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## ***Shaikh 'Alī Hujwīrī and the Development of Islamic Mysticism in South Asia***

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### **Abstract**

Shaikh 'Alī Hujwīrī, popularly known as Dātā Ganj Bakhsh, occupies a central position in the history of Islamic mysticism in South Asia. His famous work *Kashf-ul-Mahjūb* is regarded as one of the earliest and most influential Persian texts on Ṣūfism. This article examines the life, intellectual background, travels, teachings, and spiritual mission of Shaikh Hujwīrī within the socio-political and religious environment of the eleventh century. It highlights his role as a bridge between the early theoretical phase of Ṣūfism and the later development of organized Ṣūfī orders. The article further explores his efforts to harmonize Islamic law (Sharī'at) and mysticism (Haqiqat), his views on knowledge, morality, sainthood, and spiritual discipline, and his contribution toward the moral and spiritual development of society. Special attention is given to his intellectual versatility, his engagement with different theological and philosophical schools, and his influence on later Ṣūfī traditions in South Asia. Through *Kashf-ul-Mahjūb*, Shaikh Hujwīrī presented Islamic mysticism in a clear, practical, and purely Islamic form rooted in the Qur'an and Sunnah. His teachings greatly influenced later saints, especially within the Chishti tradition, and helped transform Ṣūfism into a broad spiritual and social movement in the Subcontinent.

**Keywords:** *Shaikh 'Alī Hujwīrī, Mysticism, South Asia, Kashf-ul-Mahjūb, Islamic Law, Chishti Tradition.*

### **Shaikh 'Alī Hujwīrī and the Development of Islamic Mysticism**

The history of Islamic mysticism and Ṣūfī traditions in South Asia begins with the great saint of Lahore, Shaikh 'Alī Hujwīrī, who died after 480/1087 and is popularly known as Dātā Ganj Bakhsh. In the wider history of Islamic mysticism, Shaikh Hujwīrī occupies a very important position because he stands between two major phases of Ṣūfī development. Before him, eminent mystics such as Bayazīd Taifur Bistamī (ob.874), Junaid Baghdādī (ob.410), Abū Naṣr Sarrāj (ob.988), Qushayrī, (ob.1074), and Abū Sa'īd Abū'l-Khair, (ob.1047) had mainly explained and developed the principles and theories of Ṣūfism. After this period came the rise of organized Ṣūfī orders led by figures such as Shaikh 'Abdu'l-Qādir Gilānī, (ob.1166), Shaikh Dīau'd-Dīn Abū Najīb Suhrawardī, (ob.1168), Khwāja Ahmad Atā Yesvī, (ob.1166), and Khwāja Mo'inu'd-Dīn Chishtī(ob.1236). Between these two stages was a silent but powerful period in which Ṣūfī ideas were gradually developing and preparing for a larger movement.

The philosopher Bergson compared such a stage to a train standing at a station while steam gathers before it begins moving again. Shaikh 'Alī Hujwīrī deeply understood the spiritual realities of his age. He gathered, organized, and explained the teachings of earlier Ṣūfīs and transmitted their message to future generations. In this way, he became

a bridge between the early Ṣūfī thinkers and the later Ṣūfī movements that spread widely across the Muslim world and South Asia.

Albert Schweitzer once remarked that the purpose of a great thinker is “to produce a theory of the Universe in which all the ideas, convictions and activities of an age have their roots.”<sup>1</sup>

Shaikh Hujwārī provided such a vision to posterity and gave spiritual energy to the mystical movement in South Asia. About two hundred years later, when Shaikh Nizām'u'd-Dīn Auliya' stated that a person without a spiritual guide could find guidance through the *Kashf-ul-Mahjūb*<sup>2</sup>, he was not only praising the spiritual value of the book but also recognizing its important place in Islamic intellectual history.

The *Kashf-ul-Mahjūb*<sup>3</sup> reflects both the condition of Muslim society and the nature of socio-religious institutions during the eleventh century. Shaikh Hujwārī saw Muslim society in a state of decline, frustration, and inactivity, which often appears after a period of expansion and achievement. The experiences he gained in his hometown and during his travels inspired in him a strong desire to create a new world based on spiritual struggle and moral realization. It was a transitional period in history. The Ghaznavid Empire was weakening, and the Delhi Sultanate had not yet emerged.

The social decline of the period and the inability of the later Ghaznavids to stop political decay deeply affected him, yet he never lost faith in the higher values of life. Instead, he devoted himself to spiritual reform and moral revival. It appears that he left Ghazna under difficult circumstances. He himself mentions that his books were left behind in Ghazna and that he found himself “a captive among uncongenial folk (dar miyān-i-najisān)”<sup>4</sup>. A careful reading of *Kashf-ul-Mahjūb* reveals two parallel emotions in his writing: disappointment and criticism on one side, and hope and consolation on the other.

