The popular view of commercial singers such as Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan is not a material reality for most qawwal musicians.

Meraj's five sons, wife, one daughter, daughter-in-law, and newly born grandson live in his one room, one kitchen two story house. I would not have found the abode above Nizam ud-din shrine lest Hasnain, the eldest son, led me the morning we were to depart for an *'urs* festival (the death anniversary of a Sufi saint) in Agra, UP. This afternoon was different than that early morning a month before. Meraj and I arranged a meeting to talk about my project. He knew my intentions and agreed to speak as candidly as he could. Drinking *chai*, we spent some time looking at the other books written about him or with which he consulted. Two of his sons, Sibtain and Jamal ud-din Ahmed slept on the cool stone floor and Meraj sat on the only elevated bed in the room. He saw me glance over to the sleeping young men and smiled. "We sleep during the day. Our schedules train us to be prepared to play all night." Slowly, we began our chat. *Who are qawwals and what is their relation to the shrine?*

"Qawwals are Sufis who perform for Allah, the Prophet Muhammad, and the Sufi saints. For me, singing is prayer. I am a Sufi first and a musician second." He shifted and rubbed the foot he sat upon. I have asked this question many times and he has given me the same answer. I felt the reply always lacked something; it did not offer substance—the process, life history or other influences—of how one becomes a qawwal. I wished to delve deeper and followed with the more direct question: *How does a Sufi become a qawwal?* Meraj stared blankly for a minute. I guessed he was thinking. The answer must have been obvious to him and I almost felt ashamed for asking. He returned to his smile providing me with comfort. "A Sufi learns through experience. If they wish to sing for Allah, then they can sing in the shrine." He appeared uneasy with such a question.

During long train travels to distant shrines in Gulbarga, Agra and elsewhere I had become closely acquainted with Meraj and could pick up on his body expressions. He did not like to talk about others; likewise, I did not want to make my teacher feel uncomfortable, so I changed the question. *How did you become a qawwal?* This answer quickly came, “I have always been a qawwal. I am a descendant of the last Mughal emperor’s court musician Tan Ras Khan. He was my grandfather’s grandfather. My father, Pyare Khan Sahab, was a qawwal with Gesu Daraz Bandha Nawaz shrine in Gulbarga, until we moved to Delhi during the 1947 Partition. For me, Qawwali is *khandani* (or a family tradition).”

As Meraj continued with his family history and their relation to specific shrines, the music of Qawwali appeared to be based on lineage and closed to outsiders. *Is Qawwali closed to outside musicians?* He replied, “No. In Nizam ud-din shrine we have had a man become a qawwal. He gave up everything to learn. It is very difficult because we are taught in our families from birth. We taught him because he wanted to learn, and he became a very good singer. But he had to leave because he was not a part of the shrine.” The meaning of the qawwal epithet seemed clearer. The person is a Sufi, follows the family tradition and is united with a shrine.

In Qawwali performances with *khadims* present, some would tell the qawwals songs to play, grant permission to begin and decide when to end. All gave the impression they were the bosses of the qawwals. I inquired about Meraj’s relationship with the *khadims*: *Do you work for the shrine and the khadims?*

From his slightly puzzled look, I derived that I must not be asking relative questions. I was putting too much of myself in each question searching for some preconceived answer. “My family and I perform for the saint, Hazrat Nizam ud-din Awliya Mehboob-e-ilahi. We play in the shrine whenever we feel compelled, except during prayer. Qawwals are servants to Allah, Muhammad and the Sufi saints.” The qawwals and the khadims both served the shrine, but was this egalitarian servitude? Rather than risk another awkward ill-informed question, I explored his relationship to the other qawwals: *How many qawwals are linked to Nizam ud-din shrine?*

“There is a written list of thirty-five qawwals who can play in the Nizam ud-din shrine,” Meraj replied. “We are all related. There are four families that sing here: mine, Hayat Nizami, Farid and Chand Nizami (the sons of Ustad Mehboob Nizami), and Ghulam Hussein Nizami.” I had seen these qawwals perform in the shrine with their sons. Each group often performed separately in distinctive styles and with signature songs. I remained pre-occupied with discovering a hierarchy, however, Meraj was not. *Are all the shrine’s servants equal?*

Swiftly he wrapped a lock of his wispy white hair around a finger and laughed, “Well, I am the oldest, so they call me the *khadim qawwal*. Each qawwal has a unique ability though, and sings or plays according to their family style.” Meraj is humble and did not say much more, however, I noticed that both the khadims and other qawwals would give him the lead of the group on special occasions and defer to him when he wished to perform or take the lead.

Every qawwal that Meraj linked to the shrine is male, and I noticed that during performances in the shrine men are closest to the musicians while women sit in a removed corner rarely taking active participation. At risk of another uncomfortable moment, I felt the separation of men and women worth bringing up in our conversation: *Are there any women qawwals?* To my surprise, Meraj was comfortable with this subject. He had told me before that his prior interlocutors were women and perhaps influenced his reaction to the question. He proceeded: “No, women are not allowed to play or sing in the shrine. I taught my daughter to play tablā and sing, but that was when she was a child. She never played in the shrine and does not play anymore.” His strict negation of the topic appeared as a rule and I followed his sentiment.

So, there are rules for performing in the shrine? I inquired hoping to find an all-encompassing list of Qawwali do’s and don’ts. “There are no rules. People act, as they feel compelled. But there is *adab* (etiquette). All present must follow some level of etiquette. The qawwals know how to act because they have been trained, listening Sufis have been trained, and the *pirs* give the training!” Meraj answered with a chuckle-filled gasp.

Thinking about the performances in which I have participated, I did not see anyone present tell others how to conduct themselves prior to the occasion. Participants entered autonomously under their own auspices. I have, however, witnessed people act uncontrollably and no one told them to leave unless they disrupted the proceedings. The audience politely pushed one person out of the shrine during a performance for Prophet Muhammad’s birthday in 2005. He wildly ran around yelling for over an hour, but was

not led out until he continually tried to hug the qawwals. The conduct of the shrine performance was different than commercial performances in auditoriums where the audience silently sat awaiting to clap until the end of each song. I wondered what Meraj thought about the different settings of qawwali: *Do qawwals perform differently in different settings?*

Meraj replied: “Yes, yes. I always look to my audience for direction. If I play in the shrine, I am helping other Sufis in their journey. I must always be attentive to see if someone enters *hal* (ecstasy). If the repetition of the verse is broken while someone is in ecstasy they could die. Just as Khwaja Qutub ud-din Bhakhtiyar Khaki died by falling from ecstasy during qawwali. When I play at Sai Baba auditorium, on such occasions as *Basant*, I want everyone to be happy so I include *bhajans* (Hindu devotional songs) and qawwalis for the Hindu and Sufi audience.”

He lit a Gold Flake cigarette with the swift strike of a match and continued. “I use the same instruments when I play in the auditorium, but other qawwals use keyboards and electric banjos. We only play harmonium, dholak and tablā in the shrine and not other instruments.” Since he volubly spoke on this topic, I asked him another question: *What do you think about qawwals and non-qawwals playing qawwali music outside of the shrines?*

With this question I might have asked too much, because Meraj replied in a soft voice, giving his words a determined seriousness. “I want to only perform in the shrine, but playing music is mine and my children’s livelihood. We perform if we have the opportunity to be paid to play in auditoriums. I have children. We receive *nazarana*

(monetary gift offerings) in the shrine, but we do not play there for money. We play in the shrine for the saint's blessings. I know my sons like the pop style of Qawwali, but they also know I do not like it and they will not play that in the shrine or when I am around."

Everyone was awake now and the house hustled and bustled. I asked one final question: *What do you think of Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan and do you think that qawwali has changed in your lifetime?* "Nusrat was a good singer," Meraj responded then briefly paused. "*Khanqah Qawwali* has not changed. The same *mehfil* (or gathering) remains present, but there are some new aspects. In Khanqah Qawwali only *taqaraanaa* (or the repetition of verse; *taqaraanaa* means to cycle) is necessary, but now some people use notation. Khanqah Qawwali is the words of poetry. All pop Qawwali is just for money and does not have much meaning."

3.2 *The Commercial Success of Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan*

Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan was a prominent singer in South Asia mostly remembered for his Qawwali performances and dynamic singing style. Nusrat borrowed from very contemporary forms of music including rock, jazz, and electronic, and by doing so he transformed the sound of the Qawwali genre into one of popular music. Nusrat helped to popularize the phrase "Sufi music" that has come to apply to many commercial endeavors in the Indian music industry. He, also, is respected by qawwals and nonhereditary musicians and also listened to in a spiritual way. Nusrat was born in Pakistan to a family of musicians, trained as a *tablā* player, a classical singer of the

khayal and *drupad* styles, and a Qawwali singer although his lineage is not affiliated with a Sufi shrine.²⁶ In 1971, Nusrat became the leader of his own Qawwali group and his prestige in Pakistan also increased his popularity in India. After a long career performing Qawwali in Pakistan and India, Nusrat joined with Peter Gabriel to fuse the Qawwali style with Western popular styles of music. The first example of this fusion was an album produced by the Real World Records label in 1990 entitled *Mustt Mustt*.²⁷

Nusrat performed mostly in concert halls for commercial performances and not in shrines.²⁸ The musicians sat on a stage with the audience seated in chairs facing them. The audience would react to these performances by clapping during and after songs, dancing their interpretations of how they believe Sufis dance in the shrines, making the occasion resemble the vigor of a rock concert. Nusrat applied his classical singing background to the Qawwali sound by incorporating into his singing the *sargam* improvisational style. His musical and performance style mimicked that of shrine Qawwali but was in the commercial realm. People attending concerts bought tickets and listened to him for entertainment and not always as a Sufi saint. But since Qawwali is listener dependent for meaning, he could be enjoyed however someone wished, as a spiritualist and as an entertainer, within the concert hall.

The British electronic group Massive Attack remixed the namesake song on the *Mustt Mustt* album. The trance-like electronic rhythm, a funky slap bass, and strong *sargam* improvisations point to the direction “fusion Qawwali,” or “Sufi music” was to

²⁶ Ahmed Aqil Ruby, *Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan* (Lahore: Words of Wisdom Publishing, 1992), 10.

²⁷ Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan. *Mustt Mustt*. England: Real World Records. Distributed by Virgin Records. 1990.

²⁸ Shemeen Abbas reports of a single shrine performance by Nusrat, however, the depiction appears slightly contrived.

move. In *Mustt Mustt* we can hear the synthesis of Nusrat's melodic soulful voice with electronic beats. Traditional instruments are traded in for a driving bass line and synthesizers while the singer's voice is remixed to become another facet of the trancelike rhythm and not the focus of the song. The voice is almost reduced to a drone interjected with *sargam* improvisations, and is not clearly audible for most of the song. Nusrat's electronic style resembles the trip-hop form of electronic music popularized in the United Kingdom wherein ephemeral vocals emphasize beats. Nusrat recorded and performed both the electronic, western fusion and his energetic commercial Qawwali throughout the world.

Essentially, in fusion Qawwali the music takes the center stage and not the lyrics. Nusrat intentionally geared his performances to entertain paying audiences in a progressive style of Qawwali. He continued to experiment with new Qawwali fusion styles until his death in 1997. From the release of his first fusion album in 1990 up to 2009, at least one album per year has been released mixing his recorded singing and music with various other forms. Nusrat's posthumous influence on Qawwali shows no signs of yielding.²⁹

The point to understand about Nusrat is his lasting, powerful impact on what the term Qawwali signifies within the shrine community, even though he is believed not to be a Qawwali shrine performer. To be a hereditary qawwal one must be legitimized as coming from a family lineage affiliated with a Chishti shrine. As Muhammad Hayat Nizami said, "many qawwals also sing classical music, but since our families' come from

²⁹ Oriental Star Agencies website, "Ustad Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan," <http://www.osa.co.uk> (September 26, 2009).

qawwal lineage, it is difficult for us to find opportunities to perform classical music. Nusrat was not a qawwal. He was a classical singer who became a Qawwali singer.”³⁰

Meraj Ahmed Nizami added that, “anyone (male) is allowed to sing Qawwali music inside or outside the shrine. In the shrine here, we have even trained one man to sing Qawwali, but once he asked to join the shrine we needed to refuse. There are already thirty-five qawwals performing here from four related families and we cannot accept an outsider. The man was forced to leave.”³¹ These comments foreground the beneficial and malicious aspects of the qawwal label which these hereditary musicians embrace. Beneficially, qawwals retain their rights to control the shrine performance, yet adversely, are restricted by the label of qawwal outside of the shrine and cannot be hired to perform classical or their style of Qawwali music. The Indian music industry has held the position that hereditary shrine performers are not as musically skilled as musicians coming from better socially established classical gharanas, such as Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan. Qawwals are passed over for more prominent popular singers for Sufi music concerts.

An example is the *Jahan-e Khusrau* (the world of Khusrau) festival held annually across the street from Nizam ud-din shrine and inside of the sixteenth century Emperor Humayun’s tomb complex. This festival took its name from Amir Khusrau, the founder of Qawwali and celebrated Sufi poet and musician, and celebrates Sufi music from throughout the world. This festival is an example of how Sufism is marketed commercially. The economically affluent audience pays a large sum for tickets while

³⁰ Conversation with Ustad Muhammad Hayat Nizami. July 30, 2006. Delhi.

³¹ Conversation with Meraj Ahmed Nizami. May 10, 2006. Delhi.

