

Understanding Gender and Space: A Study of Hijra Engagements in Sufi Shrines

A Dissertation Submitted to the University of Hyderabad in Partial Fulfilment of the
Degree of

MASTER OF PHILOSOPHY

In

SOCIOLOGY

By

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December 2021



CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that dissertation entitled “**Understanding Gender and Space: A Study of Hijra Engagements in Sufi Shrines**” submitted by **Usman Shafeek C P** bearing Reg. No. **19SSHL09** in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the award of Master of Philosophy in Sociology is a bonafide work carried out by him under my supervision and guidance.

The thesis has not been submitted previously in part or in full to this or any other University or institution to award any degree or diploma.

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DECLARATION

I, **Usman Shafeek C P**, hereby declare that this Dissertation entitled, “**Understanding Gender and Space: A Study of Hijra Engagements in Sufi Shrines**”, submitted by me under the guidance and supervision of **Dr. Anurekha Chari-Wagh** is a bonafide research work. I also declare that it has not been submitted previously in part or in full to this University or any other University or institution to award any degree or diploma.

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A handwritten signature in blue ink, featuring a stylized 'U' and 'S' followed by a horizontal line.

Signature of the Student

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This dissertation would not have been possible without the constant support of my supervisor Dr. Anurekha Chari-Wagh. I am deeply grateful to her for her guidance, continuous support and encouragement throughout this study.

I would also like to thank Dr. Asima Jena for agreeing to be my Research Advisor and for her valuable suggestions that helped me mould my work. I express my sincere gratitude to all other faculties of the department of sociology for their continuous academic support and excellent guidance throughout my study.

I would like to thank Uppa, Umma and my family who were always there for me with their unwavering support. I am also grateful to Muhammed Shareef and Abdul Samad for their insightful comments and valuable suggestions, which helped enrich my research work.

Finally, I could not have completed this dissertation without the support of my respondents, teachers, friends who provided stimulating inputs, constant support and guidance throughout this journey.

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Introduction

Before becoming an enduring presence in the political discourse of recent times, hijras have been an active part of South Asian imaginaries from ancient myths, medieval courts, colonial laws to modern queer narratives. Being India's major trans gendered people, hijras were part of the Indian public sphere with varying status and position. Therefore, an analysis of hijra presence and existence in Indian public space and their negotiations with different actors across time and space from ancient to modern will help us unveil hijra's multiple positionalities through ages.

Beginning with the hijra presence in ancient texts, there is a detailed scholarship on hijras' existence in mythical texts which trace out the positionality and the historical presence of the third sex, gender and sexuality in the Indian public sphere (Nanda, 1999; O' Flaherty, 1974; Reddy, 2005; Sweet & Zwilling, 1996; Ung Loh, 2014). Known in different names across Sanskrit and Pali texts, hijras were called *kliba*, *pandaka*, *trtiyaprakrti*, or *napumsaka*. Apart from Hindu mythological texts and Buddhist scripts, religious texts of Jains have also deeply talked about third sexed nonbinary people and their engagements in various spheres, producing perhaps "the single richest source for knowledge of the third sex to be found in India from the ancient to medieval periods" (Sweet & Zwilling, 1996, p. 363). The sacred power by which hijras perform *badhai* rituals is conceived through emasculation, which is mythologically connected to the two most influential icons, Siva and Mother Goddess. Hijras explicitly articulate their relationship with the asexual icons in Hindu mythology "such as Siva, especially in his *ardhnavarisa* (half man/half woman) form, and the Pandava brother Arjuna in his disguise as *brhannala*, the dancer teacher/ eunuch in the court of King Virata" (Reddy, 2005, p. 89). These mythical figures serve as the legitimacy to hijras' power to bless along with their divine

and historical association with their occupation of blessing, dancing, and singing on special occasions.

Medieval narratives also share such a prestigious presence of trans bodies which is visible from the detailed accounts of medieval eunuchs (Ayalon, 1999; Hathaway, 2018; Marmon, 1995). Drawing on these narratives of medieval empires of eunuchdom, various ethnographies and narratives on hijras (Hossain, 2012; Jaffrey, 1996; Nanda, 1999; Reddy, 2005) also note that the hijras draw upon the discourses of historical origin through religious identification depicting lineage from the medieval eunuchs which root back mainly to Muslim empires. Hijras often employ these narratives of medieval eunuchs to legitimize their existence and challenge their position in society as marginalised (Reddy, 2005; Ung Loh, 2011).

The history of eunuchs emphasises the fact that they were given such an eminence in medieval courts due to their positionality as gender-neutral. “Eunuchs were a prized commodity because they were considered the most reliable slaves. Since they had no progeny, they had no reason to siphon away money” (Vanita & Kidwai, 2000, p. 109). This condition of eunuchs as castrated and impotent men made them so valued, giving them a significant role in the politics of empire building. Eunuchs had a superior position in Mughal courts apart from their usual tasks of guarding harem and zenanas¹. “The khwajasara, or chief eunuch, held a prominent and important position in the royal household and the political hierarchy of the court” (Reddy, 2005, p. 116). They were appointed as military or diplomatic heads, and they had a significant role in the making of the empire.

¹ Harem and Zenana, both are basically referred to a domestic space in a household, which is reserved for women and from which nonfamily males are excluded. While harems were mainly seen in Islamic Civilisations of the Middle East and in the courts of pre-Islamic Assyria, Persia, and Egypt, Zenana refers to such spaces in the Hindu and Muslim households of Indian subcontinent. Zenana indicates to the inner space of a house where as the outer space is called as Mardana.

However, drawing on the violence in castrating slaves and creating eunuchs, Kugle (2010) argues that the gender ambiguity which results from a slave's or man's becoming of eunuch was not something that was happened with their consent, but the society imposed it upon them. He further argues that the eunuchs were men who were forced to become unmen by cutting off their male sexual organs. "Their gender ambiguity was the result of violence against them, not the result of inherent personality traits or inner disposition as contemporary transgender persons assert about themselves" (Kugle, 2010, p. 282). This sheds light on the fact that although hijras themselves refer medieval legacy of eunuchs to legitimise their existence, the eunuch history shows that it was often a bloodied violence that happened to empower the empires and secure their political and power interests. At the same time, considering the reception and acceptance eunuchs had in those royal and religious spaces, it must be seen as an esteemed status given to them when it can be read in the light of stigmatisation, exclusion and marginalisation hijras have been facing nowadays. It may be the reason why hijras still passionately remember the glorious past of eunuchs who share the same gender neutrality hijras possess.

Coming to Colonial India, the British portrayed hijra bodies as threatening the moral, sexual and physical environment of Indian men and public space itself. In 1871, British authorities passed an act titled Criminal Tribes Act. It was initially enacted in the regions of North-Western Provinces, Awadh and Punjab and extended the same to the whole parts of India by the early phase of the twentieth century. CTA 1871 passed as an act for the registration, surveillance and controlling the eunuchs as they are considered as a group of impotent individuals who (a) "are reasonably suspected of kidnapping or castrating children, or of committing offences under section 377 of the Indian Penal Code, or of abetting the commission of any of the said offences"; (b) "appear, dressed or ornamented like a woman, in a public street or place, or in any other place, with the intention of being seen from a public street or place"; or (c) "dance

or play music, or take part in any public exhibition, in a public street or place or for hire in a private house” (Collection of Acts Passed by the Governor-General of India in Council of the Year 1871, as quoted in Reddy 2005). With the enactment of the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871, the British barred hijras from entering and engaging in a public space and the ultimate intention of the British project was to erase hijra visibility from Indian social and public space, causing to “die out” hijras as a physical and social entity. For the British, the public presence and activities of hijras were a threat to the ideal concept of public space colonial government strives for because hijras were engaged in overtly sexual activities, alms collection through inappropriate ways, less standard talks, and thereby making that public space defiled. Thus, the British project of erasing hijra as a visible social category intermingled with other larger notions of imperial projects to ‘clean up’ a public space physically and morally, thereby ordering an unordered space that would help them to control easily, monitor, and suppress dissents and protests. The impact of the colonial project of erasing hijra visibility, making them criminals and compelling them to die out from the public space, is still visible in independent India. Reddy (2005) notes that hijras are still portrayed as trouble for public order and a source of public nuisance by many people.

In the last decade, there have been some monumental steps being taken by the Indian state and the public society to ensure the trans community that they get a substantial share of their fundamental rights as Indian citizens. Following the verdict of the apex court of India in the case *National Legal Services Authority v Union of India and Others*, hijras were given the right to claim the status of the third gender and that has been historical in many senses. In 2016, the government in the Lok Sabha introduced the Transgender Persons (Protection of Rights) Bill 2016, following a draft bill in 2015, which was said to be aimed at eliminating the exclusions, stigmatisation, and discrimination faced by the trans community in the country. Many provisions in the Bill were problematic, and therefore it received severe criticism from the trans

community itself. However, it was sent to a standing committee and tabled in the Loksabha as a fresh Bill in 2018 and passed, but it was lapsed due to the dissolution of the house before the Loksabha elections in 2019. Again in 2019, the government introduced the bill and passed it both in the Lower and Upper houses of the parliament and subsequently it became an Act. However, the Indian trans community strongly opposed the Act, with activists calling the day bill passed in the Lok Sabha as a ‘Gender Justice Murder Day’ (Dharmadhikari, 2019). The Act says that an Indian citizen would have the right to decide whether he should be identified as a man, woman or transgender person, irrespective of sex reassignment surgery and hormonal therapy. However, the Act requires transgender persons to go through a district magistrate and district screening committee to get certified as trans persons, and a revised certificate can be obtained only if the individual undergoes surgery to confirm their gender. In case the individual is denied the certificate, the Act mentions no provisions for an appeal or review of the decision taken by the District Magistrate.

In short, the state of hijra in Indian public space has not been having a static presence as there were ups and downs in their status across time and space. A brief account of the various imaginaries of hijra lives in Indian public sphere from ancient to the recent times is stated here because it will help us to get an overview about the multiple positionalities they hold through different ages. It will also set a background to trace the context of this research which mainly focus on how hijras engage with the religious and spiritual dynamics.

1.1 Context of the Research

Being India's major third gendered or trans populations, hijra engagements were recorded in different dimensions beyond the conventional understandings. Rather than trying to read hijra lives and their engagements only through the lenses of gender and sexuality, recent scholarships have significantly contributed to our understanding of hijras highlighting multiple intersections that include region, religion, class, language, kinship and modernity through

which hijra identities are shaped, transformed and contested. Nanda's detailed ethnographic account (1999) on hijra lives was a major attempt in breaking Western imagination of sex or gender binary and that constituted a new and alternative gender identity of 'neither man nor women' creating a 'third' category of sexual and gender differences. However, it was not much celebrated because Reddy's ethnographic study on hijras of Hyderabad (2005) made a breakthrough analysis of understanding hijra lives which was a paradigm shift in the realm of researching hijras. She argued that the hijra identity cannot be understood merely in terms of any fixed or static position because there is multiplicity of differences that create multiple hijra subjectivities and it cannot be traced with only focus on sexuality as Nanda (1999) did. Reddy's argument of multiple subjectivities of hijra was a momentous contribution in reimagining the hijra subject and it was a shift in the nature of works on hijras which were largely focusing on sexuality as a fundamental indicator of hijra identity.

Following Reddy's 'multiple hijra subjectivities', many scholars have attempted to read hijra lives through various intersections that the sexuality make with the other axes of identity. Among these multiplicities of differences that add creatively to the formation of hijra subjectivities, religion plays a crucial role that helps hijras to legitimise their existence through belief, rituals, customs, and other dimensions and dynamics of religious practices. Still, hijra engagements with different religions and their embracing of religious identifications, which often seek legitimacy to their identity, were not given a reasonable space in later scholarships. Despite the ancient religious texts mentioning the presence of the trans gendered personalities or the presence of eunuchs in the medieval narratives, there is a visible lack in contemporary literature when it comes to an analysis of the religious practices of the hijras even though the hijra community is very much engaged in several religious rituals and practices which derive elements both from Hinduism and Islam in a syncretic manner. There have been ethnographies documenting the hijra lifestyle, which has the religious lifestyle as one of its parts (Nanda,

1999; Reddy, 2005), but works focusing primarily on the religious aspect are limited. The larger aim of this study was to fill this very lacuna in the existing literature on the engagements of the hijras, mainly focusing on rituals and practices in Sufi shrines and how it gives meaning to the notion of self and identity of hijras in today's world.

In the Indian context, the majority of hijras recognize themselves that they belong to either Hinduism or Islam. Based on her ethnographic account, Nanda (1999) argued that the religious identifications of hijras are deeply embedded in Hindu belief. Still, ironically, they practice Islamic rites and customs whereas Reddy (2005) notes that hijras are more attached to Islamic religious identifications, rituals and practices. Despite this special attachment of hijras towards Islam (Reddy, 2005), the attempt of understanding hijras' engagement in Sufi shrines remains an unexplored area of research, especially in the Indian context². So, this study is fundamentally a call for our attention towards the hijra spirituality which is cultivated through their engagement with Sufism, Sufi shrines and saints. This dissertation intends to understand the engagement of the hijra community in the Sufi shrines along with tracing the notions of identity coming out of this engagement. Even though there is a significant share of scholarship on the pre-modern idea of queer or gender transgression in the Islamic world and Sufi literature which analyses queer Sufi literary compositions (Kugle, 2007; Marmon, 1995; Merchant, 2009, 2010; Vanita & Kidwai, 2000), studies looking at hijras' engagement in the Sufi shrines focusing on its spatiality is very limited. Thus, the central focus of this dissertation is around

² Among existing literatures about hijras, there are two major ethnographic studies which analyses hijras, their communities and lives in detail – Serana Nanda's 'Neither Man nor Woman – The Hijras of India' (1999) and Gayatri Reddy's 'With Respect to Sex: Negotiating Hijra Identities in South India' (2005). This thesis extensively depends upon these two most influential works as it narrates hijras' own lived experience in detail. Serena Nanda (1999) did her ethnographic field work among hijras in a city she calls as Bastipore, which is located in south central India, and in Bombay. Gayatri Reddy's (2005) account was based on her field work in the cities of Hyderabad and Secunderabad.

the said focus on the spatiality of the Sufi shrine, its distinctiveness and how hijras' imagine their liberation through cultivating a distinct spirituality.

