

Sufi Engagement with The Prophetic Seerah in The Indian Subcontinent

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Abstract

The Seerah (Prophetic biography) occupies a central place in Islamic scholarship, serving as both a historical record and a timeless guide for spiritual and ethical conduct. In the Indian Subcontinent, Sufi scholars and mystics engaged with the Seerah in distinctive ways that combined intellectual inquiry, devotional practice, and spiritual exemplification. Their contributions were not confined to textual narration; rather, they emphasized the embodiment of Prophetic character within the cultural, linguistic, and social realities of South Asia. Their efforts localized the universal message of the Prophet, making it accessible to diverse audiences and enabling the Seerah to function as a unifying source of spiritual identity. This paper examines the multidimensional contributions of Subcontinental Sufis to Seerah studies, highlighting their role in shaping Muslim piety, strengthening communal bonds, and fostering interreligious harmony. It argues that Sufi interpretations of the Seerah were dynamic, context-sensitive, and deeply influential, providing both continuity with Islamic tradition and adaptability to local needs. These contributions remain relevant today as models of how the Prophetic legacy can inspire spiritual renewal and social cohesion in contemporary Muslim societies.

Keywords: Prophetic Biography, Spiritual Exemplification, Interreligious Harmony, Prophetic Legacy, Social Cohesion.

Introduction

The Prophetic Seerah (سيرة), encompassing the life, character, and mission of the *Prophet Muhammad* (ﷺ), represents the foundational model of Islamic ethics, spirituality, and civilization. While early Muslim scholars across the Arab and Persian worlds developed systematic biographies and Hadith-based chronicles, the Indian Subcontinent offered a unique cultural and intellectual environment in which the Seerah became both a source of religious devotion and a model for social transformation. The advent of Islam in South Asia

through traders, missionaries, and conquerors coincided with the arrival of Sufi saints, whose mission was not political conquest but spiritual cultivation. These Sufis primarily associated with orders such as the *Qadiriyyah*, *Chishtiyyah*, *Suhrawardiyyah* and *Naqshbandiyyah* localized the Prophetic model through love (*mahabbah*), service (*ibadah*), and moral imitation (*ittiba'al-Sunnah*). Their emphasis on the inner dimension of the Seerah transformed it from a textual tradition into a lived, embodied spirituality. Sufis saw the Prophet ﷺ as a Perfect Human Being (*Al-Insan al-Kamil*), a model of divine beauty and mercy manifested in the temporal world. Through teaching, poetry, and practice, they expressed the Prophet's ﷺ compassion, humility, and justice in ways that spoke to South Asian societies of multiple faiths and languages. The Seerah became a living tradition, not a distant history a dynamic spiritual current shaping Muslim identity, aesthetics, and ethics for centuries. Islamic mysticism (*Tasawwuf*) evolved as the inner path of Islam, aiming to realize the Qur'anic call to purification (*tazkiyah*) and spiritual excellence (*ihsan*). From the earliest generations, Sufis viewed the Prophet ﷺ as the ultimate exemplar of divine proximity the one who embodied the perfect balance of outward obedience (*Shariah*) and inward realization (*Haqiqah*).

When Islam spread to Indian subcontinent between the 8th and 12th centuries, it encountered a civilization rich in philosophical traditions, devotional cultures, and linguistic diversity. The Sufis who arrived such as *Khawaja Moinuddin Chishti* (1142-1236), *Bahauddin Zakariya Suhrawardi* (1182-1262), *Shaikh Ahmad Sirhindi* (1564-1624) and later *Shah Waliullah Dehlawi* (1703-1762) saw the Seerah as a means to bridge cultural gaps and guide people toward the Prophet's ﷺ mercy. Their Seerah engagements were not polemical but experiential. They believed that to truly know the Prophet ﷺ, one must experience his states (*ahwal*) and reflect his character (*akhlaq*). Thus, the Sufi lodges (*khanqahs*) became practical institutions of Seerah education where patience (*sabr*), trust (*tawakkul*), and mercy (*rahmah*) were lived, not just taught. As Annemarie Schimmel notes, South Asian Sufism “translated the Prophet's life into the idioms of love, poetry, and ethics,” thus making Seerah an instrument of both spiritual pedagogy and cultural transmission.¹ The Sufi engagement with Seerah in South Asia was multi-dimensional, encompassing textual scholarship, spiritual practice, poetic devotion, and social ethics. Sufi scholars produced scholarly commentaries, biographical reflections, and spiritual treatises rooted in Seerah. For instance, *Dehlawi* viewed the Prophet ﷺ as the embodiment of divine wisdom (*hikmah ilahiyyah*) and saw his Seerah as the interpretive key to the Qur'an. In *Hujjatullah al-Balighah*, he argued that the Prophet ﷺ's actions and teachings are not arbitrary, but expressions of cosmic harmony designed to perfect human nature.²

