

The Socio-Cultural Context of Mawarannahr During the Period of Sufi Allayar

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Abstract

This article examines the life and scholarly activity of Sufi Allayar, a prominent figure in seventeenth- and early eighteenth-century Central Asia, within the context of socio-political and cultural transformations in the region. It highlights the decline of Sufism, the weakening of spiritual and educational institutions, and the impact of internal wars, political fragmentation, and foreign invasions on the socio-economic and cultural development of Mawarannahr. Using comparative analysis of literary and historical sources including local chronicles, archival documents, memoirs, and philosophical works the study identifies key causes of spiritual and cultural decline, as well as the approaches of Naqshbandi spiritual leaders to address these challenges. The article also underscores the role of Sufi Allayar and his contemporaries in promoting religious and moral guidance, resisting foreign and erroneous ideologies, and striving to maintain social cohesion during a period of profound instability.

Keywords: Sufi Allayar; Central Asia; Mawarannahr; Naqshbandi order; Sufism; seventeenth–eighteenth centuries; spiritual decline; socio-political change; Turkestan; literary analysis.

Introduction

The life and scholarly activity of Sufi Allayar, which form the subject of this article, mainly took place in the second half of the seventeenth century and the early eighteenth century. His life and work are closely linked to the socio-political changes that occurred in Mawarannahr and the surrounding regions during that period.

The study of the history of Uzbek statehood, its objective assessment, and the effective use of historical experience are important for the socio-political and cultural development of independent Uzbekistan. By the first half of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the study of the history of Uzbekistan, as an integral part of world civilization, especially the history of Uzbek statehood,

had become a matter of state policy. Therefore, in recent years, greater attention has been paid to applying an accurate and objective historical approach to key issues in the history of Uzbekistan. History shows that the scientific, educational, and cultural development of societies depends largely on their socio-political conditions. Only in peaceful and stable societies can science and culture develop successfully. This leads to the question of why Central Asia, which was once a center of great scholars during the Middle Ages, began to lag behind European countries in science and technology from the seventeenth century. It is widely recognized that Central Asia experienced two Renaissance periods, which occurred in the ninth–twelfth centuries and the fourteenth–fifteenth centuries. The term “Renaissance” was originally used to describe the unique development of European countries during the fourteenth–sixteenth centuries and means “rebirth” or “revival.”

Literature Review

During the first half of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, contradictory and complex historical processes took place in the Central Asian khanates. In studying this period and providing an accurate and objective assessment of historical events and developments, sources produced during this time play a crucial role. These include the works of local historians, archival documents, as well as memoirs and accounts of ambassadors, travelers, military personnel, and other individuals who visited the Central Asian region from the sixteenth century to the first half of the nineteenth century.

The philosopher A. Choriyev, in his book *The Philosophy of the Human Being*, notes the following: “Beginning from the sixteenth century, religion gradually replaced rationalism in the cultural and intellectual life of many countries in Asia and North Africa. Representatives of secular sciences were subjected to persecution. As a result, the role and significance of the natural and scientific disciplines in social life steadily declined, while religious knowledge and religious dogmatism began to increase. Consequently, the principles of Islam came to play a decisive role in the life of society. The influence of Sufism, which had been one of the defining features of medieval Muslim culture and philosophy, weakened in the modes of human thinking. At the same time, the influence of Sunni Islam in shaping people’s worldview continued to grow. This situation can be clearly observed in the works of Muslim philosophers and thinkers of the period, such as Yusuf Qorabog‘iy, Sharif Bukhariy, Inoyatullah Bukhariy, Boborahim Mashrab, Sufi Allayar, and Makhtumquli Firog‘iy.” During this period, education was predominantly focused on religious sciences. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries in Central Asia, teaching was largely one-sided, providing students primarily with religious instruction, while secular sciences were taught only to a very limited extent. The duration of study typically ranged from fifteen to twenty years, and students were required to study over 137 subjects or books. These included Arabic grammar and syntax (*sarf and nahw*), logic, rhetoric (*qira’at*), Islamic theology (*aqoidi Islam or ilm al-kalam*), philosophy (both natural and divine), Islamic jurisprudence (*fiqh*, covering ritual purification, prayer, fasting, funeral rites, pilgrimage, zakat, marriage, and divorce), as well as subjects related to inheritance, wealth distribution, and commercial transactions, taught through *Ilm al-Faraiz* (mathematics in the four fundamental operations).

Despite the strong focus on religious education, some attention was given to the development of exact and natural sciences. For example, Qosim Muhammad Sultan produced a work on medicine.

Another ruler, Abdulaziz Khan, known by the pen name “Azizi,” was highly knowledgeable in mathematics and also skilled in calligraphy. Among other notable rulers of the khanate, one, writing under the pen name “Nishaniy,” gathered medical scholars, organized medical study sessions, actively participated in them, and left written works on the subject.