Among the available studies, Amen Jaffer (2017) and Claire Pamment (2019) draw an understanding of this engagement based on their field works in some Sufi shrines in Pakistan and try to read it in the larger context of Khwaja Sira activism in Pakistan. Drawing on his ethnographic research in Bangladesh, Adnan Hossain (2012) also tries to read this engagement by analyzing rituals, practices and festivals among hijras. While Jaffer finds out the construction of a spiritual gender identity by hijras through the "creative appropriation of Sufi discourses, practices and organisational forms" (Jaffer, 2017, p. 1) based on his fieldwork in Madho Lal Hussain Dargha in Lahore, Pamment (2019) traces how pious performances in Sufi shrines is still providing a strong base for transgender activism in Pakistan. She finds a notion of a spiritualized interior in hijras that is inspired and adopted from Sufi thoughts and lives. Pamment (2019) argues that the sacred Islamic gestures, adopted from different Sufi and Shi'a rituals and performances and often enacted on the margins or in the activist programs on the peripheries, are deeply ingrained in the values and belief systems of the hijra community. These assertions of piety enable them and help them to construct a domain of affective performatives through which they can access the dominant public and political spheres.

However, the major gap which has not been filled by even these much-focused studies is that it does not look into the very spatiality of the Sufi shrine and its distinctiveness from other spaces hijras visit or engage with. Apart from this drawback, the aforementioned works (Hossain, 2012; Jaffer, 2017; Pamment, 2019) differ in their very context as it is happening in Pakistan or Bangladesh. So, through ethnographic studies from the field and the review of secondary literature available on this area, this study hopes to expose the major lacuna that exists in the current academic pursuit concerning the hijra community's engagement in the spiritual realm of Sufi shrine in the Indian context. It also hopes to fill somewhat this gap

leading to broader and deeper research into the same area, which has been hitherto untouched by present academic discussions.

1.2 Chapters

As this research broadly looks at the hijra engagements with Sufism, the spiritual or mystical dimension of Islam, the first chapter begins with a brief introduction to Sufi thoughts, discourses and its historical and social location. It looks into the notion of baraka, which works as the fundamental aspect of Sufism and Sufi shrines. Being a phenomenal part in the creation of sacred space, baraka plays a significant role in creating, establishing and maintaining the sacredness of a Sufi shrine space along with constituting the sacred geography of communities connected to it.

The chapter explores different dimensions of a Sufi shrine space and its spatial distinctiveness, trying to answer the following questions: What makes a Sufi shrine space special in its existence, appearance and engagements? What fundamental aspect makes the shrine so important for its followers? Finally, what constitutes the spatiality of a Sufi shrine and how that spatiality makes the shrine distinct from other places?

It also tries to explore the intersection of Sufism, hijra and marginality. Hijras holds a marginal positional regarding their existence, identity, and social location, which makes this study broader in its scope in searching for larger notions of intersections between gender, sexuality, religion, and marginality. Therefore, the first chapter enquires how hijras, holding a marginal position, deal with the notion of spirituality in a space that can be said to be marginal as the space of a Sufi shrine is usually dominated by people on the margins.

The second chapter is mainly divided into two major parts. The first section is centred around the idea of public space and Sufi shrines, and the following section delves into specific cases of hijra engagements in Sufi shrines, festivals, mosques and pilgrimages.

As the major question put forth by this research is focused upon the notion of public space, the second chapter begins with a brief attempt to understand the layers of public space and what attributes make a Sufi shrine 'public' in its establishment, appearance and existence. It looks into different narratives around the notion of publicness of a Sufi shrine through the lenses of marginality, liminality and the notion of shared sacred space. As this study highlights the spatial distinctiveness of a Sufi shrine, the role of modern nation-states, the idea of public order and rationality should also be problematized because the space of a Sufi shrine stands in contrary to the modernist public order and spatial reality. Therefore, the chapter traces out the dynamics of the modern notion of space and how the distinctive spatial order of a Sufi shrine differs or encounters the contemporary idea of public space and order.

The next section of the chapter focuses specifically on exploring hijra engagements in Sufi shrines across South Asia in general and India in particular. It covers different hijra narratives of visiting Sufi shrines of Pakistan, Bangladesh and India which is followed by the specific and detailed account of hijra engagements in Khwaja Muaeenudin Chishti's shrine at Ajmer. It shows how broader hijras' engagements in a Sufi shrine is and what makes their presence so special as they often refer to this presence to lend legitimacy for their existence in a world that always creates marginalisation, exclusion and stigmatisation. It explores the historical affinity hijras had with Sufi saints, especially with Khwaja Garib Nawaz, Nizamuddin Awliya and Qutubudhin Bakthiyar Kaki. As hijras visit most of the Sufi shrines during the urs or annual festival, this chapter also tries to trace the dynamics of a Sufi shrine festival, exploring the notions added to the distinctiveness of a shrine space when the festival happens and how the festival negotiates with different strata of people, especially the marginalized, who visit the shrine for annual festivals. Along with hijra engagements in Sufi shrines, as it is the major focus of the study, this chapter briefly analyses the hijra visit to mosques and their pilgrimage for Haj.

The final chapter deals with the deeper dynamics of hijra spiritual striving and how Sufi thoughts and Sufi shrine space help them constitute a distinct spiritual identity. For the term spirituality is mostly associated with the religion, the third chapter begins with hijra's religion - discussing hijras religious identifications, rituals and practices in the Indian context, looking at hijras adopting Hindu and Muslim religious identifications and the process of syncretism happening in their religious practices. More importantly, this section discusses hijras' special preference towards Islam as they are more attached to the ideals and practices of Muslims, and this connectedness make the background of the study sound in many ways.

The next section focuses on the inner dynamics of hijra spirituality which tries to explore how hijras characterize them in terms of the soul rather than bodily identifications and practices that happen through their adoption of religious rituals and traditions. It looks at hijras embracing the Sufi ideals and discourses. For example, the Sufi ideas like barzakh, bayniyya, aaraf (Sufi concepts that refer to the liminality or an in-between position), the concept of nafs, faqir, etc. can be adopted to read or understand hijra spiritual identity.

Also, the chapter tries to answer what attracts a hijra into the space of a Sufi shrine and what makes it different from other public spaces they engage in? Here, the study elaborates the notion of Sukoon (peace of mind), which was the answer given by most of the hijra respondents when they were asked about how they felt inside a shrine. This concept of sukoon can be read in the light of Sufi ideal nafs ul mutmainna (self at peace), where the self strives to reach a state of calmness and to the higher stages of spirituality which makes possible the perfect ensemble of a human being and it creates a satisfied soul encircled with calmness, tranquillity and peace. The chapter sums up trying to unearth the dynamics of spiritual being hijras strive to possess through their engagement with Sufism, Sufi saints, and shrines. Taking a cue from Weberian analysis of status group and the way negatively privileged groups imagine their liberation in a future world, this section tries to look at how hijras imagine their position in a future world in

contrast to their existence in a stigmatised world that explores hijra spirituality as a liberatory paradigm through which hijras define their existence in this world and relate it to that of a better hereafter.

1.3 Research Questions

This dissertation will delve into two research questions, which will be addressed and developed in the subsequent chapters: First, how do hijras engage with Sufism, its thoughts, practices and discourse? This question will try to explore the role of Islam's mystical and spiritual dimensions in facilitating a space for hijras to construct and validate their existence and identity. It will investigate hijra appropriation of Sufi thoughts, ideals and discourses and how these aspects help them to have a dignified living in a stigmatised world.

Second, how hijra engagement in Sufi shrines differs from other public spaces they are present and engage with? This question is aimed at understanding the spatial distinctiveness of a Sufi shrine that try to answer the related and subsequent questions of what attracts hijras into the shrine space and how Sufi shrine as a space stands differently from other public spaces hijras engage with and thereby understanding larger notions of what is the role of a space like Sufi shrine in giving meaning to the existence of hijras.

1.4 Notes on Methodology

The research methods adopted here for this dissertation include the interviews conducted among the hijras of Hyderabad, the analysis and review of existing secondary sources, and primary religious literature on the religious practices of the hijras and content analysis.

Below I provide a brief description of each of my respondents. The names of the respondents have been altered to fictional names to anonymize the participants and protect their privacy.

1. Huda Khan is a hijra of 35 years old who lives in a gully near the Old City of Hyderabad. She is Muslim by religion and follows the Shia sect of Islam. She lives alone in a single room house and works for a Transgender Clinic.
2. Haji Saab is a hijra guru who lives in the outskirts of the Old City of Hyderabad. She follows Islam and identifies herself as she belongs to the Sunni sect of Islam. In 2017, she had gone to the holy sites of Islam, Mecca and Medina, to perform Haj.
3. Anjana is a hijra guru and trans activist based in Hyderabad. She leads many initiatives meant for the upliftment of the hijra community. She is part of many platforms led by the state or NGOs and actively engages in hijra activism across the country.

As this research project was aimed at exploring different aspects of hijra engagements in Sufi shrines, the initial form of the proposed research was supposed to rely on ethnographic fieldwork in a Sufi shrine. The study was mainly focusing on the experiences of the hijras who visit Sufi shrines, concentrating on how the hijras themselves define their identity through their engagement in the Sufi shrine. Therefore, the Dargha of Nizamudheen Awliya at West Delhi was fixed as the field site where hijras frequent every Thursday or Friday nights, visiting the shrine in groups or individually. However, the outbreak of the COVID 19 pandemic and the subsequent lockdown for months have compelled me to reframe the research framework as it was not possible to visit dargha, meet respondents and collect data from the field. As a result, the methodological framework designed in the initial stage was restructured adapting to the pandemic situation, and subsequently, the research design also changed in some aspects.

This dissertation follows the framework of Sufi discourse, especially Al Ghazzali, to understand the hijra appropriation of Sufi thoughts and ideas. It takes Turner's concept of 'liminality' (Turner, 1995) to understand the spatiality of the Sufi shrine. As hijras themselves hold a liminal position on normative gender differences, an analysis alongside this idea will obviously help to explore underlying meanings of hijra engagements in the Sufi shrine space.

Weberian analysis of negatively privileged groups and sense of honour, dignity and status is also taken to read the dynamics of hijra experience in shrine space, particularly to understand how they imagine their emancipation through their spiritual seeking.

Chapter I

Sufi Shrine: Space and Sacred Geography

The role of Sufism and Sufi shrines in facilitating and providing its followers an open and direct interaction with the divine, offering a space of meditation with possibilities for transcending socially exclusive hierarchies, is relevant across time and space. Sufi shrines connect different segments of the lower classes in society, thus act as potential sites for building solidarities beyond socio-economic-religious and cultural dividing lines. Sufi shrines situate as the microcosms of local Islam because it represents the last refuge of marginalised social groups (Malik, 1998). In this sense, it is being a space that gives easy access to marginalised sections in contrast to other public spaces, Sufi shrines often provide legitimacy to the communities associated with it, along with facilitating a space to congregate and meet people. However, this does not suggest that the distinctions of class, caste, gender and other parameters do not matter in shrines, as it is evident in almost all shrines. Nonetheless, shrines provide a space for diverse groups to meet and interact across the boundaries of common public spaces and their usual networks.

Shrine acts as a space that makes possible an alternative source of communication and identity for communities who visit and engage in rituals there. It stands as a centre for healing, shelter and refuge for many people (Malik, 1998). This significance of the shrine in terms of its location as a centre open for all strata of the common public and its ability to make extraordinary alliances between different social groups and communities itself proves its distinctiveness from other social spaces people engage in everyday life. One of the effects of this spatial distinctiveness of shrines is that individuals, communities, beliefs and practices that would otherwise not engage with each other interact in a Sufi shrine (Jaffer, 2017). In societies that are segregated along caste, class, ethnic and religious lines, the shrine is one of the few

spaces that make possible individuals' engagement from diverse backgrounds in deep conversation with each other.

As a community that suffers multiple forms of marginalisation, hijras are also frequent in the Sufi shrines in various places and that makes this study more relevant. Besides occupying a position outside the heterosexual or binary gender differences, hijras also hold a marginal status that compels them to live in the peripheries almost everywhere. “They exist on the margins in literary texts, religious practices, and social spaces” (Ung Loh, 2011). Therefore, to get a broader understanding of hijras’ engagements in any space, it is significant to look at their lives and that space with respect to the modes of marginalisation they face. Lynton and Rajan (1974) and Jaffrey (1996) analyse hijra identity through the lens of social marginality, demonstrating them as “unworldly” and “invisible” outcasts, respectively. By taking the notion of potential subalternity of Islamic identifications in the Indian context, Reddy (2005) examines at the inherent relationship between religious identification, nationalism, and supralocality of hijras in contemporary India. She argues that hijras’ self-identification as Muslims makes them a true supra-local/national subject in the Indian context. She further contends that hijras’ Muslim identifications position them as the “authentic” subaltern citizens in the context of Hindu nationalism in India.

In the context of Pakistan, Pamment (2019) put forth a subaltern reading of hijras’ engagements in Sufi thoughts and Sufi shrines, locating Sufism as a subaltern stream of Islam in the context of Wahabi, Salafi and Ahle hadith factions. However, looking at the complex networks of power and hierarchical structures in which Sufi shrines are organised and shrine rituals are practised, Amen Jaffer (2017) finds out the blind spot of this reading of Sufism and its institutions of shrines as a “subaltern counter public” for hijra communities. Rather, he argues that the “creative appropriation of Sufi discourses, practices and organisational forms deployed by hijras [enables them to] construct a spiritual gender identity for themselves,” endowing a

legitimacy that “challenge[s] dominant perspectives of their gender that tend to focus on the abnormality of their bodies and sexuality” (Jaffer, 2017, p. 184).