Shaikh Hujwārī was probably born during the reign of Sultan Mahmud,<sup>5</sup> when Ghazna was known as the “bride of the cities” and the center of the eastern Islamic world. However, by the time he grew up, the glory of Mahmud's age had faded and decline had begun. Ghazna itself was moving toward destruction. Using Toynbee's words, both the “schism of the soul” and the “schism of the body politic” had deeply affected Muslim society. Sitting in Lahore, he looked back toward Ghazna and wrote:

“I have good hope that hereafter persons will appear in whom we shall believe, and that those wretches (parāgandagān) who have found their way into this city and have made the externals of Ṣūfism abominable will be cleared out so that Ghazna will once more become the abode of sanity and venerable men.”<sup>6</sup>

Although traces of emotional attachment to Ghazna appear in his writing, he seems to have distanced himself from the city. He refers personally only to two individuals from Ghazna: an old man named Mu'yyad, who cared little for worldly appearance, and a scholar who considered the patched frock (muraqqa') to be heresy, an opinion that the Shaikh strongly rejected<sup>7</sup>. Interestingly, his account of seven saints of Ghazna is very brief and lacks personal details, perhaps because painful memories were associated with the city. Yet his family continued to enjoy religious respect there even after he had left. Dara Shukoh later visited the graves of some of his ancestors<sup>8</sup>, which shows that his memory remained honored in Ghazna despite the destruction the city experienced.

Shaikh 'Alī Hujwārī traveled extensively through Syria, Iraq, Fars, Turkistan, Kuhistan, Azerbaijan, Tabaristan, Kish, Kirman, Khurasan, and Transoxiana. Intellectually, these regions were very active during this period, although politically and socially signs of decline had appeared. It was the age of great scholars such as Avicenna, Alberūnī, Qushayrī, and Abū Sa'īd Abul Khair. These journeys not only informed him about the

condition of the Muslim world but also shaped his spiritual mission and intellectual vision. He traveled with the Qur'ānic command in mind:

فَسِيرُوا فِي الْأَرْضِ فَانظُرُوا كَيْفَ كَانَ عَاقِبَةُ الْمُجْرِمِينَ.<sup>9</sup>

Say: Travel through the earth, and see what was the end of the wrongdoers.

During his travels, he observed Muslim intellectual and social life in all its forms. He met individuals devoted to spirituality as well as people deeply immersed in materialism. He became familiar with different intellectual and theological movements, including the Mu'tazilites, Kharajites, Qadarites, and Carmathians. He met philosophers<sup>10</sup> and also encountered "false Ṣūfīs"<sup>11</sup>. He carefully studied the roots of heretical ideas and movements. Most of his life was spent in poverty and spiritual discipline, although at times he also experienced luxury and wealth. His generosity was so great that he even accumulated heavy debts.

These varied experiences enriched his spiritual understanding. His aim was to remove the veils (كشف المحجوب) so that people could understand the true meaning of life. He prayed for Divine mercy to revive dead hearts and wrote:

"He it is that bringeth dead hearts to life... and reanimates them with the comforting spirit of knowledge."<sup>12</sup>

In reality, his mission was to revive spiritually dead hearts. He narrates that Prophet Moses once asked God, "O Lord, where shall I seek Thee?" and God replied, "Among those whose hearts are broken"<sup>13</sup>.

Shaikh Hujwīrī believed that serving humanity was one of the highest paths toward Divine realization. Although *Kashf-ul-Mahjūb* was written in Lahore, it contains very little information about India's society or institutions. However, Shaikh Hujwīrī does refer to Indian religious ideas and intellectual discussions. He writes about a debate he had in India with a scholar who misunderstood the concepts of annihilation (*fanā*) and subsistence (*baqā*). He states:

"Some wrongly imagine that annihilation signifies loss of essence and destruction of personality, and that subsistence indicates the subsistence of God in Man... In India I had a dispute on this subject with a man who claimed to be versed in Qur'anic Exegesis and theology..."<sup>14</sup>

In *Abdāliya*<sup>15</sup>, Maulānā Ya'qūb Charkhī also refers to a debate between the Shaikh and an Indian scholar in Ghazna. Shaikh Hujwīrī additionally comments on Indian music and wildlife. Referring to music, he writes that in India hunters sometimes attract deer by singing beautiful melodies until the animals fall asleep and are captured<sup>16</sup>. He also mentions seeing in India a worm that survived inside deadly poison<sup>17</sup>.