Sufis and Qawwals from across the street are not able to attend because of their meager incomes.

When I attended in 2005, no hereditary qawwals were billed to perform during the concert. The artists represented many electronic and Western-Eastern fusion styles and the headliner was Abida Parveen, a Punjabi Qawwali female singer, who many consider to be the second Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan. Perhaps the exclusion of life musicians of Qawwali, a music performed by Sufis, did not fit the category of Sufi music, or this could merely reflect the audience in Delhi being accustomed to and less enthusiastic for the older Delhi shrine style of Qawwali. It may come as no surprise that qawwals of the Nizam ud-din shrine, then, are compelled to protect their positions and art through their lineage ties and shrine affiliations. But what is interesting is that this penetration of cultural capitalism (if I may use the word) into the Qawwali community did not imply that Nusrat was inaccessible to shrine qawwals.

3.3 Living as a qawwal Bachche: Muhammad Hayat Khan Nizami

Yateesh and I arrived in Old Delhi near two in the morning. After curving in and out of Daryaganj colony's coiled alleyways we arrived at Muhammad Hayat Khan Nizami's apartment. Hayat sahab, as he is commonly known, is the second elder qawwal in Nizam ud-din shrine and is married to Meraj Nizami's sister. Thus, they are cousins. Hayat Sahab is musically trained in qawwali and Sufiyana Shashtri. I studied the Sufiyana singing style under his tutelage along with younger qawwals in the community. I did not discover his age, possibly because he did not want me to, but he did say that he

was a few years younger than Meraj. Hayat sat on the bed in a bedroom with his grandson who was just beginning his voice training. The child provided us with a melodious scale in the background, “*saaaaaaaa. reeeeeeee. gaaaaaaaa. reeeeeee. saaaaa.*” If the young singer made any mistakes, Hayat quickly corrected the child by singing with him.

Hayat’s small frame held enormous amounts of youthful energy and we discussed many topics after our lessons would finish. I arranged this formal interview to have a final conversation with him before I left Delhi and returned to the United States. Although it was early in the morning he was awake. I asked: *What is Qawwali and how did you become a qawwal?* Hayat Sahab answered vigorously, with waving hand gestures and active shakes of his head: “Khanqah Qawwali is performed in the shrines of Chishti Sufi saints. My family tradition has been Qawwali and classical Sufiyana Shastri and we have always learned how to perform both from childhood. I moved with my family from Sikandrabad, Uttar Pradesh during Partition and my father took residence singing in the Nizam ud-din shrine. All of the qawwals in Nizam ud-din except Meraj come from the Sikandra *gharana* (lineage and style).” Hayat finished speaking and corrected the child with a loud *saaaaaa*, having us all sing along until the note was correct.

After a moment of listening I followed with another question. *Do you think that Khanqah Qawwali has changed during your life?* Hayat replied without a pause, “Of course! The audience has changed, forcing the qawwals to change to meet the demand, but Khanqah Qawwali is still the same. In old times, all *Qawwal Bachche* (the musicians affiliated with the shrine) learned both classical Sufiyana and Qawwali. The qawwals

today only learn newer qawwalis and not many know the *ragas* (classical scales) to older, classical Persian qawwalis.” Hayat’s reply left me a bit confused. How could the audience change and the qawwals change in style, but Khanqah Qawwali remain the same?

Do you think that Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan changed the qawwali style? This is the first time we had ever discussed Nusrat, and Hayat paused. The silence shortly ended. “Classical singers and qawwals are different. Nusrat began as a classical singer of the *dhrupad* style, which uses the *sargam* improvisational technique.” He stopped to sing an example of what he meant by this. *sa-re-ga-ma-re-sa* (octave)–*sa-sa* (octave)–*ga-re-saaaaaa*. In our Sufiyana Shashtri lessons we practiced singing scales based on the classical Hindustani note system (sa, re, ga, ma, pa, dha, nee). These seven notes do not denote a tone but a shifting pattern that can apply to any key. For instance, our lessons with Hayat would usually begin by slowly singing this pattern in *C#*, which happens to be in the middle of the harmonium keyboard. However the scale can easily shift to *C* by only moving one key down. “I have been trained in classical singing, but not many other qawwals have. Meraj does not know classical singing. After Nusrat, many qawwals now include the *sargam* improvisation in their performances. But if they have not been trained to sing scales like classical musicians, then they perform it poorly.” Reflecting upon the performances I have seen in Nizam ud-din shrine, few qawwals sang *sargam* improvisations during the songs. In fact I have only seen Hayat sahab, his eldest son Humasar Hayat, and a visiting qawwal group from Karachi, Pakistan perform it in large gatherings on special occasions, such as the *‘urs* festivals.

3.4 Interpretations

Many of the qawwals, listeners and pirs with whom I discussed the topic of Nusrat also reiterated to me that Nusrat was not a qawwal; however, this common understanding within the community did not change their respect for him as a musician. Meraj Ahmed Nizami, a devout Sufi disciple, admitted he liked Nusrat's singing, but not the performer's desire for fame and money. Meraj says, "qawwals should sing to serve God, the Prophet and the saints. But now even we are forced to also sing to earn money on which to live."³² Meraj appears to lament the shift from a feudal system of Muslim elite patronage to a system of capitalism wherein everyone must compete to survive.

Meraj's sense of nostalgia for the past possibly reflects his age, being born around the time of Indian independence, and his longing for the period that his elder relatives described to him. Even though Meraj disapproves of Nusrat's accumulated wealth, the influence of Nusrat's singing style on many young qawwals in Nizam ud-din is undeniable. On the one hand, the five sons of Meraj do not engage in the flashy style popularized by Nusrat, since Meraj does not allow them to. Muhammad Hayat Nizami, on the other hand, encourages his eldest son, Humasar Nizami, to sing wherever possible. Both father and son, Hayat and Humasar, incorporate the *sargam* style of improvisation into their shrine performances and now Humasar has his own group performing concerts in Delhi and Mumbai, and recording for Bollywood. Hayat utilizes the *sargam*

³² Conversation with Meraj Ahmed Nizami August 5, 2006. Delhi.

improvisation in his performances and does not accredit Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan, yet instead says that it has come from his own classical training in the Sikandra gharana.³³

There is not a contradiction between liking the music of Nusrat and knowing that he was not a hereditary qawwal but did make much money from the musical form. Some social actors may not approve of his life or motivations, but none in the Nizam ud-din shrine community rejects him. If you go to a music store in North America or Europe you will find Nusrat's recordings and remixes under the headings: religious, devotional, world or Qawwali; however, the recordings of hereditary qawwals may be sparse. Similarly, if you travel to the Nizam ud-din shrine today, you will see numerous stalls lining the narrowly winding passages leading to the shrine's entrances selling Compact Discs and Cassette Tapes of all kinds of Qawwali singers. These will include many from the shrine's qawwals but most will be of Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan and his Qawwali group. The preference given to Nusrat over hereditary qawwals within their own community surrounding the shrine attests to a non-contradictory inclusion of Nusrat's musical style and a synthesis of a commercial Qawwali identity with the qawwal community in shrine culture.

³³ For the *gharana* system please see Daniel Nueman, *The Life of Music in North India: The Organization of an Artistic Tradition*, (Detroit: Wayne State University Press, 1980).

Chapter 4

On the Qawwali Genre and *Adab*

Hereditary performers of Qawwali, and others within the Qawwali community are aware of the recent successes of commercial music including the notoriety of Nusrat's musical abilities and personality.³⁴ To be clear, commercial styles of music are not devoid of religious or spiritual importance, but these performances outside of shrines lack the guidelines to which the occasions for the Qawwali ritual (or as the qawwals refer to it, *Khanqah Qawwali*) must adhere in order to be performed in the shrine.

Distinctions between differing Qawwali styles within the genre come from observed etiquette, created space, composition of the audience, and in music itself. Meraj Ahmed Nizami said about the differences in Qawwali performance, "Qawwali within the shrine is distinct from Qawwali outside the shrine for the reasons of location, monetary compensation, and the many established guidelines for performing, singing, and attending Qawwali gatherings in shrines."³⁵ Meraj is able to veritably speak about these reasons because he is a hereditary shrine musician who performs for entertainment purposes when called upon and he agrees with the purpose of the occasion.

³⁴ For a description of cultural mimesis, refer to Michael Taussig, *Mimesis and Alterity: A Particular History of the Senses*, (New York: Routledge, 1993).

³⁵ Conversation with Meraj Ahmed Nizami. 08.05.2006. Delhi.

4.1 *Meraj Qawwali's Performance in Sathya Sai Auditorium*

In January 2006, Anjum Naim approached me to write an article for *SPAN*, the United States Embassy's South Asian periodical published in Hindi, Urdu and English. He discovered my interests in Qawwali and wanted me to compose a personal article for the magazine. I obliged and we met many times to talk about *ghazals* and qawwalis. Months later, Mr. Naim again approached me, this time to ask for my help arranging a Sufi music program in Sathya Sai Auditorium. They planned to have two artists perform, and already had the sitar maestro Shujaat Huseein Khan but needed a second artist. The coordinators wanted to have a qawwali group, since the program consisted of "Sufi music," and in particular Mr. Naim wished to have one of his favorite qawwals, Meraj Ahmed Nizami, perform.

I agreed to help because it presented an excellent opportunity to reciprocate the kindness Meraj had given me. *SPAN* wanted me to serve as a liaison between the qawwals, I supposed because I knew both sides well. My efforts assisting the concert's organization placed myself unquestionably into my research, however, I continued with the plan. I went with Yateesh to talk to Meraj about the concert because I was unsure how he would receive the offer. Relieving my reluctance, Meraj graciously accepted. Next, I had to negotiate the payment. Mr. Naim asked me what I thought the correct amount of rupees would be and I told them that I did not know. We decided, however, the same amount that the classical Sufiyana sitar musician received should be appropriate. This came to Rs. 10,000 I relayed the message to Meraj who agreed to perform.

The tortuous organization of the actual performance followed. Shujaat Hussein Khan had been billed to perform first, the most prominent position in formal concerts such as these. I dissented: *Meraj was the elder musician why can he not perform first?* Mr. Naim answered: “The others organizing the concert’s arrangement were in charge of that. Though, I don’t like it either.” The program commenced on July twelfth inside the Sathya Sai auditorium, saving us from the sweltering midsummer heat outside. The concert hall holds over one thousand people with the seats facing an elevated wooden stage. Musafar Ali, the director of the new film *Umrao Jaan* and program organizer of the annual Sufi music festival *Jahan-e-Khusrau*, spoke first of his relation to “Sufi music.” I followed with a few words about Qawwali’s relationship to Delhi. After I finished Shujaat Hussein Khan performed *Sufiyana* on the sitar and was followed by an exuberant group of qawwals led by Meraj.

The *SPAN* Sufi music program billed Meraj’s group as *Meraj Qawwali*. All of the qawwals wore exceptional *kurtas* (long shirts) and *topies* (hats) with exquisitely golden embroidery. For the occasion, Meraj recruited a strong rhythm section from the breadth of qawwals in Nizam ud-din shrine. The two drummers were from Ghulam Hussein’s usual group. The program ended promptly at ten in the evening and the audience seemed to enjoy both performances. Later, after we returned to Nizam ud-din, Meraj also said he enjoyed the program.

4.2 *Commercial Performances*

When Meraj and his group played this concert on July 12, 2006 at Sathya Sai Auditorium his usual group included different instruments, sang from a more appealing song repertoire geared to the multi-religious audience, and energetically interacted with listeners. He was paid before the performance. Afterwards, Meraj and his sons said they enjoyed the concert and found the audience very responsive. I observed that the audience remained seated throughout and clapped only at the end of songs. Many attendees expressed to me how much they enjoyed the music or opined their personal critiques of this Qawwali group's singing style, but none discussed the religious nature of the poetry and whether it spiritually aided them in any way. This example of how Meraj's group viewed his auditorium performance and interaction with listeners shows how shrine affiliated qawwals enjoy playing for mixed audiences and how attendees receive them. The desires of audiences and qawwals echoes a mutual understanding on both sides of the stage that this evening was predominantly for musical entertainment and monetary gain. The qawwals changed their performance to meet the audience's requirement to hear a Qawwali to which they are accustomed, and the audience wanted to enjoy the sound of Qawwali without submersion into the shrine culture and context.

The commercial performance of Qawwali places more emphasis on the musician and the performance, and less on the spiritual meanings of the words. As a Chishti Sufi, Meraj Ahmed Nizami believes, "the music, according to Chishti belief, is without the same meaning and becomes an event for worldly pleasure without the emphasis on the

poetry of transcendence.”³⁶ The audience reaction exemplifies this point. On the one side, the listeners in the Sufi shrines and hospices are mostly Sufi devotees and follow the level of etiquette that each gathering requires, while on the other side, in concert halls there are mixed audiences in terms of religions they profess and their purposes for listening. Meraj said of the latter listeners, “I like performing Qawwali for people of all religions because I believe that the message is universal.” Meraj entertains outside the shrine for monetary gain *and* religious outreach, since he views his self and his songs as inseparable from Sufi belief, which he firmly believes in and the joy of which he wants to spread.