As these notions of marginality direct, an intensive critical analysis into the social location and marginality of hijras is very much important in understanding their position in a space. Therefore, while reading hijras’ engagements in a Sufi shrine, it must be centred around the notions of marginal position hijras hold and the different forms of marginalisation they face. Their engagements in a Sufi shrine should be analysed based on their positionality on the margins and the way they negotiate with shrine space to deal with the exclusions they have been experiencing from everywhere for a long time. So, this thesis looks at hijra engagements in Sufi shrines based on this notion of marginality that includes both hijras’ marginal position and the shrine’s marginal space. Apart from tracing the dynamics of such similar positionality of the people on the margins in an apparently marginal space, this study will try to understand how hijras are connected to Sufism and Sufi thoughts by looking at their longstanding relationship with the concepts and ideals of asceticism which is an inevitable attribute of Sufi lives. Before exploring these underlying intersections in analysing different aspects of hijra engagements with Sufism, Sufi shrines and saints, the following sections try to have a fundamental understanding of Sufism as a tradition and Sufi shrine as a sacred space.

2.1 Sufism: An Introduction

Sufism is generally considered as the mystical³ aspect of Islam seeking to experience the higher status of divine love and wisdom. It is the stream of Islam through which believers try to find the ultimate truth of divinity through spiritual belief, rituals and practices. This mode of Islamic mysticism is termed as ‘tasawwuf’ in Arabic. But it has been called ‘Sufism’ in the Western

³ Nile Green argues that using the term ‘mysticism’ to refer ‘Sufism’ has its limitations and it has led to some “misconceptions as a result of the narrow definition of mysticism adopted from intellectualist European milieu”(Green, 2006). See Voll and Ohtsuka for more discussion on the same. See (Voll & Ohtsuka, 1995)

world since the early 19th century (Schimmel, 1975), and it is Orientalists who introduced the term into the European languages (Ernst, 2003). The word ‘Sufism’ originates from the Arabic term for a mystic, *Sufi*, which is, in turn, derives, in popular opinion, from *Suf*, an Arabic word meaning *wool*, “plausibly a reference to the woollen garment of early Islamic ascetics”(Schimmel, 2019, p. 1). The term *pashmina-push*, or “wearers of wool”, which was used to call Persian Sufis, also strengthens this view (Nasr, 2007). Ali al Hujwiri (d. 1072), a medieval Sufi intellect, theoretician and the author of *Kashf ul Mahjub* - the oldest Persian treatise on Sufism, traces other three possible roots for the word ‘Sufism’ in addition to *Suf*. First, a Sufi is in *saff-i awwal*, i.e., in the first rank. So, the word Sufi derives from *saff*. Second, it may come from *ahl-al-suffah*, which refers to the Prophet Muhammad's pious companions who lived in his mosque in Medina. Third, its origin is *saf*d means purity (Hujwiri, 1982).

Defining Sufism shall be a tiresome task, for it is an idea that expands so widely at discourse and institutional levels. According to Schimmel (1975), Sufism is generally used to term Islamic mysticism, and she defines mysticism as the love of the Absolute. Schimmel places this love as the power that differentiates true mysticism from mere asceticism. For Carl. W. Ernst, Sufism is “a term for the process of realizing ethical and spiritual ideals” (Ernst, 2003, p. 1). According to William Chittick, "Sufism can be described as the interiorisation, and intensification of Islamic faith and practice"(Chittick, 1995, p. 207). Nasr's (2007) understanding of Sufism is centred around the notion of the truth, as he calls Sufism the “Garden of Truth”. In short, it can be summed up defining Sufism as a stream of Islam that strives to purify one's soul through spiritual ideals, thoughts and practices which will lead him to discover the ultimate truth and thereby help him to experience divine love and wisdom. This research locates Sufism's root in the concept of '*Ihsan*' which the Prophet Muhammad described as one of the three pillars of the religion – *Islam*, *Iman*, and *Ihsan*. *Islam* denotes the voluntary submission of the believer to God, strictly performing the five pillars of Islam. *Iman*

signifies the belief in the six articles of Islam and the strict adherence to it. Ihsan allows someone to attain perfection or excellence in the worship of God, and that can be achieved by immersing into the world of Ma'rifa (Knowing Allah). Prophetic tradition itself defines Ihsan as it is "to worship God as if you see Him, and if you cannot see Him, then indeed He sees you" (Bukhari, 2003). In essence, Sufism can be read as the process of attaining excellence through divine love and practices. In Sufism, the self is considered as a core concept of spirituality. It is through the practices of purifying and disciplining the self, one becomes a true spiritual follower having a deep sense of spiritual connection to his master and God. Therefore, the recognition of self is provided by a space like Sufi shrine imbibes this inherent quality of Sufism, and it makes the marginalised bodies more attached to such a space.

Zainudheen Makhdoom al Malabari (2010), in his work *Adhkiya*⁴, beautifully describes a believer's pathway towards attaining divine love and wisdom, explaining it in a threefold way. i.e., *Sharia* - the Islamic law, *Tariqah* - the mystical path, and *Haqiqah* - the Truth. According to him, "*Sharia* is like a ship, *Tariqah* is like the sea, and *Haqiqah* is like a pearl in the sea. Whoever wants that pearl should go on board in a ship, needs to dive into the sea, and then he will get the pearl". He says that one can rise to the level of a Sufi only by passing through these different stages of purification, beginning from *Sharia* which commands the believers to be faithful to the religion of Islam obeying God's orders and avoiding his prohibitions, through *Tariqah*, which is an exercise of beautifying both body and soul engaging in God's thoughts, and finally reaching *Haqiqah* which is the final destination of a believer where he can witness the *nur* (light) of the Creator (Makhdoom al Malabari, 2010). Makhdoom's rendering of becoming a Sufi directs towards the interrelationship of different Islamic traditions. It denotes the connectedness of various religious and intellectual disciplines of Islam.

⁴ *Adhkiya* is a poetic work authored by Sheikh Zainudheen Makhdoom al Malabari, which discusses the basic tenets of Sufism and the ways by which one can attain the higher status of divine love and wisdom

Even though Sufism emerged at Prophet Muhammad's time, it became defined, codified, and established as a discipline in later periods. It was in the eighth century, the spiritual knowledge and the mechanism to access it inherited from the Prophet were become clearly codified as any other Islamic intellectual disciplines (Nasr, 2007). The formative history of Sufism recognises the fact that there was no central locus point around which Sufism has been organised. All of the great masters of Sufism in the formative period were individual Sufi mystics living in urban or rural landscapes, guiding people into the path of God and engaging with different actors of their community. The formative history of Sufism is mainly the history of individual Sufis becoming great stalwarts of the time and space they lived. In later periods, it became institutionalized by establishing orders and “the orders have contributed to converting Sufism into a mass movement” (Schimmel, 1975, p. 239). Sufism evolved into an organisational framework in the twelfth century, and that marked the beginning of the organised form of Sufism through the formation of Sufi orders (*tariqah*). “The confluence of the spiritual influences of the great masters of the twelfth century led to a remarkable revival of Islamic spirituality in the thirteenth century. This period may be said to begin with al-Ghazzali and the founders of Sufi orders” (Nasr, 2007, p. 188).

Sufi orders represent a unique mode of piety and form of social organisation which is the basis of rituals, practices and other structures of a Sufi sect. The beginning of Sufi orders marked the institutionalisation of Sufism, which became the central mechanism of the functionality of this discipline with more stable systems and institutional coherence. Apart from being an independent platform for devotional discourses and practices, major Sufi orders grew up with a massive popular base and transnational connections establishing and organising its fraternities in almost all continents worldwide.

Sufism's core lies in bonding a mureed (disciple) with his Sufi shaikh (master) and that attachment guides a disciple towards experiencing divine love. The relationship between a Sufi

shaikh and his mureed is constituted through a complex hierarchical spiritual structure. This starts as disciples pledge allegiance (bya'h) to the shaykh. They gather for spiritual sessions in a *khanqah*⁵ which is the nucleus of a Sufi order from where disciples learn from their master, practice the spiritual disciplining of their body and soul, engage in collective rituals, and participate in their fraternal Sufi community. Being a space that is sacralised with the presence of a Sufi master, Khanqah stands as a locus point of blessedness and aura of the saint throughout his lifetime. According to Green (2012), with the death, a Sufi turns to be a 'blessed man' from his status as a 'man of piety' when he was alive, and his shrine emerges as a 'death space' in the place of khanqah which stood as a major shelter for the marginalised people during his lifetime.

Tracing back Sufism's social and cultural history has major significance in understanding the deep transformations it created in various sections of society and there is a detailed scholarship that analyses the transformations it made in different time and space (Green, 2012; Karamustafa, 2007; Knysh, 2017; Nasr, 2007). The history of Sufism ascertains that the Sufis worldwide have played a significant part in the formation of Muslim society by engaging with the masses, educating the common public, shaping and reshaping their everyday religion. "In addition to being a discursive voice in the choir of Islamic discourses, Sufism has established its obvious and tangible presence in the very texture of Muslim life"(Knysh, 2017, p. 85).

2.2 Sufi Shrine, Baraka and Space

The graves of venerated saints mark a vital geography that is sacralised with the blessedness of the saint buried there. It stands as a major centre of spiritual power and the baraka of the saint and constitutes a spiritual cartography linking to a larger network of shrines or orders.

⁵ Khanqah – a term with Persian origin which refers to a place designed for spiritual gathering of the members of a Sufi order. In Arab world and North Africa, Khanqah is known as zawiya. Turks called it as tekke. In some regions it is also called as ribat (Knysh, 2017; Schimmel, 1975).

Nile Green's analysis of settlements and shrines of Sufis marks this speciality of Sufi shrines that stood as the cultural routes keeping medieval Muslim cities and communities connected to each other (Green, 2012). Usually, it either exists in plain shape without any architectural settings or with excellent infrastructures which are architecturally designed, built and decorated. Shrines with bare structures are called as *maqbara* (tomb), *turba* (heap of dust), or *maqam* (place); and the ones with architectures are known as *mazar*, *ziyaratgah* (a place of visit or pilgrimage) or *dargah* (*lit.* place of access, shrine) (Troll, 2004)⁶.

The veneration of the tomb is constituted within a complex spiritual methodology and the principle of this spiritual invocation is provided by the intimacy with the saint; the *ta'alluq*. Rewarding this intimacy, the saint carries the necessary spiritual resources to overcome or resolve a problem or crisis. People visit shrines and do pilgrimage believing the intermediary role (*waseela*) of a Sufi saint who can mediate between devotees and God. Apart from the spiritual intimacy and satisfaction they embrace from the aura of the Sufi saint, devotees believe that the shrine acts as a place from where they will surely get answers to their prayers and receive help and guidance to their future plans. They perform different rituals and make offerings there to be immersed with that Sufi's baraka or charisma upon which a shrine runs. Devotees come to shrines with offerings, monetary donations, or things to be blessed and sanctified and return to their places bearing a portion of the sacredness of the saint and his shrine. In this sense, a Sufi shrine is constituted by the everyday spirituality of people visiting the shrine, and it is the notion of baraka that encourages people and brings them to the shrine.

The Arabic word 'baraka', literally means 'blessing', is a term that connotes aura of the saint, "a complex notion that involves the divine aura, charisma or power of a person, object or a site, material beneficial power, and protection" (Schielke & Stauth, 2008, p. 17). As per Islamic

⁶ These are the common terms and general classification used for shrines. It may differ in different regions.

belief, holy texts like the Quran and Hadith, sacred sites, saintly individuals, and righteous deeds of humans are circled by spiritual power. It emanates when someone reads Quran, stays in holy sites, meets pious personalities, or visits the grave of a blessed saint who is having spiritual powers and is nearer to God that makes him a friend of God. The concept of baraka represents an infinite possibility of contact and mediation. That's the primary reason why baraka becomes a central point of discussion as the vital and significant trait of a shrine. This study considers the concept of baraka or the notion of the aura of the saint as the basis of a Sufi shrine space. It dramatically influences its establishment and the formation of communities around it. The baraka works as an immanent quality that makes the space of a Sufi shrine more unique, meaningful, powerful and helps it stand out from other public places.

The baraka of the saint is embraced by all things related to the shrine, from rituals and practices to the food served on the premises. For example, devotees have the food served from the shrine, commonly called *langar niyaz*, believing that it contains the baraka of the saint. While visiting Khwaja's shrine at Ajmer for participating in the annual festival, hijras themselves organise langar niyaz and feed the poor, destitute, and other visitors of the shrine. Also, the remaining food of *langar* held after shrine rituals are distributed as tabarruk (blessed) among the devotees to carry it to their houses because it is sacred and contains the baraka of the shrine.

Also, the notion of baraka spatially differs as its power is mainly concentrated on the central part of the shrine, i.e., the saint's grave. "The closer one is to the shrine, the more one becomes immersed in its spiritual force, its baraka. Inside the shrines this spiritual power is most concentrated in the saint's tomb itself, so that visitors walk around or touch its enclosure (maqsura) to absorb some of its baraka" (Mittermaier, 2008, p. 49). It demonstrates the spatial distribution of the baraka and the importance of visiting the saint's tomb itself rather than visiting the shrine.

Nile Green interprets baraka as “the supernatural ‘blessing power’ of a ‘blessed man’ which was typically used in a partisan fashion to aid those individuals or communities who became his proteges”(Green, 2012, p. 1). According to him, baraka is a trans-temporal and trans-spatial concept that is fixed across time and space. Because it is embodied in saints and transported through the living bodies of the saints and transferred to their successors and offspring in their place of settlement. Werbner develops his Sufi theory of charisma by identifying the relationship between the renunciation of worldly desires embodied in our own selves and the attainment of right wisdom achieved by the inner soul. Through ascetic practices on the body, a Sufi becomes himself purified, which enable him to attain the knowledge of eternal realities and refute worldly desire, greed and selfishness. It results in the death of the embodied desire (nafs), whereas the soul (ruh) remains as a living agency which in turn transforms as a channel of divine giving, blessing, and healing the world (P. Werbner & Basu, 1998). Salvatore (2008) also argues that the notion of charisma should be understood as a relational concept that acts as a nexus between the human and the transcendent that makes a shrine more powerful in its intercessory role (Salvatore, 2008). According to Schielke, the baraka of a saintly place becomes fundamentally problematic for modernity and Islamic reform projects because of its inherent ambiguity, openness to Islam and non-Islam, religious and secular practices, hierarchy and anarchy, local and trans-local dimensions (Mittermaier, 2008).

