



Love in the Time of Hate

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I begin with a confession that I am no historian. Just a student. A lover of history. So, forgive me for barging on to a platform that is the pride of blue-blooded historians, and heritage experts. For that very reason it is my privilege to be a part of this platform. And it is a privilege for me to be in your company.

I ask of you, to lend me your ear. For just a while. To get a perspective on a particular period from the past from a non-historian. I do promise to bring to history, the fragrance of literature, which is my field of study, and the thrill of reportage, journalism being my profession.

This essay will take a look at the very special relationship between Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya, and Amir Khusro. Both of whom lived in the 13th century, till the first quarter of the 14th century. We will talk about Amir Khusro who had with great affection called Nizamuddin 'Nijam'. While Nizamuddin had addressed Amir Khusro sometimes as God's Turk, and sometimes as Indian Turk, the poet, Amir Khusro has left numerous verses in praise of his close friend and spiritual mentor Nizamuddin. And I have translated into English *Chaap Tilak sab*.

This verse by Khusro is still very popular with music lovers, and those in love with poetry, and which is a glowing example of Amir Khusro's intense feeling towards Nizamuddin.

I may repeat the reading again, to make many a point regarding the very special relationship shared between the two:

Your gaze,

Locked on me...

You, strip me of my beauty, my worth...

You offer me a drink,

A cup of love...

Your intoxicating gaze,

Locked on me, and I on a high.

I stake all that I have, for you Nijam,

My body, my soul...

You, have made me you.

His gaze,

Locked on you

Your life Khusro is no longer yours.

Khusro you, are now Nijam.

His gaze,

Locked on you Khusro.

The green bangles in pieces as Nijam reaches out for the fair wrist of Khusro...

Dyed in his colour, his bride

His gaze,

Locked on you.

Stripped of your beauty, stripped of your worth by his gaze,

Locked on you...

The question is why do we want to talk TODAY about the friendship between Nizamuddin and Amir Khusro, from that long ago?

Perhaps because revisiting the past makes us deal with our present, a little more confidently? That then is enough reason to keep in touch with our collective past.

I will try to transport you to the period in the South Asian region between **1238** and **1325**. You have to travel with me today, some eight centuries back in time, to see if there are any similarities in life, then and now.

If there are... then what may we learn from them, to resolve problems faced by us now.

Please bear with me as I tell you how we decided to talk about Nizamuddin and Amir Khusro today.

The two have been on my mind as I looked for answers to the increasing cruelty of some citizens against fellow citizens, in my country.

Lynching of fellow citizens seemed no longer a singular incident by a crazy citizen. Unchecked, the incidents of cruelty threaten to become a norm. As I breathlessly hear of one more lynching, one more rape, one more arrest, one more riot, one more fellow citizen vanished from the face of the earth... it becomes clear that these incidents are no longer an aberration but are encouraged and even applauded...Such cruelty taking place in front of my eyes, numbed my thinking, and paralysed me into inaction.

I was sleepless, wondering how to deal with a wave of almost organised, and nearly institutionalised cruelty taking place around me. On my own. By myself?

The question remains... what does an individual citizen do in the absence of vanishing institutional support, I still wonder. And that is when the life of Nizamuddin returned to inspire.

I was reminded of the book I had written on two mystics of the Chishti Sufi Silsila.

The Book of Nizamuddin Aulia was published in 2012.

I returned to the research done for this book and found that yes, Nizamuddin and Khusro had lived at a time when excessive violence was the order of the day. They were treacherous times.

Nizamuddin lived in humble surroundings in what is now the neighbourhood named after him in Delhi. Khusro came from a family of courtiers. He was the court poet of several rulers, much admired and wealthy. But fame and money did not always make him happy. The intrigues at court often got to him.

His mind calmed down, and his soul was at peace only in the company of Nizamuddin.

That is the beginning of a shift in Khusro's attraction for glitter and glamour, towards the spiritual world of mysticism. He was overcome with happiness and gratitude in the home of Nizamuddin.

In the presence of Nizamuddin, his poetry was dictated by his heart. Instead of only composing verbose eulogies about the ruler of the day, in exchange for money, Nizamuddin encouraged Khusro to write poetry also in the western Uttar Pradesh dialect of *khadi boli* so that many more **ordinary** people could appreciate his verses.