Likewise, *Sirhindi* (reviver of second millennium), as famous *Mujaddid Alf Thani* approached the Seerah through the lens of inner transformation. In his renowned book the sacred letters (*Maktubat*), he wrote that the “path of the Prophet ﷺ is the only true path leading to nearness with Allah,” and that every mystical experience must align with the Prophet's example.³ His insistence on combining Shariah compliance with spiritual illumination reoriented Indian Sufism from speculative mysticism toward prophetic orthodoxy. Other scholars, such as *Dehlawi* wrote commentaries on Hadith and Seerah that emphasized the spiritual dimensions of the Prophet's ﷺ miracles and moral character. His famous book *Madarij al-Nubuwwah* became one of the most influential Persian works on the life of the Prophet ﷺ in Mughal India.⁴

The Sufi love for the Prophet ﷺ found its richest expression in Persian and Urdu poetry. The praise of Holy Prophet (*na'at*) tradition, which flourished from *Amir Khusrau* (1253-1325) to *Shaykh Ahmad Raza Khan* (1856-1921), made the Seerah emotionally accessible to the masses. *Khusrau's* verses described the Prophet ﷺ as "the moon of mercy" whose light illumines every heart.⁵ Later, Urdu poets such as *Muhammad Iqbal* continued this tradition, linking Prophetic love with moral revival. Sufi-inspired poetry thus served as vernacular Seerah literature transmitting Prophetic virtues through rhythm, imagery, and metaphor. In the *Chishti* and *Qadiri* lodges, Seerah was lived through hospitality (*ikram*), service (*khidmah*), and collective remembrance (*dhikr*). The *khanqah* functioned as a moral training center where disciples learned to internalize the Prophet's ﷺ humility, patience, and generosity. The *Chishti* practices of feeding the poor (*langar*) reflected the Prophet's ﷺ ethos of serving humanity without discrimination.

Major Sufi Personalities and their Engagement with the Prophetic Seerah

Sufi engagement with the Seerah in the Indian Subcontinent was shaped by multiple Sufi orders, each emphasizing a distinctive spiritual methodology while remaining grounded in the Prophetic model of ethics, devotion, and social responsibility. Below is a detailed overview of the major orders and personalities, their historical context, and their contributions to the dissemination of the Seerah.⁶

The *Qadiriyya* order, founded by *Sheikh Abd al-Qadir al-Jilani* in Baghdad, was introduced to India by traveling disciples and became influential during the Delhi Sultanate. It emphasized strict adherence to Shariah, spiritual purification, and imitation of the Prophet ﷺ in both ethics and practice. In this order Sufis focused on Prophetic moral exemplars, encouraging disciples to cultivate humility, charity, and truthfulness. Their teachings often highlighted the Seerah's guidance on personal conduct, social justice, and spiritual discipline, reinforcing the Prophet's ﷺ centrality in ethical formation. The order strengthened the integration of Shariah and spirituality, making the Seerah a guide for both inner transformation and outward ethical behavior.⁷

The *Chishtiyya* order, founded by *Abu Ishaq Shami* in Syria, was introduced to India by *Khwaja Moinuddin Chishti*, who settled in Ajmer in the early 13th century. *Chishti* emphasized love (*mahabbah*), humility, tolerance, and service to humanity, reflecting the Prophet's ﷺ ethos. *Moinuddin's* teachings were profoundly Prophetic in orientation, promoting the imitation of the Prophet's ﷺ character in daily life. His lodges (*khanqah*) became a center for spiritual training, communal service, and ethical guidance. The Prophet's ﷺ compassion and generosity were exemplified through the feeding of the poor (*langar*) and welcoming of all social classes into the *khanqah*. The order facilitated cultural localization of the Seerah, making the Prophet's ﷺ moral and spiritual example accessible to South Asian Muslims and non-Muslims alike.