Along with considering shrine space as a sacred and spiritual place, people visiting Sufi shrines also approach Dargha as a healing space for their physical, mental and spiritual problems. This healing functionality of the shrine is centred around the notion of the baraka of the saint and his spiritual intimacy with God, who is actually healing diseases according to their belief. Many Sufi shrines across India are known as centres of healing and cure for disastrous diseases like, for example, Ervadi Dargha in Tamilnadu and Langar House Dargha in Hyderabad. Both sites are known for curing mental illness and people from different states come there for this

purpose. Kalathil (2010) notes that often people come to the Langar House Shrine, considering it as an alternative space for state-run mental illness centres and hospitals, which are very costly for them. In short, this function of the shrine as a healing and cure centre also helps that space to stand distinctively from other public places.

2.3 Spatiality of Sufi Shrine

A Sufi saint holds the status of a living blessed man throughout his lifetime, blessing the space he lives in and the people around him. With his death, his shrine acts as the locus point of blessedness creating a space encircled with his baraka and that transforms his status from a living blessed man to a saint with eternal sacredness. Shrine as a death space becomes a centre of sacredness and aura of the saint which in turn heavily helps in the making of sacred geography of space and human geography of communities who engage with that space. The following section tries to understand the dynamics of a Sufi shrine space and what are the components that help its transformation into a sacred geography. Therefore, analysing major reflections on such a space put forth by scholars from Anthropology, Sociology and History will be timely as this dissertation mainly focuses on the spatiality and spatial distinctiveness of the Sufi shrines. Scholars like Nile Green (2006, 2012), Samuli Schielke (2012; 2008), Werbner (1998), Yogesh Snehi (2019) and others share some critical ways to look at the Sufi shrines and their space. The methodology adopted here is to approach those scholars and their arguments from an engaging ground that facilitates to understand the different dimensions and dynamics of a Sufi shrine space.

2.3.1 Space of Texts and Territories: Making of Sufi Shrines

Drawing on the early modern Indian context, Nile Green (2012) analyses Sufi saints' settlements and shrine space. Tracing the historical making of Sufi spaces, Nile Green (2012) examines the cultural routes that kept medieval Muslim cities and communities connected to

each other. He explores different aspects of the interdependence of communities, narratives, and places, looking at how Muslim communities of early modern India creatively located their sense of history and memory of belonging and home. He argues that the long trajectory of patterns of imaginary and actual interaction with memory and space is composed of texts and territories. His scholarship is centred on the notions of space, migration and textuality, thereby understanding how different communities used Sufi textual resources of memory to construct and conserve their historical identity. He also tries to “develop holistic ways of tracing the connections between books and narratives, physical places and cultural geographies, and the living blessed men and immortal saints around whose texts and territories, identity, memory, and belonging took shape”(Green, 2012, p. xiii).

Nile Green’s scholarship (2012) is mainly striving to understand how crucial the shrines of immortalised Sufi saints were in making Muslim space on Indian soil. Bringing textuality, migration and territories together, he considers Sufis not only as living social actors but also makers of shrine-based memory spaces, which has a significant role in the formation of Muslim communities around the globe. He locates Sufi shrines as the ‘spatial anchors’, a space that is developed and sanctified through the cultural investment of the shrine architecture, ritual veneration, memories, and hagiographies. “Through the acts of ritual performance and narratives remembrance that were focused on the tombs, Sufis became the enduring spatial anchors for the historical memory of different Muslim communities of settlers and converts who attached themselves to the spatial and temporal surety of their burial places” (Green, 2012, p. 13).

Nile Green analyses various ways by which a space is made through different attachment that a community makes with shrines. He makes a combined reading of texts and territories by “spatialising the reading of texts and textualising the reading of spatial sources”(Green, 2012, p. 4). By literary texts, Green means the huge amount of hagiographical works on Sufis and

their biographies. For him, hagiographies are textual routes through geographies that embody the heritage and memory of saints and shrines. Drawing on his studies about various Sufi shrines across Egypt, Zayed (2008) also share the same perspective that a special sanctity is gifted to the place of a Sufi saint through the narratives about the saint, his Karamat (miracles) and the rites performed in that place. These narrations, in turn, transform that space into a 'cultural space' in which the baraka of the saint marks the frontline of the space.

By analysing how the death space of Sufis helps in defining identity by connecting the community to territory and territory to texts of memory, Nile Green attempts to develop a distinct methodology of bringing and reading hagiographical texts, territories of saints, and their shrines together. As a consequence of this combined reading, a constant interplay takes place between, on the one hand, Sufi Islam which is having the moving and portable religious resources by way of migrant Sufis, their hagiographies, rituals and occasional relics they imported and, on the other hand, immovable and static resources of sacred localities, shrine architecture, and landscapes in which settler and convert communities invested. In a way, he tries to trace different aspects of connections between bodies, texts and places of Sufi saints and their community. In a similar attempt, Pnina Werbner (1998) also explored the Sufism as a living and embodied reality that transforms a landscape into a sacred geography, creating an extensive network of communities of devotees often transgressing the borders of local, regional and transnational boundaries. According to her, Sufi saints emerge in different periods to shape and mould a sacred space, to embody the sacredness within and transform it into a lived reality. This facilitates establishing new Sufi orders and more extensive networks which in turn extends to greater landscapes, often transgressing the borders of local, regional and international boundaries (P. Werbner & Basu, 1998).

Nile Green follows Durkheimian analysis of sacred space to understand the space around a Sufi shrine and the process of making that space. "Conceived broadly in Durkheimian terms, the

sacredness of space (whether architectural space or modified landscapes) is established by the investment of meaning through the performance of ritual and telling narratives. Through these investments, space became sacred because it was ‘memory space’ of surrounding communities who through texts and ritual remembrance connected it to their own histories and proxy histories of their patron saints” (Green, 2012, p. 13). Consequently, according to Green, that ‘memory space’ transforms into a ‘Muslim space’ because the rituals and narratives of memories are conceived through the resources of Sufi Islam, resources that included not only particular idioms of writing, acts, and the architecture, but also the blessed bodies of the Sufi saints themselves which were the most important resources of all. Through the burial, enshrinement and textual commemoration of a Sufi saint, which were the static features of places of settlement, these Sufi saints’ bodies created memory spaces that were both sacred and Muslim which in turn helped in the construction of Muslim spaces. “Shrines were, therefore, spaces where the past was not only recounted in the narrative but also rendered visible in architecture and ritual. They presented their communities of memory with a tangible continuity with their past: the same gateways, prayer rooms, and books; preserved clothing, possessions, and etiquette; even the same embodied blessing in the saint’s living descendants, the *sajjada nashins*” (Green, 2012, p. xv).

Nile Green’s analysis becomes distinctive and important due to his juxtaposition with diverse aspects like geography, texts, literature, shrines and settlement to make sense of a space that emerges from these engagements. He considers migration and conversion as the two major factors in the formation of Muslim communities in India. He also emphasises the importance of texts and material bodies such as shrines in making a sacred geography. Nile also argues that Sufi genealogy, hagiography, imagination and memory, always evoked transnational and national geographies that also echoed or produced the genealogy of the followers.

2.3.2 Shrines, Locality and Modernity

Samuli Schielke shares critical blind spots that happen to be dominating the studies of Muslim space and community in his edited work 'Dimension of Locality: Muslim Saints, their Place and Space' (2008) with the co-editor Georg Stauth. Schielke's work is in the context of Egypt and he tries to look at the different dimensions of space and locality based on studies about various shrines across the globe. His reflections on shrines and their space extend what Nile Green argued about Muslim Sufi shrines in India. However, he makes the notion of space and locality more complex with the modern discourses of the market, capitalism, Islamic reform movements and others. His analysis moves beyond the conventional dichotomies of analysis, i.e., sacred and profane, Sufism and Salafism, or tradition and modernity. He looks deeply into the complex notions of contestation around saintly localities.

Instead of Muslim space, Schielke prefers to call it 'Muslim locality' in his analysis. He presents a multifaceted analysis trying to figure out how a saintly locality with sacred geography is formed, imagined and authenticated under different contexts. Through this focus on locality, he proposes an insightful approach to understand the Muslim community and everyday life. According to Schielke, Muslim spatialities should be understood by analysing the everyday life of the people who connects and relates with that space and place (Schielke & Debevec, 2012). Here Schielke develops his idea of everyday Islam contesting the conceptual frameworks of Anthropology of Islam put forth by various scholars (Schielke, 2010). He considers Islam as a parameter that people confront with other parameters in their everydayness. Everydayness for him constitutes a constellation of different ideologies, negotiations and appropriations. His understanding of Muslim locality goes along with this critical reflection on the ambiguity of everyday life. "Rather than taking Islam as the primary level of analysis and trying to explain what Islam 'is', Schielke attempts to show how the local specificity and the historical and inter-local connectedness of a site and the beliefs and rituals

relating to it are imagined and constructed in a given historical and social setting” (Schielke & Stauth, 2008, p. 14). Drawing on the deeper sociological factors imbued by the shrines of Punjab regions, Yogesh Snehi also shares the importance of everydayness noting that the “shrines are archives of every day, a mirror to understand the complex reciprocity, contestation and dissent of dominant discourses” (Snehi, 2019, p. 59)

Instead of using ‘Islam’ as an explanatory paradigm and the accompanying dichotomy of Islam and non-Islam, Schielke looks at the construction of saints and their places as a primary level of reflection and analysis, examining the dynamics and competing imaginaries of aura and modes of authentication. According to him, “the success of establishing and stabilising the presence of the saint in a given place over a long period of time depends largely on successful modes of authentication, that is, reimagining the place in terms of its origin (history) and establishing this imaginary as manifest (also changing) physical structures and ritual practices”(Schielke & Stauth, 2008, p. 19). For Schielke, Muslim locality exists in a moment of the intersection of – sacred and secular, human and transcendent, claims and authentication, continuity and break.

According to Schielke, the previous scholarship focused on the idea of ‘continuity’ to understand how a space is configured and authenticated. This was the most popular methodology that existed in historiography and anthropology. To find out the ‘essence’ or the ‘core’ and the earlier modes of worship in the contemporary and tracing the linear continuity of communication was the predominant notion that formulated major studies of anthropology of Islam and historiography. In a way, Nile Green (2012) was also tracing the continuity of Muslim space and settlement that he understood ritual performance and configuration of space was the result of continuous confrontation with Muslims and their counterpart. According to Schielke, “the construction of a mosque over a pre-Islamic site of worship is an act of symbolical and physical triumph, of the defeat and replacement of the preceding cult. As such,

it is the instigation of the symbolic rule of the new religion, an expression of the cultural break rather than continuity in essence” (Schielke & Stauth, 2008, p. 10). Here Schielke is not negating the existence of such continuity but stressing how the community imagined it by remembering and reconstructing the past calls for closer analysis. A large focus on continuity presupposes the never challenged or disturbed existence of history or space. Schielke’s entire scholarship is trying to identify how the community imagines this break and disrupt the claims of continuity through the modes of authentication.

Looking at the multiple and complex notions of locality, Schielke tries to figure out different dimensions and meanings of the term ‘locality’, connecting it to a Sufi shrine. First, the locality of a saintly place can be considered in the fundamental sense of a place identified through a reference to its history. Here the aura of a saintly locality is the product of historical imagination and the saint is the person who mediates between past and present. Second, it evolves in the sense of a landscape or territory constituted by numerous interconnected locations and can emerge as a massive movement with high organisational settings. Werbner’s analysis of regional cults denotes this dimension of locality in which a saintly place is constructed in a larger landscape with lots of networks (P. Werbner, 2008). Third, here the aura of the saint is the locus point around which that space or locality is constituted and organised. In this sense, the notion of locality appears in an abstract meaning of space. Fourth, the sacred space of a shrine emerges as a state of being that demonstrates that the locality is conceived in an imaginary sense and here the spaces are formed through the imagination. It denotes the notion of imaginary spaces which is constituted through the dreams, which often acts as a space that converses with the physical space of a Sufi shrine. Mittermaier (2008) looks deeply into the multiple dimensions of saintly dream spaces based on his studies in various shrines in Egypt. Drawing on Foucault’s understanding of the dreams as a mode of being rather than mere ‘rhapsody of images’, Mittermaier argues that the dream space “is a broader realm that is

socially or metaphysically imbued with meaning and power” (Mittermaier, 2008, p. 50). Snehi (2019) also looks into the various dimensions of dreams, production of memory and its institutionalisation through the establishment of Sufi sites. He argues that Sufi sheikhs create a model of Islamic psychoanalysis through the interpretation of dreams to their disciples,

2.4 From Sacred Space to Sacred Geography

While Nile Green’s spatial analysis was centred around the historical and cultural routes that kept medieval Muslim communities connected to each other through a network of Sufis and their shrines, Schielke’s scholarship tried to unearth mostly the modalities of everyday engagements and modern dynamics. His focus on everyday Islam is rooted in the debate and discourse on the anthropology of Islam which dates back to anthropological approaches to Islam from Gellner (1981), Geertz (1968), El-Zein (1977) to Talal Asad (1986). In this sense, Schielke attempts to trace out the multiple trajectories of a sacred space and its intersection with different dynamics of modernity. Werbner (1998), Mittermeier (2008) and Snehi (2019) also share some critical ways to look at the notion of space of a Sufi shrine and how that notion contributes to the establishment, development and everyday engagements in and around the space of the shrine.