Khusro watched Nizamuddin spend all his nights and his days in adoration of his beloved creator. He was inspired to write verses filled with yearning for his creator, in imitation of his mentor. And when the crowds that collected in countless numbers saw the love and respect exchanged between Nizamuddin, and Amir Khusro, they too aspired for a similar relationship with other human beings.

Clearly the friendship that evolved between Nizamuddin, and Amir Khusro stood out refreshingly before the whole world like a rose, in the midst of a garden reduced to thorns.

Nizamuddin was born in 1238, and Amir Khusro in 1253. Both died in 1325 and are buried side by side in Delhi's Nizamuddin neighbourhood.

Surely, most of you already know much about both Nizamuddin and Amir Khusro. About the spiritual aura of Nizamuddin, and the literary ingenuity of his close friend and dearest disciple, Amir Khusro. Both are popular memories and remembered to this day.

The basti of Nizamuddin in Delhi thrives. And is a great example of living heritage.

Where Nizamuddin had once lived, is now a shrine and thousands of devotees visit the shrine wishing for *barkat*, or blessings even from the memory of him. On Thursday evenings the poetry of Amir Khusro is recited around the shrine of Nizamuddin, with great joy.

However a fellow journalist in Delhi told me after reading the announcement of today's talk, that he was at the dargah three days ago.

“Lekin raunaq nahiin thii” he reports.

I asked, “Dargah pe raunaq nahiin thii...?”

And he said, “Ji haan... Sach poochiye tho raunaq ab kahin nahiin hai. Aisa lagta hai kahin koi utsah nahiin.”

I don't know if my fellow journalist in Delhi exaggerates. I am talking to you from Lucknow, and from the bottom of my heart I pray that he does exaggerate. To take away *raunaq* from living, is to find that little else is left in life.

But if this feeling of my fellow journalist is shared by many others, the question is how have we reduced ourselves to this state of utter *uljhan*, restlessness? How have we managed to reduce life to this when the very zest, the eros of being alive seems to be squeezed out of living?

Let us move back to the period between **1238 and 1325** during the life time of Nizamuddin and Amir Khusro, to see if we can make sense of the problems we face today, by trying to find out what we were in the past, Where we have reached today, and what may we become tomorrow?

Much of the information here is pulled out from the research I did to write the *The Book of Nizamuddin*, to prepare this essay for you.

I have divided this essay into five parts:

1. Nizamuddin
2. Amir Khusro
3. The Time of Nizamuddin
4. Sufi Mysticism
5. Friendship

Nizamuddin

Nizamuddin Auliya is the most famous of the Chisti sufis. He is the disciple of Baba Farid. He came to Delhi in 1258 from Badaun and settled in what is called the Nizamuddin basti in Delhi.

In his life time, seven Sultans ruled over Delhi but he did not befriend any.

When a Sultan expressed his desire to meet him, he said, "I have two doors in my home. If the Sultan enters through one door I will go out of the other."

The home of Nizamuddin kept its doors open mainly for the poor, who were also the majority population. Nizamuddin was visited daily by thousands of people, for more than forty years.

Barani, a chronicler of that time writes that from early morning till late into the night, nobles and plebeians, rich and poor, learned and illiterate, citizens and villagers, soldiers and warriors, free-men and slaves...men and women, young and old, shopkeepers and servants, children and slaves visited the *khanqah*, or the home of Nizamuddin.

The *khanqah* served as a community centre to help and to support people living in the neighbourhood, as well as travellers coming from other districts, or from abroad.

If a house caught fire, money was sent to the family who was left without shelter, if a widow was starving, Nizamuddin would provide for her. And on his way to his mother's grave or elsewhere, he would distribute money to the poor and to prostitutes.

Nizamuddin's life in Delhi created a bridge among different social, and religious groups. It held the ordinary citizen together within a moral frame, that the state was not capable of offering.

Nizamuddin talked to his visitors about a spiritual philosophy of tolerance, acceptance, goodness, and of an overwhelming, and universal love. Faith in the creator of the world was more valued than any one religion. Nizamuddin did not take love for granted...every moment of his life, he continued to **teach** himself to practice love in a more gentle, more intense way.

And all those who saw Nizamuddin do this, jumped on to the path of love and tried to emulate his walk.