Unfortunately, very little source material about the life and activities of Shaikh Hujwīrī has survived. However, this is not surprising because many socio-religious developments in the Subcontinent remained unrecorded for nearly 150 years. While *Minhāju's-Sirāj* documented political history, he largely ignored the role of Ṣūfīs and scholars. Similarly, *Khwāja Mo'īnu'd-Dīn Chishtī* of Ajmer also lacks a detailed contemporary biography. Therefore, most of what we know about Shaikh Hujwīrī comes directly from *Kashf-ul-Mahjūb* itself.

The discussions in *Kashf-ul-Mahjūb* clearly demonstrate the Shaikh's deep knowledge and intellectual breadth. He had remarkable understanding of theology, mysticism, philosophy, ethics, and poetry. He challenged the views of the Magians, natural philosophers, astronomers, and Mu'tazilites<sup>18</sup>. Such confidence was possible only for a scholar with extraordinary knowledge and intellectual versatility.

The Shaikh himself was a prolific writer, although unfortunately only *Kashf-ul-Mahjūb* survives today. Among his lost works were *Kitāb-i-Fanā wa Baqā*, *Asrār al-Khiraq*

wa'l-maunat, Al-Riayat li-huquq Allah, Kitāb al-bayān li-ahl al-iyān, Bahrul-Qulūb, Minhāj al-Dīn, and Minhaj. He also wrote on faith, prepared a commentary on Hallaj's poetry, and compiled his own poems in a Diwan.

Shaikh Hujwīrī had deep familiarity with earlier Ṣūfī literature and scholars. Among those who influenced him were Abu Abdu'r-Rahman al-Sulamī, Abul-Qāsim al-Qushayrī, Amr bin Uthman Makkī, Abu Nasr al-Sarrāj, Hakīm Tirmidhī, and Mansūr Ḥallāj. He especially admired Imam Qushayrī, whom he described as "a wonder of the age"<sup>19</sup>.

One of Shaikh Hujwīrī's greatest achievements was that he organized and systematized the teachings of earlier mystics. He summarized the ideas of saints such as Ḥabīb Ajmī, Mālik bin Dīnār, Muhammad bin Wasī, Fudail bin Iyād, and Dhunnun al-Misrī through stories, sayings, and examples that made their teachings understandable to ordinary readers. He also tried to bridge the gap between jurists (fuqahā') and mystics (Ṣūfīs). He included Imam Abū Ḥanīfa, Imam Shafī'ī, and Imam Ahmad bin Hanbal among the spiritual leaders of Islam and emphasized that true Ṣūfism must remain connected to the Qur'ān and Sunnah. He praised Imam Abū Ḥanīfa for teaching that knowledge without practice is meaningless.

Shaikh Hujwīrī assigned Abu Bakr (RA) a central place in Islamic mysticism and called him "the Imam of the Muslims in general, and the Ṣūfīs in particular"<sup>20</sup>. About Alī (RA), he stated that he was "a model for the Ṣūfīs in respect to the truths of outward expressions and the subtleties of inward meanings"<sup>21</sup>.

The relationship between prophethood (nabuwat) and sainthood (wilāyat) was widely debated in Ṣūfī circles, and Shaikh Hujwīrī explained the distinction with clarity. According to him, the Prophet is a guide for society and law, while the saint is concerned with inner spiritual experience. Although prophethood had ended, he believed that the prophetic mission of moral and spiritual guidance continued through righteous Muslims and saints. Shaikh Hujwīrī represented Islamic mysticism in its pure Islamic form, based firmly on the Qur'ān and Ḥadīth. He strongly opposed the mixing of foreign philosophical ideas into Ṣūfism. In his view, Sharī'at and Haqīqat were inseparable, just like the body and the soul. He treated Mansur Hallaj with great respect and admiration. He studied Hallaj's writings carefully and believed that his ideas contained profound spiritual truths. However, he did not encourage ordinary people to imitate Hallaj's public expressions because he believed such expressions could create confusion within society.

The concluding part of Kashf-ul-Mahjūb discusses the organization of Khānqah life, including companionship, eating habits, fasting, sleeping, marriage, celibacy, and sama'. Since the book was written before the fully organized Ṣūfī orders emerged, it became one of the earliest and most influential manuals of Ṣūfī institutional life.

Shaikh Hujwīrī also emphasized the importance of knowledge. He quoted the Prophet's saying that seeking knowledge is obligatory upon every Muslim man and woman. According to him, knowledge without action is useless, and knowledge should never become a means for gaining wealth or power. The true purpose of knowledge was to understand God and His commandments.