Taking a cue from above scholars, the last section has been trying to understand the spatiality of the Sufi shrine, answering the following questions: What are the components that help to constitute a Sufi shrine space? What are the underlying dynamics that contribute to that transformation from a mere normal space to one which is blessed with radiate the aura of the saint? How is a Sufi shrine space transformed into sacred geography? In short, this part of the analysis was trying to argue that the space of a Sufi shrine is not just a space that has a distinctive spatiality with the baraka of the saint, but it should be read in a much larger setting that the space of a Sufi shrine creates a sacred geography of texts, territories and communities.

Here this transformation of a Sufi shrine space towards a geography is mainly constituted by the meeting and interaction of diverse people representing various communities across spectrums of differences. Rather than merely constituted by the aura of the saint in a particular place, Sufi shrine space is created through the interaction of a vast and complex geographical landscape, which becomes possible through a wider network of communities, pilgrimages, hagiographies and territories. The notion of sacred geography becomes distinctive in its very establishment because it is constituted with the help of intricately connected landscapes of people and texts.

The transformation of a Sufi shrine space towards a sacred geography is also driven by the massive collection of texts that are written as hagiographies. Hagiographies not only facilitates a way to reminiscence the glorious lives and *karāmah*⁷ of the Sufi saint; it also creates a memory space that helps the followers to constitute a dignified living in many ways. Especially it helps people on the margins to legitimize their existence by recollecting their longstanding connectedness with the saint as it happens in the case of hijras narrating their historical affiliation with many well-known Sufi saints. For example, hijras always narrate the story of a hijra ascetic disciple of Khwaja and this glorious memory makes hijras believe that they hold a dignified identity so that Khwaja gave them such a prestigious position. Hijras see their journey to Ajmer and their active participation in the annual Urs festival as an inevitable ritual they follow each year. For them, Khwaja of Ajmer is someone who considered them wholeheartedly and gave validation to their identity. It in this context, this work is trying to understand hijra spirituality by bringing hijras into the larger framework Sufi shrine as a sacred geography.

⁷ *Karāmah* refers to the supernatural power gifted to *Awliya ul Allah* (friends of God), the saints. Employing their charisma, it is believed that the saints are bestowed such power by God to perform marvels that would have been impossible if they were not the *awliyas*.

In short, this chapter was trying to understand the fundamental aspects of Sufism, Sufi shrine and its space alongside tracing the underlying intersections between Sufism, space, sacredness and marginality. With a focus on the notion of baraka, which is a phenomenal part in the constitution of a sacred space, this chapter argues that a Sufi saint and his shrine space play a major role in creating, establishing and maintaining a sacred geography with a network of people, texts and territories. Especially communities on the margins are intricately connected to the shrine space, and hijras, one of the subjugated categories, are more aligned to such sacred places. Therefore, to understand how hijra engagements in a Sufi shrine stand differently from that of other public places, it is necessary to have a look at the notion of 'public space' itself. It will definitely open up different dynamics of the distinctiveness of a Sufi shrine space compared to other public places and it will eventually lead us to trace out the various notions of hijra engagements in public space and multiple positionalities they hold in different spaces.

Chapter II

Hijra, Sufi Shrines and Public Space

The major research question put forth by this thesis is how Sufi shrine as a space differs from other public spaces hijras visit or engage with. Therefore, it is necessary to look at the notion of ‘public space’ and its dynamics. Generally, the term public space or place refers to the important sites in a city, town or village that play a vital role in the socio-cultural, economic or political life of that particular place. Public space has historically been explained as "open space", referring to the markets, commercial centres, transportation hubs, recreational parks, city squares and other commonly owned and constituted places with public access. It may be used for daily requirements of the people to fulfil their everyday needs, and most of the public places with such functionalities will have a permanent structure. Markets, bus and train stations, commercial streets, recreational or leisure areas such as gardens, parks, and beaches are examples of such public places with everyday functionalities. Apart from places for daily engagements and activities, there are other public spaces used for weekly, seasonal or annual festivals, markets, fairs, or programs that also bring various sections together in a space.

There is no unified definition for public space, mainly due to the transformations and ever-evolving dynamics in and around the notion of public space. Hannah Arendt defines the public realm as an open and shared space (Arendt, 1958). According to her, public space is a common world that is to be shared with all people in contrast to privately owned places. Habermas’ public sphere also directs towards this notion of connectedness and nexus between space and people because, for him, it is universal access that defines the publicness of a sphere (Habermas, 1989a). Carr et al. define public space as “open, publicly accessible places” that facilitate the popular activities necessary for community building (Carr et al., 1992).

These definitions direct that the public space is measured in accordance with the amount of accessibility it provides. Here the accessibility is what ensures the free movement of different actors of a space, including its people and merchandise. This view expands the notion of publicness of a place with its characteristic of accessibility to any individual where the access is not based on some conditions. In this sense, the public places with their open access play an important role in the inclusion of a different section of society to the mainstream, which in turn possible intersections of those sections at various levels. For the poor, homeless, and other destitute people, “public” came to mean that which is not private, spaces from which they could not be excluded by somebody’s right to property. If asked, the people would reply that they settled there precisely because this space was public, not owned by individual property owners, and as poor people they had a quasi-claim to settle in such state or municipal property (Kaviraj, 1997).

3.1 Sufi Shrine as a Public Space

Looking at public space as it is accessible and open to all sections regardless of gender, religion, caste, race, or socio-cultural or economic level, Sufi shrines stand as such a space welcoming all kinds of people from different corners of the society. The burial of a venerated saint not only creates an architectural space comprising of the shrine, mosque, adjacent market, street and neighbourhoods, it also creates a complex network of communities who may either engage with that sacred place as part of their everyday engagements or make a visit to there to fulfil their worldly and unworldly desires and needs. Here what makes this shrine space different from other public places is the notion that the openness of the shrine is so wide and vast by which these communities from different sections of society can easily get access into the shrine regardless of any differences they have in between. However, as it is already mentioned, it is not suggesting that the shrine space is an absolute democratic space with no amount of discriminatory or hierarchical structures or power relations. Nevertheless, the Sufi shrine acts

as a refuge for various sections and stands as a shelter, especially for marginalized communities, even though that space itself is marginalized in many ways. So, such an analysis of shrine space through the lens of marginality will give an insight into the deeper notions of hijra engagements in a Sufi shrine as the hijras are one of the worst affected sections of many kinds of marginalization.

There is a vast scholarship that tries to understand the factors that contribute to this spatial distinctiveness of Sufi shrine, facilitating more openness and easy access to the people who live in the periphery of society. Adopting a more structuralist approach, Richard Werbner (1989) has shown that “substantive flows between persons, and between persons and places, are morally incorporative, thus underlining the power of ritual to create ethical spaces which counter the alienation and estrangement produced by modernity. This incorporative capacity is an important feature of Sufi cults” (P. Werbner & Basu, 1998, p. 7). Adding to this inclusive notion of Sufi spaces, Turner’s (1995) splendid analysis of pilgrimages, rituals and movement of people has unveiled another part within the engagements happening inside a Sufi shrine as it is a pilgrimage site. Victor Turner’s study of pilgrimage unlocked a whole new set of queries and analyses about the notion of pilgrimage as a transformative movement. Turner conceptualised pilgrimage centres as an alternative and peripheral site within feudal societies. He argued that the ritual journeys in a pilgrimage ended in a liminal moment of ‘communitas’ which was anti-structural and anti-hierarchical, creating an equal sociality and fraternity. Pilgrimage sites thus embody an alternative order of ethics that is not limited by spatially constituted relations of power and authority (Turner, 1995).

Taking a cue from Turner’s concept of ‘liminality’, many scholars have tried to conceptualise the emotional and physical bonding of marginalised communities for Sufism by focusing on the liminal status of a Sufi shrine (Jaffer, 2017; P. Werbner & Basu, 1998). According to Turner, the concept of liminal is a transgressive notion and ambiguous moment that allows

actors to stay and act upon the limits of normative social identifications (Turner, 1995). Following this, Werbner explores the liminality at the shrines as sacred localities and of the charismatic saints as threshold persons mediating between two symbolic orders. Even though Werbner admits the validity of Turner's major argument that the pilgrimage sites and the related cults generate spaces of sacredness where alternative ethical orders are ritually embodied, he argues that the sacred pilgrimages create not anti-structure but the counter structure (P. Werbner & Basu, 1998).

To locate the spatial distinctiveness of a Sufi shrine, scholars also take the idea of 'publics', "not a public in the Habermasian sense (Habermas, 1989b) but rather a subaltern counter-public (Fraser, 1990) that existed in an oppositional relation to dominant publics in South Asian society" (Jaffer, 2017, p. 2). Even though it is very much possible to locate a shrine as creating an open space, as discussed, by giving access to everyone irrespective of class, caste, gender, etc., most of the shrines are not internally democratic in their setup, for there is stratification along various lines. While marginalised communities are part of many shrines, it is also visible in some shrines that they are on their peripheries. Therefore the shrines "cannot be labelled simply as sites of resistance or even of domination but offer the possibility for both" (Jaffer, 2017, p. 4).

Apart from this analysis of shrines as liminal and counter-public spaces, Sufi shrines hold the status of shared space which facilitates the coming together of different strata in a society. This dimension of sharing is deeply imbricated in the way a shrine is constituted through its everyday activities, rituals and engagements and it heavily helps in maintaining communal harmony and syncretism. Especially when we take the particular case of India, so many of shared sacred places are performing this function bravely in the times of far-right Hindu nationalism in the country. Despite the elements of polarisation and jingoistic nationalism, many Sufi shrines still continue to operate as public spaces with open access to people from all

backgrounds irrespective of class, caste, religion and other factors. Particularly, people on the margins of the society heavily depend on Sufi shrine space, often seeking legitimacy to their existence in many ways.

This reading of the Sufi shrine as a shared sacred space is pervasive in academia as it is clearly visible in the case of most of the Sufi shrines across South Asia. Looking at the religious intermingling in Indian Sufi shrines, Peter van der Veer (1992) traces that the process of assimilation of different religious traditions can help to promote tolerance, harmony and to contain conflict. Taking notes of his fieldwork in a Sufi shrine at Surat, Gujarat which belongs to a Sufi sheikh in Rifa'i Sufi order, he notes that the Hindu devotees also participate in *urs* annual festival of the shrine. One of the distinctive rituals or practices of Rifa'i the Sufi order is a procession in which "playing" with swords was an important aspect, "piercing of cheeks, tongues, and other parts of the body by swords, iron pins, and other instruments" (Van der veer, 1992, p. 554). van der Veer observes that the Hindu devotees refrain from participating in this procession. Instead, they formulate their own ways to honour and pay their respects to the saint on the days of the festival (Van der veer, 1992). However, drawing on his study on the Sufi shrines of the Punjab region Yogesh Snehi (2019) looks differently into this religious syncretism happening at the space of a shrine. His works become vital in understanding the notion of shared space and religious syncretism of shrines because he studies shrines of a region that has deeply impacted by the partition, i.e., shrines in post-partition Indian Punjab. He problematises the popular view, like Van der veer proposes, of the Sufi shrines and space as the depiction of religious syncretism observing that the religion is a "fluid category, refashioning itself in the ever changing contours of time and space" (Snehi, 2019, p. xvi). Instead, Snehi reads these intermingling of different religious traditions in the space of a Sufi shrine as "reflecting the shared notion of piety, and that of participating in the forms of devotion that accompanied this piety was not predicated on one's pre-existing religious identity" (Snehi,

2019, p. 87). Snehi separates the notion of devotion and piety from its popular and preconceived framework of religious traditions, and he places it in an independent setting highlighting the intrinsic fluidity of such sacred spaces across South Asia.

3.2 Beyond Order: Sufi Shrines, Public Space and Modernity

As this part tries to trace how a Sufi shrine spatially becomes distinct from other public spaces, it would be timely to look at the modern notion of public space and how a Sufi shrine engages with it. Because it will help to understand the spatial distinctiveness of Sufi shrine space more profoundly as it will unveil the dynamics in and around the modern notion of space.

The project of modernisation has summed up in creating cityscapes with the orderliness of Cartesian space and geometrical architectures throughout the world. Cartesian space constitutes a well-ordered space with an equal distance from the reference point to each point, and it is the foundation on which the modern cities and their spatial orders run. At the same time, alternative orders or orders beyond these modern notions of city space were reframed and stamped as traditional sites or ‘old city’ creating a dichotomous mirror by which the latter is always dominated and marginalised by the modern ordered spaces with its fate to bear all the burden of developments and transformation taken place in the ‘modern’ part of the city. Eventually, it led to the emergence of two different spaces, often with contradictory nature, in a single city as architecturally and socially distinct entities.

With the emergence of modern spatial orders, public spaces in a city became rearranged, ordered, and categorized based on the functionalities of each space which is executed through the disciplinary and colonizing power of modernity. For example, in India, the notion of disciplining everyday behaviour and ordering public space was introduced by British colonial rule, and that led to the emergence of a duality between the city and village in which the city was considered as a place of orderliness, hygiene, advanced scientifically and technologically,

and overall “civilised” in many ways. On the other hand, the village was seen as opposed to these notions and less standardised. This colonial injection of modernity made the Indian cities more vulnerable demanding high orderliness and making people more obedient to the process of disciplining it posited on human bodies. Looking at the transformation of the public space of Calcutta and the consequent changes colonial rule made on the city, Sudipta Kaviraj argues that there is an evident strand of control, order and disciplining in modern European conceptualisation of the public. In contrast, the Indian notion of public is entirely different. (Kaviraj, 1997). Illustrating the changes in the meaning and usage of parks in post-colonial Calcutta, Sudipta shows the transformation of a public space from its colonial past to the indigenous present. From a place designed and reserved to the wealthy middle class for recreation and all, the parks in Calcutta became a place owned by ordinary people and the poor. Specifically, it belonged to them on the occasions of public programs, strikes, or demonstrations. These places were increasingly seen as places of crowds, crowds principally comprising the poor and lower-middle classes, formerly on the other side of the spectacles of power. Gradually these became and were slowly seen by the subaltern classes as spectacles of inversion, of the strange power of the vulnerable, the victimised, and the excluded.