The one thing that was banned by Nizamuddin was a serious engagement with those in power. The emphasis was on love which he was sure leads one to realization of the divine. For him, faith was important. He said that love of God means love of humanity. His is a message of universal love and brotherhood. He said that those who love god for the sake of human beings, and those who love human beings for the sake of God are the best human beings.

This is the best way to love and to adore God.

After having taught himself, and intoxicated those around him with the ecstasy of loving another...

“prem ghati ka madwa pilai ke... mohe suhagan ki mosey naina milai ke...”

Nizamuddin died in 1325, at last united with his creator after having yearned for this union throughout his life.

After Nizamuddin, the Chistis did not stay around Delhi. They dispersed to practice their message to other parts of South Asia as well.

Amir Khusro

Following the establishment of the Delhi Sultanate, the cities of northern India received a constant flood of immigrants from Iran, Afghanistan, and the rest of Central Asia.

The Mongols were on a rampage. Among the refugees escaping the Mongol fury were the ancestors of Amir Khusrau, belonging to a Turkish tribe of Central Asia. His father was employed at the court of Ilutmish, turkic Sultan of Delhi between 1210 and 1236.

Amir Khusro's mother was the daughter of an Indian nobleman at the Sultan's court.

Amir Khusrau was born in 1253, in Patiali, in the Etah district of Uttar Pradesh. Imad-ul-Mulk, the maternal grandfather of Amir Khusro was rich and educated.

This was the world where the young poet grew up, surrounded by luxury and high society. In the magnificent assemblies of his grandfather's residence musicians and poets, scholars and mystics were constant visitors.

This is the world in which Amir Khusrau became a well known and acclaimed poet. He was 20 years old when his grandfather died. As a young poet, he had already composed his first collection of poems. In the following 15 years he made a name for himself. At the age of 35 years he was appointed to the court of Delhi and later served as chief librarian of Jalaluddin, the first Sultan of Delhi of the Khalji dynasty.

Delhi was the envy of other world capital cities like Baghdad, Cairo and Constantinople because of the presence of peerless men of extraordinary talents like Khusro in the same city.

Writes Khusro about his beloved Delhi:

If a Khurasani, Greek or Arab comes here, he will not face any problems, for the people will treat him kindly as their own, making him feel happy and at ease, and if they jest with him they do so with blooming smiles.

Amir Khusro is remembered as an ardent follower, friend and finally disciple of Nizamuddin.

The reason of Khusro's popularity and prestige throughout the Sultanate period was both artistic and material. He served six monarchs, and survived their political intrigues. He avoided conflict with Sultans even when they were hostile to his spiritual master Nizamuddin.

In those days, poetry had served as a medium for communicating with the world at large...And a court poet was the spokesman for the ruler. The relationship between a patron and poet was a delicate one.

Khusrau's strong connection with the Sultanate ruling class did not prevent him from pursuing a spiritual path under the guidance of Nizamuddin which is the main inspiration of his soul searing poetry.

In the space between your footsteps, one enters the unfolding union of both worlds.

You, have codified the path of Farid, and that is why they call you the Code, the Nizam.

A hundred noble souls in heaven have been melted down, and stamped with your name, Nizam. Your court is the qibla (the direction of prayer), and angels fly to your roof, like doves. The tonic of your words is soothing to the melancholia, of those yearning for the Real (TRUTH). The lowly Khusro will have eternal life now, that he is enslaved by you, for a thousand lives.

It was a rule at the home of Nizamuddin that neither he, nor his friends engage with the corridors of power. However Amir Khusrau enjoyed the best of both worlds of the royal court, as well as the courtyard of Nizamuddin.

How did he do manage that? I suspect, with the consent of his beloved mentor Nizamuddin.

Time of Nizamuddin

The Turkish invasion of northern India began earlier, but the Turks decided to live in Delhi from beginning of the 13th century. To make a home in Delhi, the Turks had to first battle Muslims already living in the areas of Multan, Lahore, and Punjab before reaching Delhi from modern day Afghanistan. At this time individual rulers were threatened by the invader, irrespective of their religion. Local rulers were fearful of losing their land, power and wealth. Just like rulers belonging to the same religion were always fearful of losing their kingdom to each other.