The popularity of the Qawwali style created by Nusrat informs the performance of Qawwali inside the shrines. Ustad Muhammad Hayat Nizami, a qawwal elder of the Nizam ud-din shrine and a *Sufiyana* classical singer, stated, “Nusrat’s style influenced hereditary qawwals to include the *sargam* improvisations into their performances in the shrines.”³⁷ Hayat, an ebullient performer, says of his performance style that since Nusrat became famous he could include more classical singing; especially, the fame of Nusrat’s Qawwali gave him leverage to include more *sargam* improvisations in Khanqah Qawwali. And in general, qawwals were able and compelled by audience expectations to add elements of Nusrat’s style. He says his son, Humasar Hayat, grew up singing Qawwali, but did not want to learn the labor intensive and less commercially successful classical style. Muhammad Hayat believes, “the younger generations do not have the same concern for musical knowledge and ability we used to. Classical learning is about

³⁶ Conversation with Meraj Ahmed Nizami. December 10, 2005. Delhi.

³⁷ Conversation with Hayat Nizami. July 30, 2006. Delhi.

passion, and today wealth is more important.”³⁸ The former social prestige of the Sufiyana classical musician seems to have caved under the pressure of enticing, more prosperous routes that commercially sell. An inclusion within the Qawwali ritual performances of a singing style made popular by Nusrat, and the musician’s shift of emphasis from hereditary position and social prestige to commercial success provides examples of the mimetic exchanges between the many styles of Qawwali performance. The inclusion of a classical singing technique helped raise the social popularity of the qawwals within Chishti shrine culture. The fame of Nusrat influenced the hereditary qawwals to incorporate commercial (e.g. non-Qawwali) singing techniques in shrines in order to appeal to newcomers to the shrine hoping to experience the Nusrat style of Qawwali.

Nusrat’s preeminence as a popular qawwal in international commercial markets helped to elevate the popularity of shrine qawwals from servants of the shrines to that of musicians and influenced changes to musical style. Nusrat brought attention to the Qawwali style of music in North America, Europe and South Asia, and this beneficial attention increased the social recognition of the hereditary qawwals in Delhi and their music. The leaders of shrine culture had to recognize the importance of the shrine qawwals who perform music by the same name as this famous style and that hereditary shrine qawwals were bearers of a collective tradition that can transcend the confines of shrine culture.

³⁸ Conversation with Hayat Nizami. July 30, 2006. Delhi..

Possible distinctions between Qawwali styles – the observance of Chishti etiquette, the audience reaction, and the different roles of the musicians – should not outweigh the similarities within the Qawwali genre: structures of performance, musicians, and primary instruments are often the same. For the reasons of similarity of sound in the performances and recordings and the participation of the same musicians in different settings, all styles should be subsumed into the academic discussion on the north Indian Qawwali genre.

Chapter 5

Qawwali Without Borders

The concept of Qawwali as religious occasion comes from fundamental points in Qureshi's narrative, which imposes limitations on what an "authentic" Qawwali performance requires. This narrative focuses on the religiosity of the occasion, wherein everyone must know "his" role: the performance is held under the guidance of a spiritual leader, is listened to by Sufi devotees, and serves the religious function to arouse mystical love, which is "the core experience of Sufism."³⁹ Qureshi's emphasis on the "authentic" nature of the event serves to simplify how this type of music is a static system of meaning in itself, but her pursuit leaves out many other social aspects that influence the process of Qawwali. Peter Manuel notes that such particulars as historical development, regional variants, popular Qawwali, and the religious and popular genres' relation to Sufism in modern South Asia are excluded from Qureshi's study.⁴⁰ In addition, performances of Qawwali, whether in auditoriums for entertainment, shrines for spiritual advancement and entertainment, or in other possible settings, share common characteristics and also inform one another to musical styles, new and old songs, and ways to satisfy systems of patronage.

³⁹ Qureshi, xiii.

⁴⁰ Peter Manuel, review of *Sufi Music of India and Pakistan: Sound, Context and Meaning in Qawwali*, by Regula Burkhardt Qureshi, *Yearbook for Traditional Music*, Vol. 21, 1989, 130-131.

5.1 *Multiple Understandings of Qawwali Poetry: Ambiguity in Themes and Tropes*

Little distinction exists between the sacred tropes of Islam and Sufism and common tropes utilized in profane discourses. In Urdu poetry, especially in the *ghazal* form, the same concepts that express love for God are used to speak of worldly love, or concepts of intoxication can mean both physically drunk on wine or a Sufi being ecstatic on the love of God. The ambiguity of poetry and in Qawwali performances can potentially mislead a listener who is unfamiliar with the multivalent nature of tropes commonly used for many, seemingly contradictory, purposes.

The Urdu poetic tradition utilizes ambiguity, or the possibility of multiple interpretations and an unidentified lover and beloved. The qawwali, *Batufail-e daman-e Murtaza*, of Meraj Ahmed's repertoire exemplifies how one's desire of God can be expressed through worldly ideas of intoxication. The fourth and last stanza of this qawwali encompasses the usefulness of worldly, possibly profane, tropes to express ineffable, Islamic beliefs of devotion and love.

Batufail-e daman-e Murtaza

Through my attachment to Murtaza (Ali)
how can I say what I have attained!
Since I reached Ali, I reached the Prophet; when
I reached the Prophet, I reached God

Following your example, step by step I have
attained perseverance and submission.
Somewhere I encounters the traces of the
ecstatic, somewhere the blood of the color
of faithfulness

You are a lord of lords, your beneficence is
greatest of all
Whatever the blessings I have received from your
bounty, they have been beyond my
aspirations.

You are joined with the daughter of the Prophet,
you are close to the Prophet's kin.
You are the wine of cognition, the object of love;
oh to receive this goblet!⁴¹

This poem praises Ali ibn Abi Talib, the cousin and son-in-law of Prophet Muhammad, who Chishti Sufis revere as having a direct connection with God. In the last couplet, the poet transforms Ali into “wine of cognition”, a metaphor for the intoxication that the love of God brings to believers, and the poet longs to receive this wine’s goblet, or Ali. Since the text of this poem mostly addresses God and Ali through less ambiguous Islamic terminology the meaning of the last couplet is not as difficult to discern from profane interpretations. Ambiguity in other qawwalis is less easy for novice listeners to recognize.

Often qawwalis assume the perspective of a lover or beloved in order to dialogically address Divine qualities. In this dialogue, qawwals sometimes utilize a feminine perspective, or “female voice.” The first stanza of *Teri har ek ada ko jaan gain na* shows how qawwali songs engage a dialogue between lover (the pining mystic) and beloved (God) that reminisces an influence from the female voice found in Indian bhakti poetry. John Stratton Hawley asserts that in the bhakti tradition, “they [Hindu devotional/bhakti poets] speak of lovesickness, they project themselves almost

⁴¹ Qureshi, 34-35.

exclusively into the voice of one of the women who wait for Krishna.” And concludes that “whether one conceives it in the secular or religious sense (and these are not entirely separable), longing has a definite gender: it is feminine.”⁴² The use of bhakti feminine longing for love allows Indian musicians and audiences to better connect with the metaphorical message the Sufi inspired poetry and attests to Qawwali’s assimilation into Indian traditions.

Another common theme in qawwalis is the value of *majazi* (metaphorical) love.⁴³ It invokes Islamic allusions to exemplars of lover-beloved relations such as widespread Persianate story of princess Laila and Qays (or Majnun, the “crazy”), which symbolizes the degree of longing and devotion a lover has for the beloved, and the Quranic story of Joseph and the Pharaoh’s wife Zulaykha. This four-line parable in the Quran of Zulaykha’s longing for her male slave Joseph, is remembered as the “most beautiful story” and represents the intense passion with which a lover should be enamored with their beloved. Such metaphorical ideals of love allow qawwals to provide examples in the poetry for their audiences of how to love God. The second stanza of *Teri hare k ada ko main jan gain na* provides an example of how qawwalis invoke *majazi* love and additionally utilizes the trope of intoxication.

⁴² John Stratton Hawley, “Krishna and the Gender of Longing” in Joseph Runzo and Nancy Martin eds., *Love, Sex and Gender in the World Religions* (Oxford: Oneworld, 2000) 240. quoted in Syed Akbar Hyder, “Contemplating the Divine” in Manu Bhagavan and Anne Feldhaus, *Speaking the Truth* (New Delhi: Oxford university Press, 2008) 221-230.

⁴³ Syed Akbar Hyder and Carla Petievich, “Qawwali Songs of Praise” in Barbara D. Metcalf, *Islam in South Asia in Practice* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2009) 93-100.

Teri hare k ada ko main jaan gain na

I've come to know your every gesture, haven't I, my dear?
I've figured out your ways and means,
haven't I my dear?
It's not just my heart I've lost, my dear,
it's life itself, is it not, my dear?

You (God) appeared on Mt. Sinai and knocked Moses senseless
You possessed Laila and drove Majnun mad,
gave Mansur the goblet and got him drunk;
and wasn't that you, sold off in Egypt's marketplace.

Your radiant countenance
is but the promised sun,
its splendor lighting up the universe

Those glorious night-black locks of yours
bring the world repose.

Your stature casts no shadow:
how can mere mortals grasp it?

Insists a hundred thousand times that you are but human—
humanity apprehends that you're much more.

I know your every gesture,
Each and every one.
I've come to know each move of yours,
Each sign, each blandishment. ...⁴⁴

Qawwali poetry employs ambiguous themes and tropes to provide metaphorical examples for human mystics wanting to love the Divine. Such examples also invoke Indian, Hindu concepts of love and Islamic allusions to lover-beloved parables, recalling for participants emotive responses to religious beliefs and personal understandings of the

⁴⁴ Hyder and Petievich, 97. This is an abridgement of Hyder and Petievich's translation.

metaphors. The ambiguity of Qawwali helps to momentarily personalize each participant's experience of the performance.

5.2 *Multiple Understandings of Qawwali in Practice*

A concept of an authentic Qawwali is not possible since this overlooks each qawwal family group's incorporation of different sets of songs and that when they perform for entertainment purposes, not only does the repertoire change, but also the songs themselves change according to the audience. An examination with an emphasis on music does not include motivating factors of sociopolitical issues at stake in every performance and everyday power struggles of qawwal musicians. In each shrine gathering, the qawwals negotiate among themselves for leading role and song repertoire, and with the audience for guidance, including appropriate song choice and when to continue and end a song.

Each qawwal draws upon the unique training he has received during his life practice. For example, some have additionally learned classical styles of singing while some have not, and this life training becomes a determining factor for the manner in which each performance proceeds. As evinced by the prior example of Hayat Nizami, who sings and teaches the classical Sikandra gharana style, but whose sons are not interested in learning. Hayat believes the younger generations seek to build upon their roots in Qawwali, and fuse their talents with other styles of music in order to better find performances outside of the shrine culture.⁴⁵ The sound and context of the Qawwali

⁴⁵ Conversation with Hayat Nizami. July 30, 2006. Delhi.

performance are separate since the music depends more on each musician's lineage, ability and musical influences, than on the changes of context.

The composition of the audience and their observance of high etiquette combined with the presence of advanced Sufis and spiritual guides create the Qawwali ritual. Certain fundamental aspects of etiquette in the Qawwali shrine ritual do not create a specific musical genre that is exclusive to the religious sphere since many aspects are also shared with other forms of Qawwali. I have experienced many performances of high etiquette wherein the performance of religious Qawwali unofficially adheres – in that there are no written rules – to the requirements for etiquette that all participants follow, and that a spiritual leader be present and oversee the proceedings.

According to religious treatises, etiquette includes little to no speaking, sitting on the knees as if in prayer, reverence for the spiritual leader, and the proper observance of ecstasy (*hal*).⁴⁶ The fourteenth century malfuzat of the Chishti saint, Nizam ud-din Awliya records his comments on the certain conditions for *sama*’, “Each of these must be right: the singer, what is sung, the listener, and also the musical instrument.”⁴⁷ The performance today rarely adheres to this ideal even though religious treatises say the listeners are expected to remain silent out of respect for God because of the ritualized ceremony in the religious setting, and their peers are expected to be Sufis and also educated in the proper listening etiquette. The presence of a pir, the setting within the shrine, the hereditary qawwal musicians, and the devotional etiquette of participants

⁴⁶ Ruzbihan Baqli quoted in and translated by Carl Ernst. *Teachings of Sufism*, (Boston: Shambhala Publications, 1999). 96, 102. And Conversation with Meraj Ahmed Nizami December 10, 2005.

⁴⁷ Bruce B. Lawrence, *Nizam ud-din Awliya: Morals for the Heart* (Fawa'id al-Fu'ad). (New Jersey: Paulist Press, 1992). 355.

create the religious context for the shrine performance. The music, however, shares similar characteristics with other commercial and entertainment Qawwali performances. For *sama'*, emphasis is on the poetry and the musical style is less important than the presence of the combination of the aforementioned elements. Minor changes occur in the music and performance, but the fundamental sound is not dependent on a context. The sound of Qawwali is not specifically connected to the religious context, nor does the Qawwali sound form necessitate the Qawwali ritual.

Today a high standard of etiquette that participants observe still creates the space for a more somber form of Qawwali imbued with spiritual overtones, Sufi hierarchies and many advanced Sufis. Having said this, people in the Qawwali community believe that the most common auspicious location is in the shrine. In the Nizam ud-din shrine, the musicians usually sit facing the entrance approximately twenty feet from the tomb of the saint. This pathway is maintained clear throughout the performance. I have observed other locations for spiritual performances, which can be held at any time of day or night (except during *namaz*), and the spiritual guide sits facing the qawwals in lieu of the saint's tomb. Only certain instruments – harmonium, tablā, dholak, and hand-clapping – may be used in these performances. While differences do exist in styles of performance, the lines of separation are not as bold as literature may depict them.