In the first half of the sixteenth century, following the death of Khojagi Ahmad Kosoniy, also known as Mahdumi A’zam (1461–1542), who held a significant position in the social and political life of Central Asia, the Naqshbandi order began to lose its leadership over the course of the following century. Among the descendants of Mahdumi A’zam, the tendency to pursue and seize political power increasingly outweighed the role of guiding the spiritual path of the tariqa.

During the first half of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, contradictory and complex historical processes unfolded in the Central Asian khanates. In studying this period and providing an accurate and objective assessment of events, sources produced during this time are of critical importance. These include the works of local historians, archival documents, and the memoirs of ambassadors, travelers, military figures, and other individuals who visited the Central Asian region from the sixteenth century to the first half of the nineteenth century.

From the above observations, it can be concluded that Sufism in Central Asia including its role in social and cultural life as well as the spiritual environment began to decline from the sixteenth century. By the time of Sufi Allayar, it had reached a regrettable state.

Since the era of Khoja Ubaydullah Ahror (d. 1490), the Naqshbandi order emphasized maintaining close relations with political rulers, believing that influencing their hearts and policies was necessary to protect the interests of the people. By this period, significant changes in the Naqshbandi doctrine were closely associated with the rise of its political activity.

In particular, during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the culture, art, and spiritual life of the peoples of Turkestan primarily developed within the territories of three independent khanates. These khanates were home to numerous talented historians, biographers (*tazkiranavis*), calligraphers, musicologists, masters of music, poets, and writers, who produced enduring works of high quality. Notably, alongside Sufi Allayar, literary figures such as Boborahim Mashrab (1640–1711), Sayido Nasafi (1637–1760), and Turdi Farog’i were active during this period.

Although a relatively large number of madrasas were constructed in Mawarannahr in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, this trend declined in the eighteenth century. As noted by Vohid Abdullayev in his work *History of Uzbek Literature*: “In the eighteenth century, due to fragmentation and inter-khanate conflicts in the Khiva, Bukhara, and Kokand khanates, madrasas, minarets, and large ornamental buildings were rarely constructed. Notable examples include the ‘Madrasah-i Shergozikhon’ (1719) and ‘Madrasah-i Muhammadamin Inoq’ (1770) in Khorezm; the ‘Madrasah-i Domlo Tursunjon’ (1797) and ‘Madrasah-i Ernazar Elchi’ (1795) in Bukhara; and the ‘Madrasah-i Mir’ and ‘Madrasah-i Khonkhoja’ in Kokand, which were few in number but impressive in scale.”

“In Bukhara, crafts developed considerably during the seventeenth century. The production of weapons and armaments held particular importance, and goods were exported to other countries of Central Asia. High-quality writing paper was produced in Bukhara. During the Ashtarkhanid period, caravans from Bukhara even reached Western Europe. By this time, prominent nobles and rulers undertook the construction of new cities, which included settlements such as Kattaqurgan and Sherabad.”

Research Methodology

In this article, the primary method employed was the comparative analysis of literary works. In addition, not only historical sources but also literary texts from the period were utilized, and a general analytical approach was applied to them.

Analysis and Results

Literary scholar and academic Sh. Sirojiddinov identified the following as the primary causes of the widespread spiritual decline that encompassed the entire society during the lifetime of So‘fi Olloyor:

— After the collapse of the Timurid Empire, prolonged fragmentation, continuous invasions and wars, and the frequent transfer of state authority from one hand to another intensified social instability and a sense of disorientation among the population. As a result, the Islamic civilization that had developed over centuries experienced rapid decline.

— In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, the Naqshbandi ideas of accumulating wealth and interfering in politics became normalized. By the seventeenth century, this was clearly manifested in the efforts of Naqshbandi spiritual leaders to acquire political power. Consequently, methods of religious instruction and moral guidance weakened, while tendencies toward worldliness, violence, and moral degradation increased among the general population.

— Following the death of their spiritual leaders, disciples increasingly sought to deify them, venerate their person, and exaggerate their miraculous powers in pursuit of personal interests.

— In the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, among the newly consolidated Uzbek ethnic layer that comprised much of the Mawarannahr region, superstitious customs and practices persisted, further accelerating spiritual decline in the region.

According to Sirojiddinov, although the spiritual decline faced by Central Asia—particularly the peoples of Turkestan during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries was recognized almost uniformly by representatives of both the Kashgar school of the Naqshbandi order (e.g., Mashrab, Huvaydo) and the Bukhara school (e.g., So‘fi Olloyor) as manifested in disbelief, ignorance, neglect of knowledge, hypocrisy, greed, falsehood, materialism, worldly-mindedness, and indifference toward the oppressed, there were notable differences regarding the methods and approaches to addressing this decline.