Historians recall this period in South Asia as one that had very close cultural ties with the Persian world. Indian influence often crossed the Afghanistan area to rub shoulders with the world of the Persians.

With the Turks came a new economic system that was city based.

New centres of political and economic power in surroundings areas of Delhi came up. The reason why the Turks wanted to live in South Asia are political, economic and social. The condition of the places they came from like modern day Central Asia, Afghanistan and Iran, was chaotic.

During the 12th century and the 13th century, a large number of scholars, poets, administrators and warriors turned to India for refuge as Mongol hordes destroyed their homes. The first thing on their mind was to find refuge.

Apart from establishing a Sultanate, the immigrant warriors established a tradition of scholarship, making small towns in north India like Badaun and Etah centres of learning. It is essential to mention Badaun and Etah in western Uttar Pradesh because Nizamuddin was born in the former and Amir Khusro in the latter. And apart from Persian, both Nizamuddin and Amir Khusro also spoke the local language and dialect of the area they were born in.

This is why khadi boli made its way into the writing of Amir Khusro, to the delight of Nizamuddin.

This was a time of hectic exchange of cultures, ideas and arts.

Around 1206, the cities of the Delhi Sultanate contributed to the birth of new social classes like artisans, merchants, money-dealers, without disturbing the local language or way of life.

Delhi, in which both Nizamuddin and Amir Khusrau lived was home to a vibrant, urban, cosmopolitan society.

This was a society with a rich cultural setting, providing great challenges as well as opportunities.

Delhi was the home of all arts, fine and coarse. In the suburbs and slums of the great capital the pimps, prostitutes and gamblers of Hindustan collected to ply their abominable trades; and along with them, as a Heaven-sent antidote, came innumerable mystics...

The Mongols managed to conquer large parts of the world but they could never conquer South Asia, now fortified by the Turks.

In a more peaceful time, many Mongols were allowed to settle down in Delhi in a neighbourhood called Mughalpur. Mughal being one pronunciation of the word Mongol.

The immigrants were grateful to find refuge in South Asia, and Delhi also benefited from the talent, mentality and customs the immigrants brought. The migrations made the city wealthy and gave it a lush, colourful character.

There were also spies everywhere. The atmosphere of the time was highly suspicious. The most common means to gain power or settle businesses was to blind or poison rivals. Assassins, robbers and thieves were found along each route, and around every corner.

There were sinners in plenty in Delhi then, but there were also saints.

Sufi Mysticism

Long before the establishment of Turkish rule in South Asia, wandering fakirs and saints came here. Some set up mystic centres at a number of places.

A systematic organisation of *silsilah* (order, school), began almost simultaneously with the foundation of the Sultanate of Delhi. Two of the most important mystic orders were the Chishti and the Suhrawardi spread far and wide.

The Chisti teachings, of which I know a little more than about the other schools of sufism said, that the creator of the world resides within the being of each human being. That the world needs humanity above everything else. The world needs peace. Human beings need someone to share their pain and sorrow with.

Since the Chishti were willing to fulfill these basic needs of ordinary human beings, Dalit, Hindu, Muslim and Christian flocked to Nizamuddin. Because everyone was equal in his eyes. For him the religion of others did not matter. Humanity did.

From his mentor Baba Farid, Nizamuddin had learnt to serve the creator of the world by serving the roofless, the sick and the hungry. Nizamuddin had faith in his beloved Allah, but the religion that he practiced was to try and bring happiness to the human heart.

Nizamuddin had learnt to practice humanity through example. Baba Farid, his mentor had repeatedly told him that bringing happiness to the human heart is all that matters in life.

Nizamuddin's life was as generous as the river, warm as the sun and as hospitable as the earth.

Nizamuddin did not create divisions in society, but united citizens.

During his lifetime, mysticism exercised a profound calming influence on society. Cultural synthesis was seen at its best at most sufi centres. Here ideas were freely exchanged.

Nizamuddin is adored to this day as he made a personal quest for a union with the creator of the world, into a socially significant movement. For him, the highest form of religious devotion was to feed the hungry, provide clothes to the naked and to spend time with those in distress.

It was Nizamuddin's desire to see that each visitor left him with relief in the heart, and with a smile. This clubbing together of religion with serving all human beings in distress, had a revolutionary effect on society. The selfless services of community leaders like Nizamuddin inspired many to introduce a set of moral and spiritual element into their daily life.