A distinction of *mehfil-e-sama'* from Qawwali or *sama'* is not possible since this would require the creation of levels of religious-ness by describing that the proper performance can only occur under the specific presence of participants educated in Sufism. If *mehfil-e-sama'* is the proper performance, then what makes *sama'* religious?

There is little difference between a *sama'* occasion and *mehfil-e-sama'* and many with whom I spoke often used *sama'* (or "*mehfil*") to refer to both. The point of delineation here arises from an attempt to explain the difference between the everyday shrine performance of Qawwali and the special occasions when the carpets are rolled out – literally – in the *astaana* (threshold; shrine courtyard). During these special occasions, more pirs, khadims, other Sufis of high standing, and qawwals come and observe the high standard of etiquette, yet the devotees continue to come and go, talk and answer mobile phone calls in the background. In other settings such as the *sama' khana* (listening hall) of the sajjadah nashin Syed Sani Nizami of the Nizam ud-din shrine, where only strong spiritually devoted people are invited, the high etiquette is also observed, yet people obviously continue to loosely mingle in the background. I raise this example to show the guidelines between *sama'* and *mehfil-e-sama'* that appear rigid and in literature are more fluid in modern practice. The rigid distinctions between religious Qawwali and nonreligious music, similarly, do not reflect the fluidity of lived reality. In light of an overemphasis on music, a neglect of social power negotiations within Qawwali performances, and a conflation of sound with context, I question the accuracy of a binary construction of a religious Qawwali versus nonreligious music.

Chapter 6

Intersections of Oral History and Scholarship

The presentation of aspects of the oral history of this tradition alongside textual scholarship on South Asian Islamic history will provide an historical context for the socio-politics of Qawwali music and performance. Qawwali is inseparable from Islam and the Chishti Sufi order in South Asia; however, an exclusive attention to the religious nature of the Chishti order undermines the social context. A collective memory of the history of Qawwali exists in the minds and voices of the actors within the Qawwali community. All actors believe the Qawwali performed in the shrines to be bound by a seven hundred year old history to the Chishti Sufi order. Here, the performance of Qawwali is one type of Sufi *sama*’ and is used as a tool for the spiritual advancement of the Sufi participants. In Nizam ud-din the musicians are all male, hereditary qawwals of a shrine (specifically called the *Qawwal Bachche*), and are viewed as servants of the saint and his shrine. All social actors with whom I conversed agreed upon these common past characteristics of shrine Qawwali. Qawwals use the term *Khanqah Qawwali* to refer to the structured ritual performance in the shrine, and most say that this structure – which includes such aspects as the proper etiquette (*adab*), same selections of poetry, same physical arrangement, and an all male participation – has not changed.

6.1 Musical Performance

Qawwals believe, and scholars agree, that the Qawwali musical style evolves with each generation to better transmit the message.⁴⁸ Many qawwals said that they sing the same poetry, however, the manner of musical performance is a part of a developing process that relays teachings to new generations of devotees. The qawwals want to make their music and performance accessible to each new generation of devotee listeners and, equally important, to patrons since qawwals also largely depend on donations given to them during the performance. Reconstructing the past history of the music is difficult due to the ephemeral nature of music, and especially difficult in this case because of the absence of notation, yet the inclusion of the harmonium, an instrument all qawwals and participants believe a standard in the modern Qawwali performance, attests to past changes in some degree.⁴⁹

Organs first appeared in Hindustan during the Mughal period, and were brought by the request of Akbar to his imperial court along with Europeans who could play the new instrument. Bonnie Wade believes that the Mughal interest in and familiarity with Western culture and people led to the inclusion of keyboard instruments in Indian musical gatherings.⁵⁰ In imperial miniatures from the ateliers of Akbar and Jahangir we find much larger predecessors to the portable harmonium – probably the most famous

⁴⁸ See Carl Ernst. "Chishti Meditation Practices of the Later Mughal Period." In *The Heritage of Sufism*, Volume 3: *Late Classical Persianate Sufism (1501-1750): The Safavid and Mughal Period* (Oxford: Oneworld, 1999), 344-57. 347.

⁴⁹ See AIR's "Seminar on the Harmonium," in *Sangeet Natak*, No.20, April-June 1971, 5. And Vinayak Purohit. *Arts of Transitional India Twentieth Century*, Vol. 2. (Bombay: Popular Prakashan. 1988), 817, 893-5. .

⁵⁰ Bonnie C. Wade. *Imagining Sound*, (Chicago & London: The University of Chicago Press, 1998), 152-154. This is the most detailed historical discussion on the inclusion of the harmonium organ in Indian music I have found.

being “Plato (playing organ) charming the wild beasts” found in the *Khamsa* of Nizami c.1595 and held today in the British Library – which attest to the presence of keyboard wind instruments in the court. As to their lasting nature, Wade states, “while the organ remained in Indian instrumentarium in the form of the harmonium, other keyboard instruments did not.”⁵¹ In discussions with qawwals about the inclusion of the harmonium, some believe that the *sārangī*, and the sitar before that provided the musical ambiance for the performance. Collective memory of the qawwal community holds that Amir Khusrau, in addition to inventing the Qawwali style, also invented the tablā drum set by cutting in two a barrel drum and the sitar. Though of collective memory, this story lacks the documentation necessary to support the claim.

The most influential changes to the music of Qawwali have occurred in the past century and many of these changes stem from the British colonial influence and the partition of India and Pakistan. These pivotal events influenced the familial structure of the qawwal and shrine communities. With the full British takeover of most regions in India following the mutiny in 1857 and up to India’s independence of 1947, the structure of the elite and more affluent realms of society changed. Previously, due to the dominant rule of Muslim kings and princes in addition to other syncretic kingdoms in places such as Rajasthan and Gujarat, a feudal system with affluent Muslims and nobles was in place that could afford to patronize Sufi shrines.⁵² This patronage ensured the overall survival of the shrine sociopolitical structure, helped to ensure livelihood to qawwal musicians,

⁵¹ Wade, 154.

⁵² Janaki Bakhle, *Two Men and Music*. (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005). And Eriko Kobayashi, “*Hindustani Classical Music Reform Movement and the Writing of History, 1900s to 1940s*,” (PhD diss., University of Texas, 2003).

and aided the spread of Islamic styles of art and music. Muhammad Hayat Nizami believes this patronage process to be the essential difference of pre-colonial forms of music, especially the system of musicians who sang in the shrines. When I asked Hayat about the difference between Qawwali singers that are also classically trained and those that are not he replied,

In past times most all Qawwali singers were classically trained and would perform classical music for noble patrons. Classical musicians were permanent residents in the palaces or a noble's home who could afford the extravagance of being a patron. These same musicians performed Qawwali inside the *khanqahs* (Sufi gathering places) and *dargahs* for religious reasons and not necessarily to earn money. The classically trained qawwals would go to the shrines to play in praise of the Sufi saints or to receive the blessings of the present pirs, the saints, and from Allah. As Sufism and Islam spread into many regions throughout the Indian subcontinent, so did the need for more classical court musicians. Thus, the *Sufiyana Shashtri* style grew in popularity because there were more courts to perform in, as did the numbers of musicians following from the progenitor, Amir Khusrau. Sufism grew as well and more *khanqahs* and *dargahs* emerged to dot the Hindustan landscape. With the geographic expansion of Sufiyana classical musicians and of Sufism, Qawwali grew in popularity alongside the population of Hind. The Qawwal Bachche lineage existed until the nineteenth century, passing the knowledge of Amir Khusrau's *sama'*, both the classical and Qawwali forms, from father to son. This was the high point of Chishti Qawwali.⁵³

⁵³ Conversation with Muhammad Hayat Nizami. July 30, 2006. Delhi.

In Hayat's view, Sufi classical musicians were more numerous and well trained in previous generations and also had more social prestige. Their performances in shrines were religiously motivated. Hayat is himself one of only a few qawwals in the Nizam ud-din shrine with classical training and he laments the turn away from classical to popular music of the younger generations such as his sons. Given his bias towards classical music, which he thinks many qawwals today do not want to invest the proper amount of time in to capably learn, the verity of his historical beliefs can be questioned. Aspects of his statements do ring true, though, with what others say in relation to the modern structure of Qawwali music.

Haji Muhammad Idris Shah, a cousin of the Nizami qawwals in Nizam ud-din shrine and the lead qawwal of the Qutub ud-din Bakhtiyar Khaki shrine in Meharuli, Delhi, believes that the most drastic change to the qawwal community's structure came with the emergence of the Indian democracy and the creation of India and Pakistan. Idris narrates, "When partition came, Muslim communities had to leave the places where their families had always lived and travel. They left behind empty spaces that needed to be filled. Many families in the north could take the trip to Pakistan, but families from the south came to the abandoned northern cities and could not travel any further."⁵⁴ Meraj Ahmed Nizami, while not addressing any changes in Qawwali, reinforces Idris' beliefs and narrates how his family travelled north during Partition. "I was a small child when my father travelled with our family from Hyderabad to Delhi. Upon our arrival at the Nizam ud-din shrine my family was offered positions as qawwals since many of the

⁵⁴ Conversation with Muhammad Idris Shah. August 2, 2006. Delhi

musicians had left.”⁵⁵ The upheaval of communities caused by the national partition of a Muslim state from India created voids in the shrine community’s structure since many people had left. This type of experience is difficult to document given the personal and emotional strains imposed on the new Indian citizens.

One theme current throughout these narratives emphasizes that the structures of the interconnected qawwal community within the greater shrine communities experienced a great shift of qawwal familial affiliation, and a significant change to Muslim social structure within Delhi. By the Indian nation’s inception, the British domination dismantled much of the Muslim elite social strata that maintained the arts through patronage. This loss of elite patronage greatly afflicted the prestige of music and musicians were forced to struggle to find paying jobs to survive. Eriko Kobayashi addresses the (re)creation of Indian classical music and puts forth the notion that new structures of teaching and especially of receiving money had to be created to ensure the survival of classical music.⁵⁶ This led to the inception of classical recitals or concerts that people could purchase tickets to attend. Though Kobayashi does not address Qawwali, we can infer that Qawwali also needed to change its structure to accommodate for the social and economic transitions of a new form of society under a new democracy ran by the people and not an elite social class with patrons. In this new structuring of musical society, the everyday commoner became the indirect patron of the performance and the musicians.

⁵⁵ Conversation with Meraj Ahmed Nizami. October 20, 2005. Delhi.

⁵⁶ Kobayashi, 149-155.

The abundance of trained Muslim musicians in India and the severe dearth of jobs possibly gave rise to a competition for reliable positions for musicians such as that of a qawwal affiliated with a shrine. Today most every qawwal possesses written documentation of their affiliation to their shrine that states their lineage and credentials as a qawwal as proof for their profession. This paper is an important distinction to which qawwals turn to identify people in their profession. Since many in the qawwal community share lineages they do not need to ask each other for proof, but the existence of such a document could attest to past and present struggles with which qawwals have had to contend.

6.2 *Political Engagement*

Qawwals do not emphasize the structure of their music, because in the performance the message of mystical poetry is more important than the music or the musicians and singers. According to Meraj Ahmed Nizami, “qawwals do not write their own lyrics because they are the musicians; the Sufi saints write the poetry to the music.”⁵⁷ By deferring to Sufi saints, Meraj is de-emphasizing his agency as a qawwal in the process of creation and emphasizing the role of a qawwal to be a functionary who transmits the message to others. It seems that Meraj prefers to be humble about his agency in the performance and does not want people to be misled and come to revere the musicians over Sufi saints and the message behind the poetry.

⁵⁷ Conversation with Meraj Ahmed Nizami. August 6, 2006. Delhi.

An historical analysis of the vast legal dialogue about the validity of *sama'* in Islamic philosophy and jurisprudence provides insight into the Chishti point of view on music within the shrine.⁵⁸ Struggles have arisen between rulers' religious beliefs being imposed on Sufi ideology and practice. During his life, Nizam ud-din Awliya was subjected to the wavering whims of the ruling Sultans. The saint received support from some rulers like the generous patron Sultan 'Ala ud-din Khalji (r. 1296-1316), yet was forced to defend his *sama'* occasions against the piously orthodox ruler Sultan Ghiyas ud-din Tughlaq (r. 1320-5).⁵⁹ The perennial political meddling in the Chishti practice of Qawwali influenced Chishtis to defend themselves, and thus develop guidelines for how their ritualized ceremonies should be conducted so that others like the legalists would not have to. This self-regulation plays an important role in the development of Chishti Qawwali, for it forces the Chishti practitioners to continually maintain the etiquette of their practice.

⁵⁸ For a discussion of the debate on and controversy of *sama'* in Hindustan see K.A. Nizami, *The Life and Times of Nizam ud-din Awliya* and *The Life and Times of Nasir ud-Din Chriagh-e-Delhi* (1991), and in general see Gribetz, Arthur, "The samā' Controversy: Sufi vs. Legalist" in *Studia Islamica* 74 (1991): 43-62. And Leonard Lewisohn, "The Sacred Music of Islam: Samā' in the Persian Sufi Tradition" in *British Journal of Ethnomusicology*, Vol. 6 (1997): 1-33.