Representatives of the Kashgar school, alongside the Naqshbandi doctrines, actively promoted the ideas of other Sufi orders such as Yasaviya, Malamatiya, Qadiriyya, Mawlawiya, Qalandariya, and Zayniya. For them, devotion to God, adherence to the Prophet’s Sunnah, enjoining good upon others, and observing Sharia, tariqa, and the truth as embodied in the Prophet Muhammad’s example were central tenets. They were regarded as men of their time, fully engaged with contemporary realities.

Following Khoja Ahror’s death in 1490, subsequent Naqshbandi spiritual leaders sought to improve the condition of Muslims by influencing politics—“winning the hearts of rulers” and peacefully resolving conflicts among sovereigns—and often succeeded in doing so. However, by the seventeenth century, many of the more ambitious sheikhs began to exploit wealth and political power not to improve the welfare of the people, but to expand their own spheres of influence. According to Sh. Sirojiddinov, “Sufi Allayar’s objective was to unite the entire society under the banner of a single tariqa and to direct it toward resisting foreign and erroneous ideologies.”

Thus, on the one hand, internal wars, and on the other hand, invasions and military aggression by neighboring states, continued unabated, resulting in the disruption of Central Asia's economy. Irrigation systems were destroyed, arable land lay fallow, and towns and villages were left in ruins. The full burden of these wars and conflicts fell upon the people, devastating both rural and urban communities. For example, the nearly thirty-seven-year-long struggle for the throne between the Ashtarkhanid brothers Subhonqul Khan and Abdulaziz Khan—marked by intense battles and military campaigns—caused immense suffering for peasants as well as artisans in the cities, draining the very vitality of the population. Witnessing these events, the seventeenth-century Tajik poet Sayido Nasafi lamented the condition of the people and the country in the following lines:

("In the struggle for the throne, the people's vitality is exhausted; If such is the crown, then the world itself will be overturned.")

Similarly, Sufi Allayar alludes to the dire and calamitous conditions prevailing during the rule of the three khanates in the following verses:

("Holding power along with selfish desires,

It is unworthy to oppress the weak and the stranger...

Friends, in this unfaithful world, for the sake of wealth,

It is unworthy to harm one another and cause misery.

For rank and worldly gain before the rulers,

It is unworthy to stand idle and cry for justice.

Turk, Tajik, Uzbek, and the people of the steppe,

It is unworthy to fight day and night for mere possessions.")

The fragmentation that had begun in Central Asia during the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries intensified in the eighteenth century, as the existing two khanates (Bukhara and Khiva) were divided into three (Bukhara, Khiva, and Kokand). As a result, internal conflicts, the aggressions of neighboring rulers, including Nadir Shah Afshar's temporary occupation of parts of Central Asia, brought widespread devastation, poverty, and ruin to the population, plunging the economic and cultural life of the region into decline.

Conclusion and Recommendations

The study reveals that during the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, Central Asia particularly the region of Turkestan experienced profound socio-political instability, marked by internal conflicts, foreign invasions, and fragmentation of khanates. These conditions contributed to the decline of educational, cultural, and spiritual life, including the weakening of Sufism, which had previously played a central role in shaping ethical and intellectual norms. The Naqshbandi order, once a guiding spiritual force, increasingly became involved in political power struggles, with some leaders exploiting influence and wealth for personal gain rather than societal welfare. Nevertheless, figures such as Sufi Allayar sought to unify society under the banner of spiritual and moral guidance, emphasizing adherence to Sharia, the Prophet's Sunnah, and resistance to foreign and erroneous ideologies. Literary and historical sources indicate that the moral, economic, and social hardships endured by the population, as reflected in contemporary poetry and chronicles, were both a cause and a consequence of this decline. The analysis demonstrates that the complex interplay of political, social, and spiritual factors determined the course of Central Asia's cultural and intellectual development during this period.

1. Further interdisciplinary research combining historical, literary, and philosophical sources is recommended to deepen the understanding of socio-cultural dynamics in seventeenth- and eighteenth-century Central Asia.
2. Modern studies of Central Asian history should integrate comparative analyses of local and foreign accounts to provide a more balanced and objective understanding of the region's socio-political and cultural developments.
3. The legacy of figures such as Sufi Allayar and other Naqshbandi leaders should be further explored to inform contemporary discussions on the role of spiritual guidance, ethical education, and social cohesion in society.
4. Preservation and critical study of manuscripts, madrasas' archives, and local chronicles are essential for reconstructing the intellectual history of Central Asia and understanding the causes and consequences of spiritual and cultural decline.
5. Educational curricula and cultural programs could draw on historical examples from this period to highlight the interplay between political stability, cultural development, and spiritual life, fostering awareness of the importance of moral and ethical guidance in society.

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