The *Suhrawardiyya* order was founded by *Shihab al-Din 'Umar al-Suhrawardi* in 12th-century Iraq. In India, it was propagated by *Bahauddin Zakariya* in Multan, who adapted the teachings to the Indian social and cultural milieu. The *Suhrawardiyya* emphasized balance between inner spirituality and social responsibility, closely aligning with the Prophetic example of ethical governance and moral uprightness. Followers were encouraged to internalize Prophetic virtues such as justice, patience, and humility, while actively engaging in societal

welfare. The order contributed to the ethical and social dimensions of Seerah studies, highlighting that emulating the *Prophet* ﷺ required both personal piety and public service.⁸ The *Naqshbandiyya* order, founded by *Baha-ud-Din Naqshband* in Bukhara, was introduced to India by *Khawaja Baqi Billah* and systematized by *Sheikh Ahmad Sirhindi*. The *Naqshbandis* emphasized silent dhikr (*Zikr e Khafi*), sobriety, and strict discipline, focusing on inner spiritual transformation while adhering closely to Shariah. *Shaykh Sirhindi* reinforced the centrality of the *Prophet* ﷺ in all mystical practices, insisting that spiritual progress must be rooted in Prophetic consciousness. The order produced a scholarly and reformist engagement with the Seerah, promoting ethical revival, spiritual renewal, and adherence to Sunnah amidst social and political challenges.⁹

Later Indian Sufi Figures and Seerah Scholarship

A scholar-saint of Delhi who synthesized Sufi spirituality with Islamic jurisprudence, *Shah Waliullah* presented the *Prophet* ﷺ as the exemplar of divine wisdom and moral excellence. He emphasized that every action of the *Prophet* ﷺ is a source of guidance (*Hujjatullah al-Balighah*) for personal and societal reform. A later Sufi jurist and poet who emphasized love and veneration of the *Prophet* ﷺ (*Ishq-e-Rasul*). His writings and poetry (*na'at*) reinforced the Seerah as a living source of spiritual inspiration, combining devotion with strict adherence to Shariah.¹⁰ Sufi engagement with the Seerah encompassed love for the *Prophet* ﷺ, moral imitation, cultural localization, and promotion of social harmony. For Sufis, love for the *Prophet* ﷺ was not emotional excess but the essence of faith. This love (*mahabbah*) was seen as the gateway to gnosis (*ma'rifah*) and divine proximity (*qurb*). The *Prophet* ﷺ was the "beloved of God" (*Habibullah*), and to love him was to participate in divine love itself. Sufi poets such as *Shaykh Abdul Rehman Jami* (1414-1492), *Ahmad Raza Khan* and *Allama Muhammad Iqbal* (1877-1938) transformed this love into literary devotion, making the Seerah a living emotional experience for the masses. As Schimmel notes, "Every verse of *na'at* poetry is a mirror of the *Prophet's* inner light."¹¹

The Seerah provided Sufis a template for ethical cultivation. Through self-purification (*tazkiyah al-nafs*) and constant remembrance (*dhikr*), disciples were trained to mirror the *Prophet's* ﷺ virtues mercy, humility, and sincerity. Orders like the *Qadiriya* emphasized truthfulness and justice in imitation of his leadership. One of the most significant Sufi achievements was the indigenization of the Seerah. The *Chishti* modeled their hospitality on the *Prophet's* ﷺ generosity, by composing poetry in Persian, Urdu, Punjabi, Sindhi, and Bengali, Sufis made the Prophetic model culturally resonant. While the *Naqshbandiyyah* placed particular emphasis on silent dhikr (*Zikr e Khafi*) to emulate the *Prophet's* ﷺ meditative stillness in the cave of Hira. The *Prophet's* ﷺ compassion became the moral language of Indian spirituality, bridging Muslims and non-Muslims alike.¹² Festivals such as *Milad al-Nabi* became expressions of communal devotion and cultural unity a uniquely South Asian synthesis of Seerah commemoration and Sufi aesthetics. Sufis invoked the *Prophet's* ﷺ conduct with non-Muslims his treaties, justice, and forbearance to model coexistence. The Charter of Medina and his forgiveness at Conquest of Makkah were often cited as examples of ideal governance and compassion. Sufi Lodges (*Khanqahs*) provided charity, education, and refuge to all, regardless of creed turning Seerah ethics into social practice. This moral inclusivity became a defining feature of South Asian Islam.