The development of Chishti *sama'* of Qawwali is contemporary with Jalal ud-din Rumi's Mevlevi order's development of their practice known today as the Whirling Dervishes. See, Annemarie Schimmel. *I Am Wind, You Are Fire (Rumi's World)*, (Boston & London: Shambhala Press. 2001). 32. Also for a discussion of the term *sama* (Arabic) and *sema'* (Turkish) as part of the neo-platonic philosophy incorporated into Islam, please see Dering, J.; Sellheim, R. "Samā'." *Encyclopedia of Islam, Second Edition*. Edited by: P. Bearman, Th. Bianquis, C.E. Bosworth, E. van Donzel and W.P. Heinrichs. Leiden: Brill, 1993. Vol. XIII. 1018-1020.

⁵⁹ Sunil Sharma. *Amir Khusraw: The Poet of Sultans and Sufis*, (Oxford: One World Publishing. 2005). 24, 34.

6.3 Concepts of Qawwali's Creation

In north India, the Qawwali performed inside Sufi shrines or hospices continues in a long tradition most practitioners today believe to have begun near Delhi with the master poet-musician Amir Khusrau Dihlavi and under the guidance of his pir, Nizam ud-din Awliya. Meraj Ahmed Nizami related his thoughts on the origins of Qawwali that date the development of this *sama'* ritual to one generation earlier under the guidance of Khwaja Mu'in ud-din Chishti, the founder of the Chishti order. According to Meraj's account, Mu'in ud-din Chishti brought with him his love of *sama'* when he travelled from Baghdad to Ajmer, Rajasthan in the early thirteenth century on an order from his pir to travel East and spread their form of religion. Mu'in ud-din Chishti, upon encountering Hindu holy men and rituals, synthesized Persian and Arabic poetic verse with the musical style of Hindu *kirtan* (musical prayer in praise of Hindu gods and goddesses). With this first musical and poetic fusion, this saint sowed the seeds of Qawwali.⁶⁰ After Mu'in ud-din passed the leadership of the order on to prominent disciples the Qawwali ritual performance spread to other regions. The ritual did not become organized until it fell into the capable hands of Amir Khusrau and his *sama'* loving pir, Nizam ud-din.

The most common oral tradition of events leading to the creation of Qawwali attributes a significant amount of innovations to Khusrau. Most qawwals believe that first came the creation of the *Qawwal Bachche*, a gharana which traces back to the original twelve qawwal singers and musicians trained by Amir Khusrau in the early fourteenth

⁶⁰ Conversation with Meraj Ahmed Nizami. August 5, 2006. Delhi.

century in the Nizam ud-din khanqah.⁶¹ The qawwals affiliated with the Nizam du-din shrine today believe they continue in this lineage and refer to their selves, as do the qawwal community from other Chishti shrines throughout India, as the Qawwal Bachche. To be a Qawwal Bachche signifies a place of prestige in the qawwal community and those in other shrines revere any qawwal from the Nizam ud-din shrine as with a certain level of respect. Before the creation of the Qawwal Bachche, disciples would play for their pir when asked or when compelled to do so since there was distinction among the follower for who should perform sama'. In his system, Khusrau created specific training for each qawwal in the area of performing that they were proficient in, and taught them the poetry along with training in the meaning of what they would sing. Meraj Ahmed Nizami, a member of the Qawwal Bachche, instructs his family in much the same way as Khusrau trained his original Qawwal Bachche and stated, "My children have always sung with me and if one was better at singing or at playing the dholak then they were encouraged to continue."⁶² The oral tradition of teaching survives within the home and all the sons are encouraged to participate.

6.4 *Etiquette and Importance of Poetry*

Qawwali ritual survives through diverse lived memories and oral traditions of its social actors (musicians, shrine leaders, and most importantly shrine devotees), whose presences are necessary to create the occasion of high etiquette since most of these participants have been educated in the proper etiquette to observe. Qawwali exists as an

⁶¹ Qureshi, 99.

⁶² Conversation with Meraj Ahmed Nizami. July 5, 2006. Delhi.

example of the Chishti Sufi order's syncretism of its religious roots in mystical Islam with the nurturing South Asian environment. Musicians sing old and new poetry verses in Persian, Hindawi, Urdu, Punjabi, Sindhi, and modern Hindi set to a generationally relevant, ever-changing accompaniment of music. Outside of commercial systems, the Qawwali poetry is more important than the sound, since most qawwal elders, devotee listeners, pirs and others in the shrine community believe this poetry to be the most important aspect of the Qawwali occasion. The preparedness and mystical understanding of the listening disciple has been a focus since the inception of Qawwali. Meraj narrates an allegory in his family:

Nizam ud-din asked Amir Khusrau to train disciples to sing. After Amir Khusrau had assembled the Qawwal Bachche and trained them in their respective positions in the mehfil, as well as memorizing the poetry, they performed for his pir, Sheikh Nizam ud-din Awliya. Soon after the occasion had begun, Nizam ud-din stopped the proceedings and told Amir Khusrau, "Although the children perform well, they should not sing these words, for they are too young to know the meaning. When they understand what they are singing then they can sing."⁶³

Even though the children were capable musicians, the unpreparedness of the children to understand the meaning of the poetry they sang teaches that children are not as prepared as post-puberty men and that singers of all ages should be themselves Sufis on the mystical path moving beyond the self and closer to God. Tradition loosely adheres to this former standard and young children barely able to walk do perform alongside their father

⁶³ Conversation with Meraj Ahmed Nizami. October 20, 2005. Delhi.

and grandfather in Qawwali performances with a high level of observed etiquette. Tradition also holds that the singer should understand the language and more importantly the meaning of the Sufi poetry should be relevant to the singer. Many of the qawwals and participants in gatherings do not know Persian but the qawwals have memorized the sounds of the words and remove the ambiguity with their understandings of the essence of the poems, which they sometimes interject by way of explanations between verses. The music adds to the popular appeal of Qawwali but for the Sufi educated participant, the poetry remains of primary importance since this tradition serves as a tool for Sufi spiritual advancement and emphasizes the message of the poetry. And still, many devotees and visitors coming to the shrine also enjoy the aesthetically pleasing entertainment of the Qawwali performance within this setting. The shrine does not prohibit anyone from coming to see Qawwali, however, to assurance of the possible correct reception of the ritual's message can only come from one with guidance of how to receive it from that person's own spiritual leader.

The cliché of the ebullient Qawwali performance pervades collective thought in Delhi, as anyone can attest who goes to the Nizam ud-din shrine on a Thursday night, the most auspicious night to visit the saints. This cliché has become a selling point for performers of Qawwali to obtain work in many different contexts and the musical template for the diversity of performances remains the same. Instruments may change and new styles of singing may be incorporated, however, the similarities of the sound of concerts and rituals exceed the differences. A Qawwali musical style is incorporated into the Islamic cultural realm yet is neither religious nor nonreligious. The participants

decide how to receive each performance based on their individual training in Sufism and belief structures.

Chapter 7

Thoughts of Social Actors: Future Possibilities or Hindrances?

The popular view of commercial singers like Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan is not a material reality for most qawwal musicians. People within the Qawwali community have seen the possible popularity that their music can gain, which offers a way out of the hereditary, oppressive shrine culture. Younger qawwals search for opportunities, often clandestinely so that they will not offend elders, which could advance their singing careers. Though qawwals may hold shrine affiliated positions and receive money on which to live, shrine culture allows for little upward social movement and holds social actors in set place for life. The appeal of a better standard of living forces qawwals to search elsewhere for supplemental income. And even if some qawwals may succeed outside of shrine culture, this does not equate to more prestige within the culture of the shrine.

7.1 *Living as a Qawwal Bachche: Suqlain Nizami*

Suqlain Nizami, the middle son of Meraj Nizami, possesses a sweet and uniquely powerful voice. Though he usually sits in the middle of the group I can always find his smooth and crisp singing during the performances. To refine his vocal skills he began taking Sufiyana Shashtri lessons from Hayat in the Inayat Khan shrine. Hayat wanted me to attend the same Sunday singing lessons, which I did. I had heard rumors that he

appeared on *Indian Idol*, the Indian version of *American Idol*, and one day brought up the subject after a lesson.

How are you doing on Indian Idol? He shockingly looked at me. “How did you know that I tried out for that show?” *Someone told me, I couldn’t remember whom.* This answer did not seem to console his worries. “Was it my father?”

Oh no, it wasn’t. Sorry if I scared you. I swiftly apologized. He looked to see who was around us. No one was near and we continued our conversation.

“I made the third round, but now it is over. I was kicked off.”

Congratulations. That’s really good. India’s a big country with a lot of talented people.

“You must not tell my father.” With these final words, the topic of conversation switched back to something less personal. “One day I saw you with a guitar. Can you teach me? I have an old one at home.”

7.2 *Acceptance of Qawwali*

The importance of the qawwal community to the Indian nation may be changing thanks to the commercial efforts of Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan. Qawwal groups (sometimes called qawwal parties) from the shrines of Nizam ud-din and Qutb ud-din in Delhi have travelled abroad to perform for non-resident Indians in South Africa, Europe, the United States and Canada. The Indian Council for Cultural Relations (ICCR) has sponsored the qawwal groups to represent Indian culture in other countries and entertain Indians living abroad. The selection of qawwals to represent a part of Indian culture to other countries

attests to the popularity of Qawwali music and a common familiarity among Indian people, and those of Indian descent, with Qawwali music, performance, and tropes.

The desires of younger generations advance in the singing profession and to not solely depend on serving the shrine for income represent possibilities for change in the qawwal community. Humasar Hayat has utilized his Qawwal Bachche lineage as a springboard for a career in recording and to better market himself to obtain concert performances. In between his commercial career, Humasar also performs in Sufi shrines on important religious days and events. Having seen Humasar perform in many different settings, I can attest that he incorporates crowd pleasing techniques made popular by Nusrat, only with a minimal, less exorbitant tone while in a gathering with high Sufi etiquette.

Suqlain Nizami, the middle son of Meraj Nizami, is one of the most talented young qawwal singers in the Nizam ud-din shrine and continues to try different avenues to advance outside of being a Qawwal Bachche. Despite his non-shrine culture accomplishments, Suqlain is unable to tell anyone in the shrine community for fear that his father would find out, since Meraj strongly disapproves of qawwals performing commercially motivated music. The efforts of some talented youths from hereditary qawwal families to seek ways to advance themselves represent their recognition of possibilities to advance in a commercially driven capitalist culture.

7.3 *A Khadim Perspective: Agra, Uttar Pradesh*

I spent most of my time in Delhi's shrines with the qawwals and listened to the qawwals perform and tell me about their art. When occasions arose I would discuss qawwali with others. Mostly I talked to audience members and other regulars in the shrine when the opportunity presented itself. The khadims ran the day-to-day shrine processes and were usually busy. Also many people (American scholars and Sufi friends) advised me not to talk with them or write my name in their ledgers because once you do, then you become their property and cannot talk to other khadims or pirs. Or, at least the others will not talk with you.

Every Friday night, Meraj and his sons played in the small shrine of Sufi Inayat Khan, a veena player who toured the United States and stayed in the West for over twenty years spreading Sufism. The Inayat Khan complex is only a hundred yards from the back entrance of Nizam ud-din shrine, and non-Indian Sufis own the land and send money to the appointed caretakers for its operation. Foreigners are allowed in but the doors mostly remain closed to Indians in the local community. Meraj and Hayat both hold singing lessons for younger qawwals—and me—in the music room upstairs. Meraj's Friday performances usually lasted an hour and included songs specifically written for Sufi Inayat Khan. After one such performance in May, he told me that his family would leave tomorrow to go to Agra, UP for the Shaikh Abdul Qadar Jalani Shahbaz 'urs and wanted to know if I could accompany them.

Traveling by train for a little over two hours we arrived at 10:30 in the morning. The sajjadah nashin held the 'urs in the *cilla* of the deceased Sheikh. Along with Meraj's

group, Ghulam Hussein and his large band came from Nizam ud-din shrine in Delhi. The leaders of the *cilla* gave us a warm reception and one large room in which to sleep. In total there were over twenty qawwals and I sleeping in one room. We all managed in the constricted, some more easily than others. More qawwals arrived from other regions of north India—Amrohah, Firozabad, Bidar and Fatehpur Sikri—but slept outside. Late in the night, at eleven, Meraj’s group kicked off the proceedings followed by twelve more groups.

The next day I woke earlier than the qawwals, who were tired after playing until four in the morning. Exiting our room, I found myself in the courtyard enjoying the nice pre-monsoon dry heat of an Indian summer with the sajjadah nashin and his younger brother. We talked for some time over tea.

“You are from America?” the younger brother inquired. *Yes I am. I have come to research qawwali.* “Oh good. You came to the right place! Every year we have them come and perform for the ‘urs. It is our duty to take care of them,” he stated with a bold face. “I attend Agra University and want to go to the U.S. to play basketball. See, I’m good because I’m tall.” He towered over me even though we sat on a bench. His smile cracked a little, “but I need to stay here to take care of the *cilla* (shrine) and my family.” *I imagine it is a great responsibility.* I offered empathetically.

With a look of intent, he pointed to where the qawwals lay sleeping. “Be careful. These qawwals will steal from you. You can’t trust them. But I saw you were with a good group of them from Delhi so you should be ok. I’m just warning you.” The others in the complex were waking up at this time and he rose to leave. *It was nice talking with you.*

Thank you for having me here. I said as I walked back to see what the qawwals were doing until sundown and the next qawwali-filled night began.