Contrary to this orderliness and functional compartmentalisation of modern public spaces, a Sufi shrine and its space stands differently with its spontaneous order, which is constituted by the baraka of the saint, everyday engagements of visitors, spatial connection to the adjacent markets, neighbourhoods and communities. Sometimes shrines also subvert the modern notion of functional orders as it literally happens when authorities plan to develop transportation infrastructures or ease the urban traffic as it is visible in major Indian cities. Here the shrines or saintly places⁸ deflect the modern spatial order by not accepting the authorities' demands to

⁸ Here I used the term ‘saintly places’ because these kinds of contested places are constituted not always by saint’s bodies or shrine. Sometimes, a place may be transformed into a sacred space with the presence of some saintly objects like, for example, a tree, wall, or well with a historical connection to a saint.

move away from their places which in turn becomes a hindrance to the maximum functionality and orderliness a modern city strives for.

While taking diverse perceptions, Zayed and Mittermaier argue that the sacredness of a shrine space becomes so problematic to the advocates of modern functionality and rationality because the saintly locality of Sufi shrines is a world apart which is open and freely available to various types of usages and different strata of peoples (Mittermaier, 2008; Zayed, 2008). Mittermaier (2008) states that a saintly locality is constituted and organised in contrast to the modern notion of spatial and functional orderliness. “Shrines run counter to the checkerboard order of modernity not only because they refuse to be moved from their place, but also because they represent a non-linear spatial order” (Mittermaier, 2008, p. 49) in opposition to the ruler straight-line order of modern spatiality. Zayed looks into the more profound transformation that happened in and around the public space of a shrine with the effect of modernity. According to him, “While the traditional square of the saint’s shrine was most importantly characterized by the openness it enjoyed due to the baraka of the saint, the modern public space of the saint’s square is in many ways more contested and fragmented due to ideological and religious contestation, urban expansion, modern economics, and state attempts to impose fences, police surveillance, and other physical restrictions on the use of the space” (Zayed, 2008, p. 122). Schielke also argues that, in contrast to the orderliness and rationality of modern cityscapes, a saintly locality, its neighbourhoods, adjacent markets, and surrounding landscapes they establish are signified by the notion of intersection: “between the human and the transcendent, between pious and profane practices, between different social classes, and between open and protected (or ‘public’ and ‘private’) spaces” (Schielke & Stauth, 2008, p. 16).

The process of sacralising the shrine space through the festivals and the rituals performed also encounters the modern idea of space and order. Schielke looks at how the festive space of a

shrine itself challenges the modern spatial idea of functionality. It confronts the notion of the contemporary public sphere, which demarcates itself as the park, street squares, and others with regard to its functionalities. According to him, functionalities and rationalities are the fundamental projects of modernism. Rather than resisting this order with its disorder, saintly festivity manifests an order in ambiguity that shows an attempt to suspend daily life for a while (Schielke & Stauth, 2008). It is at this juncture; this thesis tries to look at how hijras find a kind of legitimacy in such spaces that basically run counter to modernity's notion of ordered and disciplinary spatial concepts.

3.3 Hijra in Sufi Shrines: Validating Identity and Legitimising Existence

Although hijras draw their identity concurrently appropriating Hindu and Islamic religious identifications, which will be discussed in detail in the next chapter, scholars note that hijras manifest a special preference towards Islam (Hossain, 2012; Jaffer, 2017; Jaffrey, 1996; Reddy, 2005). That may be the one reason why hijras are more attached to the Sufi shrines, Muslim pilgrimage sites and practices there, visiting these places very frequently. There are many narratives of hijras visiting various Muslim shrines, engaging in rituals and actively participating in shrine festivals.

Many ethnographies, features, and reports mention this practice among hijras and some of them gives a detailed note on their engagements in shrine rituals, customs and festivals (Dhingra, 2008; Hossain, 2012; Jaffer, 2017; Jaffrey, 1996; Nanda, 1999; Reddy, 2005). Before proceeding to a detailed analysis of deeper dynamics of hijra engagements in a Sufi shrine space, it would be better to start this section by briefly looking at the available literature that tries to understand hijras appropriating or following Sufi ideals, thoughts, discourses, and their connection with Sufi shrines. Moreover, it will unveil the larger picture of hijra engagements with Sufism in the South Asian context particularly in the context of India, Pakistan and Bangladesh.

In India, hijras are frequent into many shrines across states and regions regularly visiting popular darghas like the shrine of Khwaja Mueenudheen Chishti at Ajmer, Hazrat Nizamudheen Dargha at West Delhi, Dargha of Quthubudhin Bakthiyar Kaki at Mehrauli, Khwaja Bande Nawaz Dargah at Gulbarga and others. Gayatri Reddy (2005) notes that many hijras she met from Hyderabad were frequent visitors to various Muslim shrines across the country. Nanda (1999) also shares hijra accounts of visiting Sufi shrines, especially going to the Dargha of Khwaja Mueenudhin Chishti of Ajmer. In an account to understand hijra engagements and interaction in a dargha situated at the North Indian City of Narayanpura⁹, Banhishikha Ghosh (2021) tries to understand how myths, rituals, festivals and everyday engagements in a shrine space take an essential role in constructing and authenticating hijra identity. She explains how hijras claim validity to their identity and existence through the history and space of this dargha, where they gather every week and on special days of festivals.

While exploring Bangladeshi hijras' construction of identity through different modes of religious identifications, Hossain (2012) notes their engagement with Sufi Islam explaining hijras' special practice of a Sufi festival which is being conducted annually remembering the prominent Sufi saint Khwaja of Ajmer. Hossain notes that Bangladeshi hijras' reverence for Khwaja and his hijra disciple Mariom is deeply rooted in their community, and they conduct a Sufi festival known as 'sinni' every year. Hossain narrates that hijras gather and celebrate the 'sinni' festival annually commemorating Khwaja who gave validation to their identity. They perform some rituals and practices praising Allah and Prophet Muhammed, reciting the Holy Quran, and remembering Khwaja's eminence and glorious life during the festival. They prepare food as a tabarruk to be distributed to the guests and hijras participating in the festival. They clap, sing using musical instruments and dance remembering Khwaja Garib Nawaz.

⁹ Narayanpura is a fictional name given by the author for a metropolitan city in northern India.

Bangladeshi hijras' reverence to the Sufi saint Khwaja signifies the Khwaja's acceptance among hijras and his relationship with that community across South Asia.

Apart from these contexts of India and Bangladesh, hijra accounts of visiting Sufi shrines are relatively much detailed in the context of Pakistan. Known as Khwajasiras¹⁰, Urdu equivalent to hijra and its origin traces back to medieval empires, hijras are very frequent in many famous shrines across the country like, for example, Madho Lal Hussain's shrine in Lahore, along with their active participation in many Muslim festivals like Muharram. In the context of Pakistan, Jaffer Amen (2017) and Claire Pamment (2019) try to unearth the dynamics of hijra spiritual engagements with Sufism based on their fieldwork in different Sufi shrines in Pakistan, along with seeking the possibilities of reading hijra lives through Sufi discourses and thoughts. Based on his fieldwork at Madho Lal Hussain's shrine in Lahore, Pakistan, Jaffer (2017) looks into "the creative appropriation of Sufi discourses, practices and organisational forms by hijras" (Jaffer, 2017, p. 1). Jaffer argues that some specific Sufi ideas like nafs, faqiri and Sufi organisational form of pir-murid relationship have enabled hijras to establish an alternative hijra identity. Guru-cela relation is the basis for hijra social organisation across South Asia as is evident from the many accounts on hijras' lives (Hossain, 2012; Jaffer, 2017; Nanda, 1999; Pamment, 2019; Reddy, 2005) and this relationship between guru and cela shows numerous similarities with the Sufi organisation of shaikh-murid relationship.

Drawing on hijras' performance of clapping and chanting - beating their own body parts themselves like Muharram rituals of Shia community - in a protest against Pakistani police, Pamment (2019) looks into the various modes of piety among Pakistani Khwajasiras performing marginalised traditions of religious and cultural roles. She explores multiple

¹⁰ In Pakistan, hijras are called Khawaja Sira, the equivalent term of transgender in the Urdu language. "Khwajasira" is a Persian title once endowed upon the powerful gender-fluid harem guards and ministers of the Mughal courts, one that British colonial rulers derogatorily translated as "eunuchs" (Pamment, 2019).

traditional performances and rituals practised by hijras within Sufi shrines and other spaces they engage in their everyday lives. Pamment argues that performing sacred Islamic gestures help hijras to access the dominant public and political domain even systematic exclusion continues there. She highlights how Sufi Islam shapes hijras' engagements in Sufi shrines, locality, and politics in Pakistan. Pamment explores the notion of a spiritualised interior of hijras which is creatively drawn from Sufi thoughts and discourses to contest the conventional understanding of gender. She argues that for hijras, "these assertions of piety, drawn creatively from Sufi and Shi'a modes and often performed on the fringes or lower rungs of developmental activism, offer an embodied outlet for negotiating multiple axes of exclusion" (Pamment, 2019, p. 297). These available accounts of hijras visiting Sufi shrines and following Sufi ideas and thoughts pave the way forward to understand hijra engagement in a detailed manner which will be analysed in the following parts.

3.4 At Khwaja's Darbar

"We visit Ajmer every year. There is an *Ithiyaz* for our people. Since the time of Garib Nawaz, our people and friends were very much respected there and given the high status". For the last 24 years since her childhood Huda - a young Muslim hijra in her mid-40s who lives in the Old City of Hyderabad - has been a frequent visitor of Ajmer Sharif and follower of Khwaja Garib Nawaz.

Among the popular shrines, Khwaja Muaeenudin Chishti's shrine at Ajmer is one of the major sites of devotion for hijras where they often visit and participate especially in the annual festival that happens once each year. Khwaja is revered by hijras across the subcontinent and hijras consider him as someone who gave validation to their identity. Jaffrey (1996) narrates Kamal Baksh, a hijra guru she met, that the hijras from different parts of the region visit Khwaja's shrine for his blessings and for getting solutions for internal disputes between hijra groups. During the annual festival at the shrine of Khwaja, hijras actively participate in all the rituals,

customs and practices happening in and around the shrine. During the festival, it is hijras who are the first group to lay chadar¹¹ on Khwaja's grave. They come to the shrine in separate groups, either based on their living place or without any basis, to lay chadar. It is a special ceremony for hijras to go to the shrine in a procession carrying chadar and dancing all the way. People throughout the way seek blessedness from that chadar, and some follow hijras' procession to the shrine's inner sanctum.

Hijras also participate in special qawali sessions and donate money to the singers. As qawali is popular across South Asia shrines, especially in shrines of Chishti Sufi order, hijras participate in these devotional music sessions and often join with singers. They also conduct langar niyaz and feed the poor and needy people who visit the shrine. The langar niyaz or community feeding is an essential part of all Sufi shrines that are being prepared and distributed among the destitute and deprived people who live in and around the sanctuary of the shrine seeking alms, begging etc. Also, visitors other than these people have food from langars as tabarruk (seeking blessedness of the shrine and saint) and some take it to their homes for others.

Apart from frequently visiting Ajmer, hijras' longing and preparations to visit Khwaja's shrine show their attachment to the saint and his shrine. Huda shares her experience, "I had a habit of practising Chirag Roshan of Garib Nawaz on every Thursday at my house. I light candles for Garib Nawaz every Thursday. Whenever I have a temptation to visit Khawja or a feeling of going Ajmer comes to my mind, I pray, "Oh Garib Nawaz, I want to visit you and come near you", Then the preparations for that visit become ready automatically. Whenever I have such a dream to go there, everything becomes ready for me somehow. Whenever I have such an inner feeling in my mind to go there, the way towards Khwaja will be open for me, no matter I am financially capable of that or not. Sometimes my neighbours arrange the money or

¹¹ Chadar is a mat which is laid on the grave of the saint and the process of laying is considered as a holy practice.

whatever I want for that visit. Sometimes, my friends ask me to join them to visit there. Anyhow I will reach there if I have Umang to visit Garib Nawaz. I have a strong and good relation with Garib Nawaz in a way. I respect him so deeply, and I ask him for fulfilling my dreams and wants”.

Haji Saab, another hijra from Hyderabad, also has been visiting Ajmer for a long time. “Whenever Garib Nawaz calls me, I visit him. Whenever I have a desire in my mind to visit him, I go there and pay respects to him. I feel very comfortable there, I feel delighted, and it is like a festival, meeting and interacting with the people around. All other people treat us very respectfully and are also very happy for us”.

Hijras’ attachment to the shrine of Khwaja is also based on their historical affinity with the saint and his shrine. They revere him for he has given validation to their identity and legitimised their existence by considering them wholeheartedly and giving them a prestigious position during his lifetime. The story behind the shrine ‘Kinnar ki Mazar’, situated in Ajmer, situated not far from Kwaja’s shrine, which is believed to have belonged to a hijra ascetic disciple of Khwaja Garib Nawaz, proves hijras’ historical connectedness with Khwaja. It is situated on the top of a mountain with minimal structures and architecture. Huda told me the story of this hijra ascetic, stating their historical affinity and with Khwaja. There was a Mukhannath¹² named ‘Maya Ji’ who was with the wife of Khwaja helping her as a servant. One day, Khwaja met her and asked her whether she had any longings to fulfil. She replied that I have every fortune here in this world except that I cannot deliver a baby because I am impotent. Khwaja prayed Allah to bestow her with a baby and she became pregnant. But to take the baby out of

¹² The Arabic word ‘mukhannath’ (pl. mukhannathūn) literally means ‘effeminate’. It is a term that refer to men who resembles women or people of ambiguous sex whose conducts resembles feminine nature. See Everett K. Rowson (1991), The Effeminates of Early Medina, *Journal of the American Oriental Society*, 111 (4) pp. 671-693. For more nuances in the meaning of terms ‘khuntha’, ‘mukhannath’, and ‘khanith’, See Almarri, S. (2018). Identities of a Single Root: The Triad of the Khuntha, Mukhannath, and Khanith. *Women & Language*, 41(1). <https://arcade.stanford.edu/content/identities-single-root-triad-khuntha-mukhannath-and-khanith-0>

her womb, they were compelled to cut her stomach because she had not that body part through which babies were normally coming to outside. Unfortunately, she and her baby lost her life and they are buried in a mountain near Ajmer. Hossain (2012) notes that the hijras of Bangladesh call this hijra as Mariom and consider her as their patron and revere her. The same story was told by the hijras of Hyderabad to Reddy (2005) to prove that they cannot give birth to a child. However, they call this hijra ascetic disciple of Khwaja as ‘Tarabai’ in contrast to the naming by hijras of Bangladesh interviewed by Hossain. Nanda (1999) also shares her experience of listening to the same story from the hijras of Bastipore, where she did her ethnographic fieldwork.