The Sufi model of engaging the Seerah offers profound lessons for the modern world. Amid global crises of identity and sectarianism, the Sufi vision re-centers the *Prophet* ﷺ as the archetype of mercy and moral beauty. Their approach demonstrates how Seerah can serve as a bridge between devotion and social ethics, tradition and modernity. Modern scholars like *Sayyed Hussain Nasr* and *Iqbal* have drawn upon this Sufi understanding to argue for a spiritually rooted Islamic modernity one that balances rationality with love and social reform with inner transformation.¹³ The Seerah, as lived by the Sufis of the Subcontinent, thus remains a living spiritual legacy capable of renewing Muslim societies today.¹⁴

Conclusion

The engagement of Sufis with the Prophetic Seerah in the Indian Subcontinent represents one of the most profound and multidimensional syntheses in Islamic intellectual and spiritual history. Far beyond the mere preservation of biographical facts, Sufi scholars, saints, and poets animated the Seerah, transforming it into a living guide for ethical conduct, spiritual cultivation, and social harmony. Through their writings, discourses, poetry, and the exemplary lives they led, Sufis demonstrated that the *Prophet* ﷺ is not only a historical figure but a timeless model whose moral, spiritual, and social qualities can be internalized and manifested in daily life. This Sufi engagement emphasized practical emulation (*ittiba*) alongside inner devotion (*mahabbah and ihsan*). The *Prophet's* ﷺ qualities of compassion, patience, humility, and justice were made tangible through Sufi practices such as *khidmah* (*service*), *dhikr* (*remembrance*), and hospitable communal living in *khanqahs*. These practices localized the universal principles of the Seerah, allowing diverse communities in South Asia to access the spiritual and ethical teachings of Islam in ways that resonated with their cultural, linguistic, and social contexts. Moreover, Sufi interpretation of the Seerah played a crucial role in fostering interreligious and intercultural harmony. By highlighting the *Prophet's* ﷺ merciful dealings with non-Muslims, his emphasis on justice, and his advocacy of peaceful coexistence, Sufis provided a model for inclusivity and ethical leadership. Their *khanqahs*, poetry, and festivals created spaces for dialogue, compassion, and communal solidarity, demonstrating that the Seerah is not only a source of personal piety but also a blueprint for constructive social engagement. In addition, the Sufi approach to the Seerah bridged the gap between intellectual scholarship and devotional practice. Figures such as *Waliullah Dehlawi*, *Ahmad Sirhindi*, and *Ahmad Raza* exemplified a methodology in which rigorous study of the *Prophet's* life was inseparable from heartfelt love and spiritual transformation. This integration of knowledge and experience ensured that the Seerah functioned as both a mirror of divine perfection and a compass for moral and spiritual conduct, guiding individuals toward both personal growth and communal well-being. In the pluralistic world of South Asia, and indeed in our contemporary globalized era, the Sufi model of engaging with the Seerah continues to offer a timeless paradigm for spiritual depth, ethical excellence, and cultural harmony. By balancing devotion, scholarship, and social responsibility, Sufi interpretations of the *Prophet's* life provide enduring lessons for Muslims and non-Muslims alike, emphasizing that the legacy of the *Prophet* ﷺ transcends time, geography, and cultural boundaries. Thus, the Sufi engagement with the Seerah is not merely a historical phenomenon but a living tradition that can inspire contemporary societies toward mercy, justice, and human dignity.

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