Whenever speaking with khadims, there always appears to be something each one wants, and could possibly motivated by the inner-khadim and inner-shrine culture power struggles that underlie actions and words. I did not want to intervene in these struggles; however, just by being there I must recognize that I was. The khadim in Agra, through his hospitable nature, brought the predominant view of more affluent people to the fore. His warning of the possible immoral conduct of visiting qawwals attests to the divide between different strata within the shrine culture hierarchy. Even though qawwals may be Sufis and talented professionals, they will always be servants to the shrine who might possible steal or perform immoral acts. Throughout my experiences I rarely saw khadims and qawwals interact except when the khadims would order the qawwals to do something. Predominantly such interactions would take place in the Qawwali ritual setting. Every action within shrine culture reflects the sociopolitical hierarchy. Qawwals from the community may economically advance outside of shrine culture yet within it remain forever cast in their role as servants to the shrine's leaders. As one khadim intoned to me upon my request that we discuss Meraj *Sahab* (Mr. Meraj), "It is Meraj Qawwali, not Meraj Sahab."

Chapter 8

Further Thoughts: Conjecturing History

The Qawwali ritual helps maintain the social hierarchy of the Nizam ud-din shrine culture. Though the term Qawwali signifies many different meanings to each person familiar with it, the Qawwali ritual is a unique occasion that requires the presence of specific people within the shrine and Sufi hierarchy. Various forms of musical performances often take place in Delhi and other regions of the world, which can verily claim to be Qawwali. This claim, however, remains in musical construction and resemblance of performance since the social hierarchy has been removed. And as the case of Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan demonstrates, audiences often tend to exalt the performers and musicians rather than spiritual guides. We can speak of the Qawwali ritual because of its reliance on a social hierarchy that it reinforces. Even though these rituals predominantly occur within a shrine, we cannot discuss them through the religious lens since the realm of religion is too open to interpretation, which serves to impede the Qawwali discourse. The perceptions of Qawwali offer more clarity to the experience and are, thus, more appropriate terms in which to address this discourse.

The dominant narrative of the Qawwali genre within the academic community has been insufficient because of its limitations to a religious category. While in agreement that this style is important because Qawwali has its roots in the Chishti Sufi order, it is unsound to dismiss other commercially popular styles from this musical genre. The Chishti order's belief in changing the transmission of their teachings between generations opens up our discussion to look at commercial musical influence and questions the

evolution of musical genres. The example of Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan's fame and influence on the Qawwali community and shrine culture demonstrates how the Qawwali performed in the shrine by the qawwals adopts popular variations of many forms of music. Given the significance of this modern mimetic exchange the definition of the Qawwali genre should be expanded to include the commercial variations of Qawwali styles.

Through examining the interplay between the commercial and the religious styles of Qawwali in the late twentieth century, we can hypothesize that Qawwali did not independently develop over its vast history in the Chishti order's shrines and hospices without the influence of styles performed outside of the shrine for entertainment. It could also be the case that given the social exchanges of modern Qawwali practice the Qawwali of the early modern period changed in a culturally symbiotic manner. Shifts in political policies, ruling parties, and religious views in the environment outside of the Chishti shrine brought about shifts in patronage of the shrines. Different patrons affected shifts in the development of the shrine and its surrounding community. The modern examples of musical mimesis hint that this exchange might not only be recent. Perhaps the atmosphere in the shrine has interacted with its outside environment and the music of Qawwali serves as one testament to this.

We can suppose then that pre-modern Qawwali must have been informed by dominant forms of music of that time the way it was by rock fusion in our age. And that period must also have had its own Nusrat Fateh Ali Khans. Therefore the notion held by scholars that it is exclusively informed by religion and operates according to different levels of religious-ness isolates Qawwali in particular and music in general from political,

cultural and economic influences. More importantly, it undermines the ephemeral nature of music, which constantly changes in sound and style of performance. The rigid classifications such as that found in scholarly literature of Qawwali have not been adequately comprehensive, serving more to exclude than include aspects of the performance. Social interactions of politics and devotional practice can be brought to the fore through an emphasis on Sufi shrine culture which can also shed light on the implications of shifts in Sufi devotion and thought in the greater early modern Perso-Islamic milieu.

Part III

Chapter 9

Struggles for Gender Equality

The qawwals with whom I spoke held a consensus that the Qawwali performance affords little space for women to participate. During my research I was unable to speak with the daughters and wives of qawwals since I am a male and did not find the opportunity with either successful or struggling female musicians about the issue. In the course of my studies, I came across an investigative news article produced by BBC Radio Urdu that examines the desire of women to perform in the Nizam ud-din shrine and the reasoning behind shrine officials to not allow women to sing or play music for the saint or devotees.

The gendering of roles and spaces is defined within this culture's terms and is not a naturally developing process. Building upon the previous discussion of sociopolitical relations in the Qawwali community, this chapter examines the space for women's agency in the Nizam ud-din shrine culture. The BBC Radio article provides an example of some women's thoughts and struggles to perform Qawwali in the shrine, and foregrounds the inherent gendering of tradition through their desires to transform it into a space of gender neutrality. The differing viewpoints of those involved in this issue provide integrity to this report, although the reporter does neglect to interview the qawwals. What follows is my translation of the radio article. Reporter Khadija Araf

conducts the interviews and narrates the quest for gender equality within the Nizam ud-din shrine community and the larger context of Delhi.⁶⁴

BBC Radio Urdu⁶⁵
March 10, 2009

You must have heard the echo of qawwali coming from the shrine, so what is this one prominent lady qawwal's complaint? Please listen to Khadija Araf's report.

"Our desire is to perform Qawwali but there is not permission."

(singing) "Khwaja, I am at your door...Nobody will let me in..."

Naz Warsi: I wish to sit in front of the saint's shrine; what the men sing I sing as well. What is the difference if I shall sit in the proper musician circle and sing? But those in charge say there is no permission; that you should just sit outside and sing there.

Reporter: This is a minimal desire of India's well-known female qawwal Naz Warsi. Since childhood she has obtained training in Sufi classical singing and, though she has already earned her name in the journey of singing, Naz Warsi had the double struggle of making her place in the world of Qawwali. First of all, she is one woman who's able to sing Qawwali of which it is said only men are should be allowed to sing. And the second thing is that even after reaching an important place in the Qawwali world, she is not able to sing the words of her own pir, through which she lives every moment, in his very shrine. According to Naz Warsi, the shrine is in the dominance of men who have hereditarily learned music.

NW: It's because some people are inheriting jobs in this profession. Now we are repeatedly called *ataa'i* (or the naturally gifted; un-inherited). This means a person who has no musical lineage. Now those who have possessed inheritance do not let us move forward. As if it's not enough that they also bestow the label on me.

⁶⁴ I thank Shahnaz Hasan for her help in the translating process and her insight about this topic.

⁶⁵ BBC Radio Urdu, "They Desire Qawwali but there is Not Permission," BBC Radio, http://www.bbc.co.uk/urdu/radio/2009/03/090310_qawwali_woman.shtml (accessed March 10, 2009). Refer to Appendix I for my Urdu transcription of this radio article.

Some may say, well there are ladies called qawwals and those people will hire one or two of these untrained girls to sing. Nowadays, when someone hears the girls singing, they will say that a decline has come in Qawwali. That (poor singing) is the only reason why ladies could receive permission to sing. But these girls say that what they are singing is Qawwali and that I am a Qawwali singer. But what they sing is not even close to Qawwali.

R: Naz Warsi says that this is not only her desire. It is the desire of all women singers who possess and have always possessed skill in singing Sufiyana Kalaam. But because of society's principles up to the present, they are not able to gain their rights.

Baby Taj: Ladies are compelled to perform quite a lot of hard work and struggle for advancement. Gents think that those girls are the first good singers. Quite a lot of people consider women singing a very bad thing.

R: Baby Taj is one female qawwal who in her childhood fought with her mother and relatives, with great difficulty learned to sing. And at present, through singing in stage shows and gatherings she has kept her passion alive. She says that women do not feel it is easier to obtain the equal status that men have in the Qawwali world.

BT: I have gone to Ajmer Shareef many times and also to the shrine of Mehboob-e-Ilahi Nizam ud-Din Awliya. But I have not seen ladies singing in these shrines either. Right now, call it oppression or call it choice. Because of either of these they do not allow women to sing Qawwali. (They think) such ladies will adorn themselves and sing, and having put on make up and dressed up, there will be a larger crowd. And then the women will become more famous than the men!

The public and others will have gathered because some people are not there for spiritual reasons but to only listen and watch the spectacle. But some have always come for the spectacle.

R: Baby Taj says that in order to obtain equal rights they will have to fight. And in this fight, they are alone.

BT: If I speak up, who else will speak with me? No one is there.

R: Naz Warsi and Babi Taj say women also become classical singers because of a hereditary lineage; therefore for them the journey of female singers was not easy.

But Zila Khan, India's famous Sufi female singer and daughter of Ustad Vilayat Khan inherited classical singing, and she has also gone through the same fight.

Zila Khan: No man has ever helped me by coming forward, and saying, "Ok, let's get you a concert." Not to mention the idea of gender equality. They've already tackled the professional jealousies. This is the same old story.

R: Zila Khan says that men dominate Qawwali and Sufi singing. But nobody has stopped women from singing and earning a name in singing.

ZK: Absolutely opposite of this, my point of view is this: music is the only profession in which women from a long time ago could flourish, in addition to selling their bodies, whether to earn a profession through music and dancing in temples or singing in brothels. And what's more, they were not allowed in the office. They could neither work as journalists; such as you are now, so music is especially such an elite, -ism. It's such a creative thing in which there should not be any gender bias.

R: In the 700-year history of Sufi singing there are several names of women singers. But for what reason is it that in spite of so many women earning a name in Sufi singing they still do not have permission to sing in the shrine. The *sajjadah nashin* (head of the shrine) of Hazrat Nizam ud-din Awliya's shrine, Syed Sani Nizami says that it is forbidden for women to sing in the shrine.

Syed Sani Nizami: The saint thought that women or little children singing in the shrine (is forbidden) lest wrong work begins from any flexibility given to this rule. What I mean is that...the singing would be listened to from the gendered perspective. It is necessary for singers that they should be religiously clean, should not be women, nor should be children. That whatever the singer sings, should be religiously legitimate according to shari'a (Islamic law).

People come to the shrine of a saint that they consider alive and request that the saint please pray to God on their behalf and that such-and-such work be fulfilled. This is such a sacred place and the place where the saint becomes the connection and the source to reaching Allah. Now if women receive permission in the shrine, then tomorrow they will receive permission in the mosque. But Islam does not permit this.

R: Sociology expert, Imtiyaz Ahmed does not agree with this

statement and says that in the style of Islamic ideology that shrines began to implement, permission was not given to ladies to sing in the shrine.

IA: One school of Islamic thought from which the Muslim is very scared concerns adultery. There is space for adultery created in this arena by the arrival of women, which can cause them to slip from faith. Therefore women are kept outside. It has been thought in Sufi sects that women must be kept outside. With full theology this life will be spread. This is the expression of men. It is not, however, that which he thinks.

R: Sociology experts and historians are convinced that the shrine is one such place that reflects society where there is a direct connection in order to obtain equality relating to power. And men decide who gets that power. Their (women's) story is subdued. And like other sectors of society, Qawwali female musicians are also forced to struggle for their rights.

Their fight will be continued as long as there is a particular common thought in society for women who hold on to their rights, such as Naz Warsi and Baby Taj and other qawwal female musicians like them.

Khadija Aarif, BBC Delhi.

(singing continues)

9.1 Desires of Women Singers

The three women interviewed in this article desire to sing Qawwali within the shrine space. Each comes from a different background and presents her views on what she desires and why she believes her desires cannot be fulfilled. Naz Warsi is a popular commercial Qawwali singer and is a Sufi follower of Sheikh Nizam ud-din Awliya yet is perennially denied permission to sing in the shrine. Her struggle of learning to sing and perform Qawwali music was made more difficult since she is not a hereditary descendant from a musician lineage. Naz Warsi finds her struggle to be two-fold. Warsi had to learn the art of Qawwali music; and after achieving a certain level of proficiency she had to

compete with hereditary musicians. Warsi opines that her greatest desire is to perform for her saint within the saint's shrine and within the "proper musician's circle," but "those in charge" will not grant her permission.

Similar to the desires of Naz Warsi, Baby Taj wishes to sing in the shrine and to receive recognition for her artistic abilities. Taj feels that today men within this social milieu overemphasize the womanly body before witnessing the abilities of performers. Taj also had to overcome her own family's unwillingness to allow her to learn to sing in addition to being raised in a society that unfavorably views women singing. Now she says that she is able to pursue her passion for singing Qawwali and Sufiyana Kalaam on stages and in concerts, yet still cannot perform in the shrine. The ultimate desire for Baby Taj is that women join together to be recognized as equals with men, and that those men – and society at large – move beyond the constructed differences of gender.

The desires of Zila Khan assume a different form than Warsi and Taj. Khan seeks to re-enliven the respect that the singing profession once held for women and wishes that society eschews its lack of social gender equality. Of these three musicians, Zila Khan is the most established professional commercial singer and recording artist and the only one whose concert I have been fortunate enough to attend.⁶⁶ For Khan, music is a creative space that holds no place for gender biases. Warsi, Taj, and Khan each desire gender equality in the musical sphere in general, and specifically, within the shrine culture of Nizam ud-din Awliya. Though of a common goal, each singer has a different perspective for reasons why women are not allowed to perform in the shrine.