In her autobiographical account, Leyla Jagiella (2013) shares her experience of finding solace in Khwaja Garib Nawaz. Born as a boy into a Protestant family in Germany, she could feel her as a girl encapsulated in a male body during her infancy. With the spiritual enlightenment she had in her teenage time, she accepted Islam. However, the prejudice towards her gender and conversion continued as she was discriminated against at her school, mosque, and even home. She became mentally so weak and reached to a point of collapsing herself, thinking about committing suicide. However, during her visit to Ajmer, she decided to begin a new life becoming a woman. Finally, she met with hijras of India and Pakistan and found solace in their company and community (Jagiella, 2013).

Along with Kwaja’s shrine at Ajmer, the shrines of Hazrat Nizamudheen Auliya and Khwaja Qutubuddin Bakhtiyar Kaki situated in Delhi, also witness frequent visits of hijras. These two Sufi saints belonged to the Chishti order of Sufism which is founded by Khwaja. Hijras are very frequent to the Nizamudheen Dargha, especially on Thursday nights and Fridays on which they come in groups to the shrine with flowers, donate to the shrine and poor people, and perform shrine rituals and practices. Some hijras visit the shrine early and alone while others

come in groups, offer prayers, take photos of themselves and sit near the tomb after prayers. Often other devotees who visit the shrine approach hijras to bless them and their children.

Another sacred space that is historically connected to hijras is 'Hijron ka Khanqah', situated at Mehrauli, Delhi. This space is a manifestation of the hijras' relation with the Sufi saints. Khanqah generally refers to the spiritual centre, and here, Hijron ka Khanqah is a graveyard cum masjid that holds the graves of 49 hijras. It is constructed as a spiritual retreat for the people of the hijra community and it is believed that this was originally gifted by Sufi Saint Qutbuddin Bakhtiyar Kaki to a hijra ascetic Miyan Sahib and the central grave in the khanqah belongs to Miyan Sahib (Mehta, 2006). The proprietary right over the khanqah belongs to the hijras and is being taken care of by themselves from the early twentieth century. Now the khanqah is supervised by Haji Panna, a hijra of Turkman Gate and it is hijras who have the sole right to collect rent of the shop rooms adjacent to the khanqah. Hijras from different parts of the country visit the khanqah once a year and gather there for an annual festival. They offer prayers, engage in rituals, and prepare langar and feed the poor and needy people.

Other than these three shrines mentioned above (Ajmer, Nizamudheen and Bakhtiyar Kaki Dargha), hijras visit many other popular darghas in different parts of India. Haji Ali Dargha Bombay, Haji Malang Kalyan Dargha, Bande Nawaz Dargha Gulbarga, Darghas in Nagpur, Thajbagh and Moorpata,, Yusufain Dargha Hyderabad, Jahangir Pir Baba Dargha, are few among the popular Indian shrines hijras visit. Huda has visited almost all darghas mentioned and Anjana and Haji Saab have visited a few of them. Apart from this popular darghas, Huda has visited all Sufi shrines in Hyderabad as she has lived in the city for a long time. However, she could not go to any darghas outside India.

3.5 Hijras and Shrine Festivals

As hijras visit most of the Sufi shrines during the urs or annual festival, as it can be understood from the narratives mentioned, it would be timely to understand what is added to the distinctiveness of a shrine space when the festival happens and how the festival negotiates with different strata of people, especially the marginalized, who visit the shrine for annual festivals. Shrine festivals are considered as the crucial makers of a saintly space by which saintliness is constituted through the rituals, practices, memories and imaginations. Here saintliness is conceived as the notion of baraka or aura of the saint which marks the distinctiveness of Sufi shrine space. Among the festivals happening in a shrine, ‘Urs is the major one and it is the annual commemoration of a Sufi saint which takes place every year in his shrine. “The ‘Urs or the ‘death anniversary’ of the saint was the most widespread of all ritual performances of embodied memory associated with Sufi shrine” (Green, 2012, p. 26). This annual festival is a moment where the shrine, its surroundings and the devotees entirely engage in the special rituals, practices and events commemorating the saint. It is “a ritual securing of space across time” (Green, 2012, p. 33). Thus, it is a temporal ritual of commemoration and recollection of remembering the saint. Also, a spatial ritual of enshrinement and emplacement of making Muslim space around the shrine. ‘Urs literally means ‘wedding’. Here, physical death allows a saint to enter into his actual life and it makes possible his meeting or union with God.

Saint festivals always play crucial roles in sacralising the shrine space through various rituals and practices and in the formation of festivities of the Muslim community specifically related to their space and memory. SAA Saheb’s (1998) ethnographic account explains the process of sacralising locality through the ritual procession of five minaret flags conducted as part of the saint’s ‘Kanduri’¹³ festival at Nagor-e-Sharif in Tamilnadu, is a perfect example explaining this

¹³ Tamil speaking Muslims describes urs as Kanduri festival and it’s been widely used Tamil speaking South Indian region and Sri Lanka.

aspect. Marking the beginning of the saint's festival, these five flags¹⁴ move through the streets of the town set up in a chariot bringing areas of town where people reside into contact with the sacred symbol of the shrine. He argues that through this ritual procession and the festival, localism is immersed in the shrine, for the sacredness of the shrine is spread into the neighbourhoods carrying and spreading blessings of the saint and his shrine (Saheb, 1998).

Being a moment that facilitates and makes possible the intersection of different strata of society, festivals in shrines have a deeper notion of blurring the boundaries between the participants of the festival and their everyday lives. Looking into the various dimensions of the annual urs festival in a Sufi shrine, Snehi (2019) attempts to draw how the urs festival is transformed into this moment of transgressing all the barriers between the people visiting the shrine at that point of time. By focusing on the marginalized subjectivities and their saint veneration, he tries to understand how these sections negotiate their subjectivity through their reverence to the saint. In this sense, the Sufi shrine festival acts as a moment and the saint's grave stands as a space to negotiate and break down the differences between people visiting the shrine and that helps the marginalised a lot to find a kind of legitimacy and recognition.

As hijras visit most of the Sufi shrines during the urs or annual festival, normally, they arrive at the shrine before the beginning of the urs and stay there till the end. They actively participate in all rituals, often leading them like in the case of chadar laying ceremony of Ajmer urs where hijras are the first among the people to lay chadar on the grave of Khwaja Garib Nawaz. Also, they perform other rituals and practices in and around the shrine and become part of the everyday activities of the shrine. Apart from their visit and active participation in the festival, hijra *ziyara* to Ajmer Sherif and other major shrines constitute a distinctive collective self.

¹⁴ This ritual of carrying flag and travelling throughout the locality is very common in many parts of South India. For example, 'Kodi mara jadha' happening as part of urs in Sufi shrines across Kerala marks this ritual of sacralising the locality around the shrine. It may differ in its names in various regions.

Because, hijras travel and gather there in groups which makes it possible to have larger gathering of the community across the subcontinent. Huda says, “We go there in groups of ten to fifteen people and sometimes in a smaller group of just two or three people. My old guru from Bombay has been booking tickets for at least ten to fifteen people to go to Ajmer and she has been doing it nowadays also taking 45 to 50 people with her to Ajmer Sherif”. Here in this pilgrimage and further gathering, a distinctive notion of the community consciousness and collective self can be traced apart from the notion of sukoon, which will be discussed in detail in the final chapter, and the individual spiritual satisfaction they mainly strive by visiting Sufi shrines.

In this sense, festivals in a Sufi shrine space facilitate an emancipatory moment and space for hijras and that help them to negotiate their identity, marginality, and subjectivity along with spiritual ecstasy they strive for. However, this does not mean that the dargha space is an adobe of absolute democracy or there are no such power structures inside the shrine. Nevertheless, it suggests that the marginalised have abundant space to negotiate their marginality in contrast to the other public spaces they engage with.

3.6 Transgressing Gender Positions: Hijras, Shrines and Mosques

As hijras are frequent to the shrines, they also participate in prayers performed at mosques. Reddy notes that hijras of Hyderabad visited mosques, although not regularly or daily, to perform namaz, especially on Fridays (Reddy, 2005). Every Friday, Hijras of Delhi visit Jama Masjid wearing kurta-pyjama to perform Jumua namaz and participate in congregational prayer (Goel, 2016). Anjana told me that the hijra Nayaks of Hyderabad perform Tarawih¹⁵ namaz, which is a special prayer performed in Ramadan, from Mecca Masjid for 30 days in the month of Ramadan. Haji Saab is still going to the local mosque nearby her home for namaz. Huda

¹⁵ A special prayer performed during the nights of Ramadan, reciting long portions from Quran and often completing a *juza'* every day.

also shared with me her experiences of going mosque for namaz. When she was staying in Delhi, she used to go mosque every day during the holy month of Ramadan. She used to go there for every prayer and especially participated in all tarawih namaz. ‘When I was living in Delhi, Imam of the masjid and other people there had been reserving me a place in the second saff (line) and sometimes when I go to Masjid little bit late, they were waiting for me to begin namaz. Imam of the Masjid was very respectful to me, and he always enquired about my living situations and all. In Ramadan, I make some foods and bring them to the masjid to distribute as tabarruk’. To visit the mosque and join prayers with fellow devotees, hijras have to appear wearing men’s attire.

However, it was relatively easy for hijras to access the shrines contrary to the mosques because “unlike the mosques that require hijra to adopt masculine sartorial comportment, hijra typically visit shrine premises dressed in female attire” (Hossain, 2012, p. 502). When I asked Huda about her attire to the mosque, she replied: ‘I go to masjids wearing a kurta and pyjama and wearing my shawl like a turban covering my hair’. Haji Saab also had almost the same answer regarding the attire they used to follow when visiting mosques. Pamment (2019) narrates Neeli, a Lahori hijra, comparing her experience of visiting masjid to that of the dargha gives a clear picture of this difference. “In the mosque, the maulvi [Islamic cleric] tells us to remove our nail polish and cut our hair... he wants us to go in an ugly state in front of Allah. At the shrine, we appear before our Allah in a more beautiful state!” (Pamment, 2019, p. 302).

“We, Mukhannath or Kinnar, are allowed to enter inside every shrine”. While narrating her visit to Ajmer, Huda was a bit proud when she shared her experience of entering inside the inner sanctum of shrines. Hijras’ appearance and practices in shrines transgress normative gender barriers and they are given a special status inside shrines. For example, in Nizamuddin Dargha, women and men have particular places to pray and women aren’t permitted to go inside the central place of the shrine where saints’ graves are situated. But, hijras are free to

enter inside to this inner sanctum and they can pray from both spaces of men and women. However, apart from merely covering their heads with a shawl or something like that as women usually do, hijras make their dupattas in a turban-like manner and enter the inner sanctum wearing it on their heads. Jaffer (2017) also shares the same experience when he visited two shrines at Lahore with Nazli, a hijra who lives nearby. He notes that as women were forbidden from entering the shrine's inner sanctum, there was a particular place for women to pray and only men were allowed to enter inside the grave chamber of the saint. However, hijras go to the shrine and pray from both women's place and inside the grave chamber dressed as men where only men are allowed. Pamment (2019) notes that hijras are free to go inside, even in shrines that permit entrance only to men. Likewise, darghas like Bibi Pak Daman in Lahore which give access only for women, always allow hijras to enter inside the shrine and participate in shrine rituals.

This capability of hijras to crisscross gender barriers can be read as the fundamental aspect of their position in a society that is extremely segregated based on gender variations. Also, this ability of hijras to transgress the normative gender positions strengthens the narratives of eunuchs that to which hijras often refer to legitimize their existence in a society that is marked by strict gender roles and positions. As eunuchs being slaves, they were loyal and trustworthy servants of their masters or owners. Eunuchs had significant role not only in the making and managing of an empire, but also in the domain of Islamic religious space due to their role in harem space which was demarcated by gender segregation. They worked as the major guardians and had free access to all domains of the space they lived. This gender liminal position of eunuchs helped them to transgress typical gender barriers and they constituted a space beyond the conventional conception of gender segregation with that positionality. David Ayalon (1999) traces the Islamic notion of gender seclusion in social domains as one of the major reasons for the prominence of eunuchs in medieval Islamic empires. Shaun Marmon's

account on the position of eunuchs in the Islamic religious space gives a fantastic picture of eunuchs in Islamic history. Bashir (2007) observes that the position as guards in the holy places and shrines was regarded as an exceptional religious blessing for eunuchs. Based on their celibacy status, he also notes that the eunuchs were well fitted for this position as guards due to their capability to circumnavigate realms of men and women.

In a different dimension, Reddy notes this aspect of hijras' ability of "blurring of gender and religious boundaries in their everyday practice as Muslim/Hindu men/women" (Reddy, 2005, p. 102) by practising a mixture of rituals performed by both Muslim men and women and by assimilating Hindu religious and mythological elements into their religious practices while professing affiliation to Islam. However, as Huda told me, all are allowed to enter inside the Dargha in Ajmer, whether it is men, women or transgenders, in contrary to the practice of almost all shrines across India where women are not allowed to enter inside the mausoleum of the shrine where Sufi saint's grave locates.