As always, the majority of population was the most troubled, and sufis were its only hope.

Social equality was practiced at the home of Nizamuddin. The prince and the pauper received the same attention, making the Sultan's court and Nizamuddin's courtyard symbols of two opposing institutions.

While members of royal families murdered siblings and close relatives to assure themselves an unchallenged throne...While kings and princes fought enemies daily, piling up decapitated heads of the defeated, in the yard of the palace to discourage further defections, mystics prayed and continued to quietly serve the needy.

And to share and inspire each other with heartfelt stories of love and compassion.

The presence of mystics in Delhi had acted as a corrective to the political hysteria of the period.

Friendship

Against this background a little now on the friendship between Nizamuddin and Amir Khusro.

When I first took myself back in history, I tried not to judge or to compare that society so long ago, to my own. It is of no interest to me for example, whether the relationship between Nizamuddin and Amir Khusro was sexual in nature. Simply because I don't know. There is nothing on record to suggest that it was.

However there are lines written by Khusro addressing Nizamuddin, where Khusro says in rhyme that I kiss your threshold, and not your lips.

Traditionally mystics do not share any intense, intimate and personal experience with the public. The climax of a mystical experience of any sufi is union with the creator. The journey of an *auliya* like Nizamuddin is a continuous attempt to aspire, to anticipate that ultimate moment of oneness with the divine beloved, which is assured at death.

But some *auliya* experience divine union in their life time.

The mystic finds it impossible, and is also forbidden to share the ecstasy experienced of being drowned in longing for the beloved, with others. However impossible, the mystic may find it to talk about *batin* or his inner personal journey, his day to day conduct or *zahir* actions are there for the world to witness, and to emulate.

The mentor, or *auliya* tries to live an exemplary life every day, with the single purpose of being worthy of the anticipated union with the creator. And *that* decent conduct by the *auliya* before the public, inspires devotees to follow in the footsteps of the master.

An *auliya* is a mystic who has reached that stage in life when his sole beloved is the creator of the world, while the desire of a disciple or devotee is to get his love accepted and acknowledged at least by his spiritual mentor, already so close to the creator of the world, and representing divine love on earth.

What mentors on the path of mysticism do is to encourage and help a devotee reach a stage of courage and confidence in their life when they are able to have a divine experience of their own.

Nizamuddin was guided by his mentor Baba Farid, and following in the master's footsteps he inspired his devotees to do the same.

Talking about Nizamuddin is a joyful exercise that can last a lifetime. If you are ready to join me in following in the footsteps of Nizamuddin, let's continue the conversation.

But for today let's take a break and close this talk right here, leaving it to you dear audience, to decide whether you found any parallels with the time of Nizamuddin, and today? And if you are at all inspired to emulate the life Nizamuddin and Amir Khusro chose to live even when challenged with difficult social, political and cultural turmoil that hovered around them.

But not before reciting chaap tilaak for you once more to see if you find something more in the reading this time round than in the first reading?

Your gaze,

Locked on me...

You strip me of my beauty, my worth...

You offer me a drink,

A cup of love...

Your gaze,

Locked on me, and I on a high.

I stake all that I have, for you Nizam,

My body, my soul...

You have made me you.

His gaze,

Locked on you

Your life Khusro is no longer yours.

Khusro you are now Nizam.

His gaze,

Locked on you Khusro.

The green bangles in pieces as Nizam reaches out for the fair wrist of Khusro...

Dyed in his colour, his bride

His gaze,

Locked on you.

Stripped of your beauty, stripped of your worth by his gaze,

Locked on you...

Chhap tilak sab cheeni ray mosay naina milaikay

Prem bhatee ka madhva pilaikay

Matvali kar leeni ray mosay naina milaikay

Gori gori bayyan, hari hari churiyan

Bayyan pakar dhar leeni ray mosay naina milaikay

Bal bal jaaon mein toray rang rajwa

Apni see kar leeni ray mosay naina milaikay

Khusrau Nijaam kay bal bal jayyiye

Mohay Suhaagan keeni ray mosay naina milaikay

Chhap tilak sab cheeni ray mosay naina milaikay

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