⁶⁶ Zila Khan has recorded six albums and contributed to two compilations. <http://www.zilakhan.in/index.htm> (accessed April 13, 2010).

9.2 *Obstructions to Equality*

Each woman's opinion of why women are excluded from participating in the Qawwali ritual as musicians reflects her personal background and biases. For Naz Warsi, "those in charge" of permitting musicians to sing are the hereditary Qawwal Bachche of the Nizam ud-din shrine. Because of her non-musical familial lineage Naz Warsi believes that she has been labeled *ataa'i*, a derogatory term in the music sphere that hinders a musician from obtaining performances in any setting. Promoters and audiences of commercial music performances, whether of classical music or other forms, have come to expect musicians from lineages. There are hierarchies of established lineages, and even if a singer is from a musical lineage this does not ensure the artist's survival. Warsi also refers to her desire to sit in the "proper musician circle" and sing in the shrine. The proper musician circle refers to the qawwals who gather in a large group to sing facing the shrine during Qawwali rituals, the proper maintenance of which is very important to qawwals. This wish foregrounds Warsi's personal longing to become a Qawwal Bachche more than it does her desire for gender equality in shrine culture. Though Naz Warsi stands alone in this article as the one who wants to become a Qawwal Bachche, she represents other Sufi women devotees to Chishti saints who want to sing in front of the tomb of their beloved.

Warsi also wants respect as an actual musician and introduces examples of people hiring women to act like qawwals as a public parody. "Some may say, well there are ladies called qawwals and those people will hire one or two of these untrained girls to sing." This example, if true, parodies the efforts of women who have trained to be able to

sing like the male qawwals. Since the women singers are hired to perform poorly, the tragedy also serves as a mockery of all women for it is a public display designed to reinforce social conceptions of inadequacies in women. The example provided by Warsi attests to her life struggles to learn to sing and to gain recognition in a field that she feels is dominated by men, musical lineages, and a patriarchal culture socially oppressive to women.

Baby Taj on the other hand finds the root of the problem of gender inequality within the musician sphere to grow out of society's principles. This musician believes that women "are compelled to perform quite a lot of hard work and struggle for advancement." The struggle for gender equality is a universal one for all women to fight against the oppression of society's principles that are based on incorrect assumptions. "Quite a lot of people today consider women singing a very bad thing," but these people do not know why women singing is bad. In Taj's point of view, women have been singers in the past, but society's present principles exclude women from the process. Taj does not know why she is not allowed to sing but conjectures that whether it is the shrine leaders' continuance of an oppressive tradition towards women or the current leaders' choice, women are not allowed to sing inside many Chishti shrines.

Most prominently for Baby Taj, the exclusion of women as musicians from the Qawwali ritual reflects the socio-sexual insecurity of male musicians and other social actors in shrine culture. This musician believes that if men allowed the women to sing then the women might perform better and become more famous than the men. The patriarchal dominance of shrine culture, though, cannot admit to this possibility and instead

references the immoral nature of women performing. In order to overcome the androcentric dominance of shrine culture, Baby Taj wishes that more women would speak up for their rights and challenge the domineering principles of society, yet she realizes that not many women are willing to compromise their own and their families' reputations. "If I speak up, who else will speak with me? No one is there."

The relatively successful recording artist and concert musician Zila Khan agrees with Baby Taj that society's principles are in control of social gendering. Khan, a descendent from the highly regarded musical lineage of her father Ustad Vilayat Khan, a sitar virtuoso, and grandfather Sufi Inayat Khan (the Sufi saint predominantly worshiped by Western disciples and whose exquisitely modern tomb is adjacent to the Nizam ud-din shrine), who played the sarod, is familiar with the inner workings of the commercial music sphere. Though Khan states that she has never received help from men, we must remain skeptical in light of her eminent musical lineage. Through her long career, Khan finds that the professional jealousies of male musicians, is another factor in addition to gender that does not allow for much social movement. Furthermore, this prominent musician believes that men have gained control of all social spheres, especially in the professional realm, and gender inequality in music reflects a "social elite-ism." In this hierarchy, men retain control and women, due to their inherent bodily form, remain subject to men's authority. Thus, in spite of Zila Khan's musical lineage, she is also subjected to the patriarchal power struggles of the biased musical social sphere.

Khan believes that the current gendering of society is not representative of a long-standing tradition. Previously, the social milieu was such that women could earn a living

singing. “Music is the only profession in which women from a long time ago could flourish, in addition to selling their bodies, whether to earn a profession through music and dancing in temples or singing in brothels.” Khan’s sentiments of the past structuring of pre-India Hindustani society echoes the arguments made by Kobayashi, who addresses the preparations necessary to transform music from a tainted immoral social aspect to a pure and religious one.⁶⁷ The construction of the new Indian classical performance by bhajan and kirtan accomplished singer and teacher Vishnu Digambar Paluskar (1872-1931), in the early twentieth century helped to erase the impurities associated with musical gatherings in general and women singing in particular.

Tradition held that music was an art of courtesans or servants, since feudal kings and princes were the only ones wealthy enough to maintain large retinues of musicians. Because some courtesans were singers, though, it does not necessitate that all woman singers were courtesans. Musical reformers had to change the status of the musician within society from mere servitude to a respectable profession having a high place in Indian society equaling the high art they perform. Whereas before, parents would not let their children learn music because of its association with courtesans, the reformers sought to elevate the status of musicians as cultural exemplars who ennobled the people. As one reformer close to Paluskar stated, “Never make the mistake of assuming that the dancing of whores and Hindustani music are the same...it was a sad turn of events that to listen to music men had no choice but to solicit the company of prostitutes.”⁶⁸ However much this statement exaggerates the situation, it does foreground the concern of reformers to

⁶⁷ Kobayashi, 149, 155.

⁶⁸ K. N. Kabraji in *Gayan Uttejak Mandali*, 1946: 10 in Bakhle, 72.

urgently transform the perception of women in music. The tradition of music being an impure profession for women needed to end, because as Paluskar observed, women were the moral and religious conscious of the family. “Similar to the effect on people of the wisdom of the ancient sages as heard through singing...when women sang devotional music, they influenced people to enhance their faith with devotion and keep them on the path of truth.”⁶⁹ Paluskar emphasized the importance of teaching women devotional songs, and sought to not only cleanse the stigma associated with women singers, but to elevate their status to spiritual and necessary for the religious community.

Though of impure associations before the construction of the new Indian classical music performance, women sang and some became famous because of singing. After the purifying of the musical performance, women could sing but only if they were from an established, reputable musical lineage. As the (re)inventor, Paluskar believed women were the heart of the religious community and their singing had a profound effect on people. Before, women safeguarded singing since it was one of the only ways they could independently earn a living. Though little documentation exists to say whether women could perform within the Sufi shrine in prior eras, we can conjecture that women played a different and perhaps more significant role in shrine performances before the effects of British colonialism and the creation of the Indian nation.

⁶⁹ Paluskar quoted in Shriram Nam Adhaar Ashram, *Mahila Sangeet*, part 1 (Nasik, 1933), in Bakhle, 170.

9.3 *The Verity of Gender Inequality*

The reporter goes to the top of the sociopolitical power chain to interview sajjadah nashin Syed Sani Nizami as to reasons why women are not allowed to sing in the shrine. Nizami is the authority of the Nizam ud-din shrine and the article reflects his view of the topic as inconsequential through terse answers. He refutes the desires of women to sing in the shrine by deferring to the tradition of the saint; “the saint thought that women or little children singing in the shrine (is forbidden) lest wrong work begins from any flexibility given to this rule.” The sajjadah nashin believes that, in accordance with his thoughts on Nizam ud-din Awliya’s ideology, if women were allowed to sing in the shrine and during the Qawwali ritual, their presence would change the purpose and meaning of the occasion away from the sacred and to the profane.

Participants would only see women’s bodies and hear women’s voices, which would result in them forgetting the spiritual reasons of the occasion. Nizami terms this detrimental restructuring of participant reception, the “gendered perspective.” For him, the gender of the performers would remove the spirituality from the occasion and participants might be set back in their spiritual quests. Nizami, to support his authoritative views, cites the religiously unclean nature according to “Islamic law” of women and children singing. The shrine is a “sacred place” where devotees come to ask for blessings and have prayers answered and if everything is not in order in the shrine then this might not happen. Finally the last word pertains to Nizami’s faith, “Islam does not permit this.” The reporter probably does not interview qawwals or khadims since the

sajjadah nashin is the most authoritative perspective on the matter. An inclusion of the qawwal perspective would have strengthened the article, though.

Syed Sani Nizami believes the presence of women singing within the shrine to be inappropriate in order to preserve the tradition of shrine culture that follows the examples of the saint and Islam. The purpose of his objections to women singing is to maintain the religious purity of the shrine space so as to ensure the proper reception of the Qawwali ritual for the participants. In this reasoning, women are grouped together with things religiously unclean, in addition to the singing of children. Though the sajjadah nashin refers to children as improper and perhaps not religiously clean in reference to singing, I have seen children singing alongside their fathers and grandfathers many times and in many gatherings with various levels of etiquette. Though children and women are not interchangeable human beings, Nizami's argument against allowing women to sing relies on a thin foundation. Oral tradition within shrine culture does allude to children being unfit to partake in the Qawwali ritual since Nizam ud-din Awliya believed they were too young to understand the message of the words they sang. This communally told allegory does not hinder the inclusion of children of Qawwal Bachche. No social actors spoke of an allegory from the saint's life pertaining to the inappropriateness of women performing, but there could be one.

This sajjadah nashin also refers to the Islam's proscription on women singing as part of his rebuttal, implicitly referring to social principles of separation. Although women are allowed in the shrine complex and are given a section in which to sit during shrine rituals, they are not allowed in the shrine itself, the mosque during prayer, or to participate in

shrine rituals. Although many references in the Quran and hadith offer prescriptions for the female body due to bodily fluids, there is no direct mention for the reason of women not being able to sing. Islamic ideology regulates the female body socially for such reasons as female bodies being impure because they have a menstrual cycle.⁷⁰ Basis for women not being able to pray within or enter the mosque at the times of communal prayer comes from the possibility of a women being on her cycle at that time.⁷¹ Some ideology holds that even if all people are unaware of her presence, the possible presence of the womanly body that could be unclean can nullify all of the men's prayers in the eyes of God. An inclusion of Islamic theology in shrine culture's tradition supports certain claims for the exclusion of women in rituals. But a direct proscription of women singing in this ideology means that the tradition prohibiting women singing most likely comes from another source.

The sociology expert Imtiyaz Ahmed introduces a few points that possibly refute the sajjadah nashin's claim that Islam forbids women to sing because of impurity. Ahmed

⁷⁰ Quran 2:222 implies menses is unclean. For hadith see Sahih Bukhari, "Menstrual Periods", Vol. 1, Book 6, No. 321. Bukhari states "But the menstruating women should keep away from the *Musulla* (praying place)." And Sahih Muslim, "*Kitab al-Haid* (Book of Menstration)", Book 3, No. 0592, 0595, 0605 and Sahih Muslim, "*Kitab al-Taharah* (Book of Purification)", Book 2, No. 0573-4.

For a discussion of a woman's subversive agency in Islamic societies see Janet L. Bauer, "Sexuality and the Moral "Construction" of Women in an Islamic Society" in *Anthropological Quarterly* Vol.58, No. 3 (Jul., 1985) 120-129.

⁷¹ Quran 4:034 details different male and female duties in family and community. Quran 24:031 states women tempt men and should be veiled.

For a discussion of Islamic ideas of male superiority and female bodily subjugation see Fatima Mernissi, *Beyond the Veil: Male-Female Dynamics in Modern Muslim Society* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1987) 25-86. Mernissi believes that in Islam sexual desires are something to be cultivated and usefully employed. Following the beliefs of Imam Ghazzali, women are more powerful than men and must hide themselves to maintain order. And Asghar Ali Engineer, *The Rights of Women in Islam* (New Delhi: Sterling Publishers Inc., 2004) 48-71. For female impurity in Islam see Lindy Williams and Teresa Sobieszczyk, "Attitudes Surrounding the Continuation of Female Circumcision in the Sudan: Passing the Tradition to the Next Generation," in *Journal of Marriage and Family*, Vol. 59, No. 4 (Nov., 1997) 968-969. The authors explore Muslim concepts of female purity as more culturally dependent than prescribed by the Quran or hadith.

believes Islam is not a universal concept and the style of Islam that shrine leaders have developed excludes women because of a temptation on the male participant's part for adultery (*zina*).⁷² "There is a space for adultery created in this arena by the arrival of women, which can cause them [men] to slip from faith." Emphasis is on the male participant's spiritual gain and only references women as hindrances to this process. The men fear the temptation of adultery caused by the presence of women performers. The concept of a musician's licentious nature is a holdover from feudal social structures, which may have changed in the higher, more educated social strata yet persists in the lower, less educated strata. This view still holds that men are not responsible for their licentiousness; rather women are to blame for a male's slip from the moral path of Islam. The belief that women can have such malicious impacts on men's faiths removes their agency in religious activities and beliefs in the public sphere of shrine culture.