### Findings and Conclusions

To sum up, for Shaikh Hujwīrī, mysticism was essentially a movement for the moral and spiritual development of humanity. He emphasized humility, compassion, moderation, self-control, and service to others. He believed that true spirituality appears in moral conduct and good character. His book is filled with stories and anecdotes carrying deep moral lessons. One famous example is the story of the gardener's wife in

Basra. When a wealthy man asked her to close all the doors so nobody could see them, she replied that she had closed every door except the one between them and God. Hearing this, the man immediately repented and begged to be forgiven<sup>22</sup>. *Kashf-ul-Mahjūb* became one of the most influential books of Sūfism in South Asia. It was widely read in Delhi, Bihar, the Deccan, and in Khanqahs throughout the Subcontinent.<sup>23</sup> Shaikh Nizāmu'd-Dīn Auliya' strongly recommended the book and emphasized its spiritual importance. Dara Shukoh later remarked: "No book on mysticism in the Persian language has been written with such excellence."<sup>24</sup> During the time of Alau-ud-din Khalji it was one of those mystic classics which were in great demand.<sup>25</sup> Before leaving for Ajmer, Shaikh Mo'īnu'd-Dīn Chishtī visited the tomb of Data Ganj Bakhsh. This visit was not simply an act of respect but a declaration to continue the mission of moral and spiritual reform initiated by Shaikh Hujwīrī.

## References

1. Schweitzer, Albert, *The Decay and the Restoration of Civilization: The Philosophy of Civilization, Part I* (London: A. & C. Black, 1923), 81.
2. Durrar-e-Nizami, malfuz of Shaikh Nizam ud din Auliya, compiled by Mulana Ali Jandar.
3. Unless otherwise indicated, all the references to *Kashf ul Mahjub* in this Article are to be the English translation of Reynold A. Nicholson. (Reynold A. Nicholson, D. Lit (d.1945) was a famous orientalist who worked as a lecturer in Persian at the University of Cambridge. Being an expert of Persian language and literature, he took the responsibility of rendering the oldest Persian treatise into English upon his shoulders and published it in 1911 for "E. J. W. Gibb Memorial". Nicholson wrote a Preface comprising eight pages. The translation of *Kashf al-Mahjub* is published in 420 pages.
4. Nicholson, Reynold A., trans. *Kashf al-Mahjūb: The Oldest Persian Treatise on Sūfism* by 'Alī ibn 'Uthmān al-Hujwīrī (London: Luzac and Company, 1911), 91.
5. Strangely enough the name of Mahmud is nowhere mentioned in *Kashfu-l-Mahjub*.
6. Nicholson, Reynold A., trans. *Kashf al-Mahjūb: The Oldest Persian Treatise on Sūfism* by 'Alī ibn 'Uthmān al-Hujwīrī, 175.
7. Ibid, 94.
8. Dārā Shikūh, *Safīnat al-Awliyā'* (Kanpur: Munshī Nawal Kishore Press, 1900),
9. Al-Quran, Surah Al Naml, Ayat no 69
10. Nicholson, Reynold A., trans. *Kashf al-Mahjūb: The Oldest Persian Treatise on Sūfism* by 'Alī ibn 'Uthmān al-Hujwīrī, 28.
11. Ibid, 29.
12. Ibid, 1.
13. Ibid, 101.
14. Ibid, 243.
15. Urdu translation by Islamic Foundation, Lahore, 1978, 20-21. The report of discussion may be correct but there are two difficulties about this account of Abdaliya. 1: He quotes the incident from Shaikh Hujwiri, but the passage is not found in the *Kashful-Mahjub* unless he had access to some other work of the saint. 2: The remark that he was responsible for the victories of Mahmud of Ghazna in India is obviously untenable, chronologically.
16. Nicholson, Reynold A., trans. *Kashf al-Mahjūb: The Oldest Persian Treatise on Sūfism* by 'Alī ibn 'Uthmān al-Hujwīrī, 400.
17. Ibid, 407.
18. Ibid, 280.
19. Ibid, in this respect he foreshadows the approach of the Naqshbandi Order. P.167.
20. Ibid, 72.
21. Ibid, 74.
22. Ibid, 13.
23. Maktubat-i-Sadi, letter no 33 & 49. Shaikh Sharfu'd-din Yahya of Manar called him "a radiant luminary of his age" (letter 93).
24. Dārā Shikūh, *Safīnat al-Awliyā'*, 164.
25. Baranī, Ḍiyā' al-Dīn, *Tārīkh-i Fīrūz Shāhī* (Delhi: Idārah-i Adabiyāt-i Dihlī, 2004), 436.