The shrine is a male space, wherein the female body can enter but cannot be accepted. The gendering of roles within the Qawwali ritual evinces the deliberate exclusion of women. As discussed earlier, during performances, qawwals will sing from the female perspective as a lover to a beloved. The female voice pines for a union with the male; or the male performers will assume the viewpoint of a woman and attempt to speak as though they are a woman and understand the feminine psyche. Abbas addressed this concept at length in her work in order to show how there is a certain level of feminine agency in Qawwali performances. The female voice is a powerful tool in Sufi

⁷² Quran 17:032 forbids adultery. Quran 24:002-24:004 and 25:068 further address how believers should handle adultery. Also see Shahnaz Khan, "Zina' and the Moral Regulation of Pakistani Women" in *Feminist Review No. 75, Identities* (2003), pp. 75-100.

ideological dialogue with saints, the prophets and God, and male singers often interpolate how they believe women would speak, think, and act. The singers perhaps base their beliefs of the female voice on concepts put forth and perpetuated by oral traditions that maintain social roles and apparently concepts of how a woman should act in reality. And listeners, Abbas points out, are aware of how to receive the female voice, that is to say they are aware of the meaning, purpose, and emphasis the female voice gives to the performance. Abbas quotes Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan,

The Sufi poets—in the tradition of Sufi mystical poetry these poets—when they speak they do it in the female voice—they present themselves as the female—for them their beloved—their mentor—their sheikh—is the male—whereas their own choice is that of the female—their discourse is that of the female.⁷³

Interestingly, male singers and poets can represent the feminine perspective by the inclusion of a female voice through the medium of the male singer yet the womanly body is not allowed to participate in the Qawwali rituals, let alone sing from the female perspective with her own female voice. The Chishti shrine, therefore, is a male space wherein women can be represented by men through male conceptions of female perspectives, but are physically and psychologically excluded from taking part.

Baby Taj echoes Ahmed's sentiment that women receive blame for the faults of men in shrine culture through discussing the spectacle of the Qawwali ritual. Taj relates that shrine leaders believe that if women were allowed to participate in the Qawwali ritual in the shrine then "such ladies will adorn themselves and sing, and having put on

⁷³ Abbas, 67.

make up and dressed up, there will be a larger crowd.” Gender equality advocates believe the concerns of shrine patriarchal culture center on the physical body of the woman, and ignore the spiritual desires and preparedness of women. “The public and others will have gathered because some people are not there for spiritual reasons but to only listen and watch the spectacle.” Taj points out, however, that if the shrine leaders assume all male devotees come for religious reasons then perhaps the leaders are mistaken because “...some (spectators) have always come for the spectacle.” While women are subjugated solely because of their bodies, men are allowed unquestioned freedom in the shrine and in rituals.

The reasoning of Syed Sani Nizami, as represented by this article, to explain why he does not allow women to sing in the shrine foregrounds his desire to preserve sociopolitical structure. In this structure, Nizami holds the power over the shrine’s functionaries as well as devotees. To maintain social order, women cannot be allowed to challenge the status quo. Any change in the structure, which tradition maintains, might result in an upheaval of devotees coming to the shrine and interfere with the shrine-dependent economy. The shrine is the sacred place where saints are buried and devotees expect certain roles to be performed by the social actors. The performance of the roles of social actors is most important to the functions of the shrine. Those coming to the shrine to pray and ultimately give money (in the form of *nazarana*) to the shrine and other social actors need to believe that the shrine is correctly functioning. And the devotees’ beliefs are based on the appearance that all operations are correctly functioning. The daily operations and maintenance of the shrine reassure devotees of the unseen spiritual

effectiveness of the space. The offerings go into the local economy and ensure its hierarchal survival, and any change such as the new inclusion of women in shrine rituals might harm the economy. The purity of the social actors in the shrine affords no space for the female body and the leaders must maintain the tradition that includes the exclusion of women in order to preserve religious purity and a codependent shrine economy.

This thesis addresses important sociopolitical issues as to why women musicians cannot achieve gender equality in the shrine. Within this shrine culture, 1) concepts of tradition view the female body as impure and unequal to the male body; 2) the culture around the shrine has shifting principles regarding women's agency in society. 3) a belief that women are immoral and responsible for men's faults persists in the less economically affluent, less educated strata of society, while the higher strata with more education has perceivably moved forward, however slightly; 4), the past and present protectionism of social actors in shrine culture from the Qawwal Bachche to the sajjadah nashin to positions represents the fierce competition for survival. A social network holds these issues together and this network depends on the oral traditions of Nizam ud-din shrine culture.

Chapter 10

Tradition

Nizam ud-din shrine culture preserves social order and unwritten proscriptions through the transmission of oral tradition. Shrine culture emphasizes a tradition that maps ideals of the past onto the present to maintain sociopolitical hierarchies. Tradition suggests a multifarious process of narrating the distinctive character of the present and making sense of the inherited forms of discourse, practice, and personhood that lend social formations authority and intelligibility.⁷⁴ Life experiences condition participants to follow the tradition that stratifies the culture among gender and hierarchal lines. It also delineates between expected roles in the private and public spheres. For example, a stratification of males in the professional, public sphere of the shrine mostly excludes women yet this tradition emphasizes women's roles in the private sphere.

Tradition includes significant factors that bind the social structure in shrine culture and is based on historical constructs since the shrine leaders today defer to it for judgment and guidance. That is to say, the tradition of shrine culture blends present social conditions with inherited processes that previous generations of social actors have built, created, and maintained. Can we assume that this tradition has been practiced in the same manner since the saint Nizam ud-din's death in 1325 C.E.? Most likely not. But the intention of leaders today to emphasize a continuous tradition serves their interests of maintaining a structured society. Those in charge of the shrine speak similarly as sajjadah nashin Syed Sani Nizami does in this article, in a cycle. If a social actor questions

⁷⁴ Pandian, 468.

tradition, then this cyclical argument references the questioner's beliefs since the tradition stems from the saint and Islamic practice. His speech pattern cycles: women are not allowed to sing in the shrine because of the tradition of the saint and of Islam; this tradition holds that women have another role and place; and a believer in the community should not question tradition because to question would mean to question the saint; thus, tradition must be followed. This line of reasoning preserves the status quo in the shrine and in order to participate, one must adhere to the boundaries of tradition as interpreted by modern leaders.

10.1 Education

To take part in shrine culture one must be sufficiently socialized in the order of the system. For most, this social conditioning begins at an early age with the family and through education and through social education and ensuing coercion people follow tradition. Educational differences of families are derivatives of a social segregation stemming from a hierarchy, and of economic disparities among the various strata. The families of sajjadah nashins and some khadims are able to attend schools and universities, a costly affair in India, since there are little subsidized public schools (in the American sense of the phrase) and how much parents can afford to pay determines the quality of education their child receives. For the less economically affluent strata of the shrine culture, sending their children to attend a school is rarely an option, which limits the future possibilities for the children. They are compelled to follow the inherited trade,

which means a girl will learn from their mother how to perform womanly duties, and a boy will learn a profession from his father and other male elders.

The sons of Meraj went to school only as small children. When I asked Suqlain Nizami if he still attended school he replied, “I learn from my father the songs and how to sing. We are qawwals and that is a full-time job. We sing mostly late into the night and sleep during the day. That’s how we earn our living.” life experiences gained by singing in the shrine and in concerts in Delhi and though travelling to perform at shrines in other cities for religious festivals comprise the education for Qawwal Bachche. Child qawwals gain a specific education in their art, shrine etiquette, and tradition, which limits their skills and opportunities to pursue other professions. Tradition and penury combine to limit other possibilities of maturing qawwals and forces the younger generations to continue as shrine functionaries.

10.2 Women and Social Expectations

Tradition maintains predetermined roles with the woman having a less significant role in the public space of the shrine and a more significant role in the private space of the home. Women are not allowed in the shrine itself, nor allowed to participate in shrine rituals. Often women sit around the outside of the shrine, to look inside through the *jali* honeycomb marble lattice. During Qawwali gatherings in the shrine women are assigned a seating area in the far left behind the crowds of men. In private homes, a woman has more agency in running the family, which includes daily duties of cooking, cleaning, possibly disciplining children, and praying for the family.

The gendering of shrine culture as according to a closely guarded tradition reflects the communal domination over the female body by the male body. The physical body and its cleanliness appear more important to shrine roles than psychological identity. Roles of social actors are defined by constructed concepts of the female and male bodies as inherently different since God and nature created them. Among the factors that influence tradition's essentialist fabrication of gender in shrine culture are the interpretation of Islamic beliefs and practice and north Indian concepts of space and gender roles. The identity or psychology of a man or woman is the product of conditioning under patriarchy, a conditioning that leads men and women to act in separately specific ways.⁷⁵ Within shrine culture, educational indoctrination in a tradition that conditions people to behave according to predetermined roles in order to assure the continuation of cultural constructs of male and female genders.

Syed Sani Nizami, the authority in Nizam ud-din shrine culture, interprets various traditions as a singular, dominant shrine tradition designed to maintain the sociopolitical hierarchy and socio-economy of the shrine. Islamic traditions as interpreted by shrine leaders and possibly changing with generational succession of leaders informs part of the dominant tradition. Hagiographies, malfuzats and oral traditions of saint Nizam ud-din Awliya's life and ideology advise other aspects of the dominant tradition. Other social aspects and latent power negotiations that I might have overlooked possibly inform the social formations of shrine tradition as well. The combination of these traditions forms an unquestionable code of conduct and social roles for differing socio-economic levels of

⁷⁵ Julie Rivkin and Michael Ryan, "Feminist Paradigms" in *Literary Theory* (Malden, Massachusetts: Blackwell Publishers, Inc., 1998.) Pg. 531.

male functionaries in addition to gender. The structures of social processes cannot change within the shrine culture because of tradition, and tradition cannot be changed because it is the binding factor of the social actors who function to preserve the purity of the shrine space that devotees expect.

Conclusion

Qawwali, a term that brings forth many different meanings and contributions to life experiences of people within north India, includes more styles of music and performance than it excludes. This musical genre exists as part of living oral traditions that vary between regions and theological interpretations of Islam and Sufism. Relative factors of time, place, and inherited pasts have combined to create specific social structures that have influenced the performance, music, and concepts of Qawwali. During my research, I was continually made aware of the vast meanings and interpretations of Qawwali. With each new perspective I heard about what Qawwali personally means to each interlocutor. My desire was to expose the multivalence of Qawwali in practice and is the impetus for this thesis. Slowly, I came to realize that these varying perspectives reflect the important social function of the Qawwali rituals in many cultures and does not represent correct or incorrect musical interpretations of this music performed by adherents to the Chishti Sufi order. Though ritual enactments may take on many forms, most serve the primary purpose of preserving social order within specific cultures in order to assure the sanctity of the occasion as based on each culture's belief structures. No one authentic Qawwali exists. All styles are important in their own settings.

These many interpretations of Qawwali also overlap in a fluid intermixing of musical information. Most prominently, the ascension of commercially motivated Qawwali in South Asian and world markets has influenced stylistic changes in the Khanqah Qawwali performance. Popular performers utilized aspects of Khanqah

Qawwali that made it appealing to shrine devotees and they emphasized its qualities while including aspects from other audience appealing musical styles to create a valuable commodity for concert halls and recordings. Under the Qawwali banner, such musicians as Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan made their fusion styles popular. Shrine devotees, in turn, came to expect certain aspects of the popular Qawwali style to be included in the Khanqah Qawwali performances. Eventually, qawwals did interject certain popular sounds into their performances. This cycle demonstrates how folk arts can become profitable commodities when in the hands of commercially minded people, that is to say, people outside of feudally structured cultures, who are aware of opportunities for success and possibilities to better their social standing.

Qawwals may be the most proficiently trained artists in Khanqah Qawwali art, but their professions bind them into positions that afford little room for social advancement. As shrine functionaries, qawwals must perform predetermined roles in rituals. In the greater society of north India, qawwals carry a stigma of being hereditary musicians who are not apt for concerts and recordings since many believe that qawwal gharanas are not adequately musically proficient for large, profitable performances for economically affluent people. Struggles for survival within the professional music sphere permeate communities of musicians like the qawwal community. And much training and musical ability is not as important as social standing, economic affluence, and nepotism. But being a hereditary qawwal has the advantages of holding a profession with its own level of limited prestige within the shrine culture.

There are musicians who belong to no gharana or musical lineage. For these performers, surviving as a musician becomes incredibly difficult in the highly competitive world of professional music in north India. Just being a male does not necessitate success or self-sustenance as a musician. For example, non-hereditary musicians are not allowed to join the Nizam ud-din shrine culture as qawwals. Perhaps this is one reason why many non-hereditary musicians seek success in commercial forms of hereditary folk arts such as Qawwali because it is the only permissible way for them to pursue their passions, arts, and talent.

Being a non-hereditary, unaffiliated male musician is difficult in north India, but being a non-hereditary female musician is almost insurmountable. Social structures of patriarchy dominate most professional realms of north Indian society. Women have not been afforded any space in these structures. Whether from interpretations of religious gender biases or male protectionist motivations, the social gender divide underlies most actions in the public and private spheres. Communally held conceptions of gender roles run throughout much of north Indian society, and exist especially in less economically affluent, more feudally structured sub-cultures. Herein, women have little agency in the public spheres as evident in their exclusion from shrine rituals and Chishti Sufi shrines. Though many believe an exclusion of the female body in the shrine and rituals to be a long-standing proscription, the verity of this practice cannot be proven. A reluctance of most males – from shrine leaders to qawwals – to allow any deviance from the tradition to which they defer for judgment demonstrates the difficult struggle for women to participate in shrine culture. Ultimately the professional music sphere of musicians in

shrine culture and in greater north Indian society is dominated by two principles: firstly, the musician must come from an established lineage and secondly, the musician must be a man.

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