3.7 In Search of the Divine: Haj and Hijra Pilgrimages

Apart from shrine visitations, hijras often go for religious pilgrimage to the major sacred sites of Islam. The practice of going for Haj and visiting holy sites of Islam is popular among hijras. Huda told me that many hijras, especially gurus, have gone and still going for Haj and Umra, often visit other sacred sites of Islam like Karbala, and other holy places in Iran, Iraq and other countries. "Three years ago, one of my close friends also went for Haj. But due to the pandemic of COVID 19 and lockdown, we cannot visit these holy sites and do pilgrimage now." Reddy narrates that some hijras in Hyderabad had performed Haj – the holy pilgrimage in Islam. "In yet another gendered component of their religious identity, I was told that many of the senior hijras went on the Haj, the holy pilgrimage to Karbala or Mecca and Medina. Amir Nayak's predecessor in the Lashkarwala house had apparently been on the Haj and was therefore referred to with some respect as Salmanhaji Nayak, as her celas and nati celas told me with

much veneration and pride.” (Reddy, 2005, p. 103). Anjana also shares this practice among the Nayaks of Hyderabad, who are still going for Haj every year. Hossain (2012) narrates his experience of meeting some hijras of Bangladesh who performed haj. “Sonia, now in her/is the late 40s, performed haj and since her/is return has been working with the local mosque as a volunteer in weekly Islamic preaching” (Hossain, 2012, p. 502).

Haji Saab, a hijra guru who lives in the outskirts of the Old City of Hyderabad, went for Haj four years ago in 2017. “For a long time, I had a *niyath* (intention) in my mind to go for Haj and visit Allah’s home Ka’ba.” Haji Saab went for Haj with a private travel group, not with the government, so it was costly, and all expenses were covered by her own money she earned. “We were a group of four hijras from Hyderabad, and there were hijras from Mumbai, Delhi with other private groups. We stayed there for 31 days performing Haj, Umra at Mecca and visiting Prophet’s tomb at Medina. Also, I could meet hijras from Pakistan, Bangladesh and Indonesia during Haj, and they were very good people.”

As hijras find solace and seek to have the blessedness of the holy sites of Mecca and Medina through Haj, it is very much appropriate to look at the eunuch guardians of Mecca and Medina, whom hijras often refer to. “I had heard that there are mukhannath (eunuchs) people from Habsha (Ethiopia). They clean the Prophet's tomb and keep its key”. Haji Saab shared with me their experience of seeing a mukhannath guard when they visited the prophet’s tomb at Medina. “I could see a mukhannath guard and they were a Habshi (Ethiopian). But I couldn't meet and interact with them because they were in a separate room guarded by government officials. Inshallah, next time I will try to meet them”.

From the middle of the twelfth century, the space constituting the inner sanctum of Prophet Muhammed’s tomb in Medina is guarded by the eunuchs known as *aghas* or *aghawat*. They have the sole right to keep the keys of the Prophet’s tomb and mosque’s minbar. This makes

hijras' visit to this holy site so special because hijras often claim legitimacy for their identity by referring to the legacy of medieval eunuchs and their esteemed positions in various empires across the Islamic world. Leyla Jagiella notes that the hijra gurus of Delhi she interviewed were met with the aghawats in Mecca during their pilgrimage for Haj. Marmon (1995) explores the sacred societies of eunuchs who worked as the guardians at the holy site of Ka'ba in Mecca and Prophet Muhammad's tomb in Medina. For centuries, these eunuchs of sacred sites of Mecca led the major activities like lighting the great oil lamps in the sanctuaries, burning the Oudh, distributing the holy water Zamzam and cleaning the surroundings of Holy Ka'ba. They also led the central rituals happening in and around the burial chamber of the Prophet at Medina, from the lighting of the lamps (tasrij) to the ritual of the tawaf (circumambulation around the Prophet's tomb) in the evening as an event of closing the burial chamber. Apart from rights given solely to aghawats for specific rituals in the sanctuary of the Prophet's tomb, they had been given an esteemed status by the rulers all the time. Once appointed in thousands of numbers, aghawats are now reduced to very few for the last aghas were appointed in 1978, and there are only six members now. As hijras often narrate the stories of medieval eunuchs and their esteemed status to claim legitimacy for their identity, it is very timely to look at this notion of legitimization and the role of medieval eunuchs in constituting contemporary hijra subjectivities.

While explaining the preparations and procedures for Haj, Huda mentioned that the hijras are not allowed to go for Haj registering their actual gender identity as hijras. "We go for Haj in male identity as it is the practice after our death because our kafn (shroud) and dafn (burial) will be as per male practices." Even though hijras were going for Haj, as these narratives refer, it's not possible for them to perform haj as hijras as the Saudi government banned their entry. The haji hijras who completed the pilgrimage to Mecca had made it through registering as males. Saudi Arabia banned people identifying as transgender on paper from entering their

country to perform Hajj and Umrah without giving any reasons for the same¹⁶ (Goel, 2018). To be eligible to go for Haj, hijras are compelled to change themselves into a man's physical appearance from chopping long hair into a short one, stopping the intake of hormones, wearing men's attire and sprouting facial hairs. Even after this kind of tremendous hardships from changing bodily appearance and sartorial style to acquiring a passport in an identity they left behind, why hijras still choose themselves to go for Haj and Umrah should be traced out. When I asked how they feel about these changes and transformations they need to adopt to go for Haj as they are compelled to go for it in a male identity, Haji Saab's response was interesting and insightful towards opening inner dimensions of hijra spiritual seeking. "See, *Ye duniya he do din ki*. This world is not an infinite space. Allah created me as a female inside and that is his marzi. I was born as a male, but Allah gave me a female's soul (rooh). I can live and travel like a female throughout India. However, I don't have to go for Haj in a female body. I want to go there in a body that I had given when I was born from my mother's womb." Here, Haji Saab is not concerned about any kinds of challenges they had to face to perform this holy pilgrimage and Haji Saab was saying like "Allah knows everything" as they ultimately submitted to God. "Everyone visiting Ka'ba visits there as a newborn baby just came out of their mother's womb. No one can deceive Allah in any matter because he knows everything, whether it is male or female." The other reason behind such enthusiasm among hijras for Haj may be the religious significance of Haj as it is Fard al-Ayn¹⁷ (individual obligation) on every Muslim and it is so

¹⁶ Kugle (2010) suggests that the Saudi's rejection of hijra as a category is rooted in the classical sharia concept which directs that the gender of a khunsa (intersex) is determined by the functionality of sexual anatomy which in turn constitute either male or female category of gender in some exceptions in the case of ambiguity in defining into these fixed categories. Haji Saab also shares the same point of Islamic law as the country runs on Sharia law. "See. Saudi is an Islamic kingdom, and the government runs based on Islamic law. So, you cannot travel to Saudi in a trans identity. We Hijras go for Haj in our identity we had in the time of our birth, i, e. in male identity. We have our passports in male identity, and we go there in male identity wearing male attire."

¹⁷ Fard al-Ayn is a term in Islamic jurisprudence or legal thoughts. It refers to the individual duty or obligation on every single Muslim and it cannot be sufficient even if it is done someone else instead of someone. Its opposite term Fard al-Kifaya means that the duty will be waived off from the individual if someone else did it. In contrast to this, Fard al-Ayn is not waived for anyone.

special for a Muslim to have the opportunity to visit Islamic holy sites of Mecca and Medina. Also, Haji hijras were given an esteemed status in society (Hossain, 2012), which in turn helped them to legitimise their existence in many ways.

In a Washington Post article¹⁸, Yasmine Canga-Valles and Olivia Lace-Evans narrate the story of Shilpa, who went for Haj in 2009. In India, there was not a category of the third gender at that point of time, so that she could go for haj under a male name. However, after 2014 when India's apex court and the Transgender Persons Act of Parliament of India made a 'third gender' status to hijras of India, they became unable to visit Mecca for Haj because the Saudi government does not allow hijras to perform haj¹⁹. Shilpa expresses her concern that she and her guru will not be able to perform Haj after this legislation (Canga-Valles & Lace-Evans, 2015). The same narrative of losing fluid gender position where they could change to the gender they wanted to shift, which was the practice among hijras while they were going for Haj, can be seen in the context of Pakistan after the apex Court of Pakistan has directed the government to specify the hijra identity on the official documents and registration forms and hence marking their gender as 'X' in passport²⁰ (Transgender Persons Flay Saudi Travel Ban, 2016). Haji Saab also shares the same concern if they register under the third gender category. "Even though Hijras have given a legal right to claim 'third gender' category after the historical

¹⁸ https://www.washingtonpost.com/national/religion/indias-third-gender-hijra-community-balances-acceptance-with-religious-identity/2015/07/14/9c02f772-2a5e-11e5-960f-22c4ba982ed4_story.html

¹⁹ This can be used to read the notion of how hijras are accepting such a legislation which gives them a new legal identity. How this becomes an hindrance to their capability of gender transgression that helps them to act beyond.

²⁰ Dana Zzyym, an intersex activist, recently made into the news after he was issued the first ever gender-neutral passport in the United States marking 'X' on the gender column. As a result, U.S joined other countries which have already given this legal right to non-binary or third gender people, including Argentina, Austria, Australia, Canada, Colombia, Denmark, Germany, Iceland, Ireland, Malta, the Netherlands, New Zealand, Pakistan, India and Nepal. For more details, refer to <https://www.state.gov/issuance-of-the-first-u-s-passport-with-an-x-gender-marker/>, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/10/27/us/us-first-passport-gender-x.html>, <https://www.newsweek.com/which-countries-recognize-third-gender-option-passports-1643167>, <https://edition.cnn.com/travel/article/countries-with-third-gender-x-passports/index.html>

judgement of India's apex court, Hijras who have an intention to go for Haj do not go for that because they cannot visit Saudi if their gender is recorded as transgender in passports. So Hijras go for Haj by registering as males in passports. We cut our hair, stop taking hormones, leave female dresses and adopt complete male attire". Given these hijra's Haj accounts and narratives, their experience can be considered as something that strives for spiritual elevation that always tries to go beyond the celebrated political rights given by liberal states and orders that hinder them from being fluid in their gender and corporeal position.

To conclude, it can be summarised that the hijra engagements in Sufi shrines, mosques and their Haj and pilgrimage to the holy sites inspire us to think of a distinct spiritual vocabulary they strive for. Compared to other public places, these sacred spaces help them to constitute an exceptional spiritual self. It makes them capable of negotiating with the exclusions, stigmatisation, and marginalisation they encounter in their everyday lives. Therefore, it is very appropriate to explore the deeper dynamics of this notion of spirituality and spiritual identity as it follows in the next chapter.

Chapter III

Towards Hijra Spirituality: Gender, Religion and Sufism

Rather than merely looking at hijras and their lives only through the lenses of gender and sexuality, recent scholarships have significantly contributed to our understanding of hijras highlighting multiple intersections that include region, religion, class, language, kinship and modernity through which hijra identities are shaped, transformed and contested (Agarwal, 1997; Cohen, 1995; Jaffrey, 1996; Nanda, 1999; Reddy, 2005). Among these multiplicities of differences that add creatively to the formation of hijra subjectivities, religion plays a spectacular role that helps hijras to shape themselves and legitimise their existence through belief, rituals, customs, and other dimensions and dynamics of religious practices.

Studying hijras of Hyderabad, Gayatri Reddy argued that “the axis of sexual difference through which hijras have traditionally been understood is intersected by a variety of other axes of identity, including religion, gender, kinship, and class” (Reddy, 2005, p. 17). Her basic premise is that the notion of the sexuality of hijras is mediated through the multiplicity of differences, such as gender, caste, class, religion, region, and others. While Nanda’s (1999) research was trying to break Western narratives around sex/gender binary and constituting an alternative gender identity of “neither man nor woman”, Reddy (2005) finds out the drawbacks in this analysis by its only focus on sexuality and argues that there is a multiplicity of differences comes when sexual identity interacts with multiple factors of differences. Reddy’s argument of multiple subjectivities of hijras was a momentous contribution in reimagining the hijra subject, and it was a shift in the nature of works on hijras, which were mainly focusing on sexuality as a fundamental indicator of hijra identity. She challenges the notion of identifying hijras as a third gender and tries to understand how hijra identity is being constructed through diverse ethical practices and multiplicity of differences. Following this, Reddy argues that “an

integral element of hijra identity is constructed through and by their religious affiliation” (Reddy, 2005, p. 100). Jennifer Ung Loh (2011) also notes that “the religious practices and identifications provide hijras with a framework within which to assert their self-consciousness, and affirm their own identities, not only as hijras but also as individuals” (Ung Loh, 2011, p. 64).

Worship of Bahuchara Mata²¹, adoption and practice of the asceticism and renunciation within Hindu mythology, performing Hindu ritual practices; all connote the significant Hindu religious aspects and identifications which are being practised by hijras. Bahuchara Mata, ‘a Hindu goddess who hijras consider as their patron goddess’ (Kanodia, 2016), acts as the mother goddess and “it is in her name that hijras perform their ritual function by giving blessings of fertility or prosperity to a new born child or married couple” (Ung Loh, 2011, p. 55). A good number of examples of transvestite, cross-dressing and other gender-variant people can be seen in the epic text of Mahabharata and Ramayana, both of which often lend legitimacy to the hijra existence in many ways. Arjuna’s transformation to Brihannada or Brihannala and Krishna’s transformation into Mohini to get married to Aravan during the battle of Kurukshetra are major instances from these texts and hijras quote these myths and resort to mythical icons to constitute a legitimate existence for them. Hijras also invoke the notion of sannyasa portraying real hijras as asexual practising asceticism and renunciation and thereby idealising asexuality (Reddy, 2005). Apart from these larger notions of Hindu practices, hijras also perform many rituals included in the realm of everyday Hindu religion. Rituals related to the emasculation operation,

²¹ Bahuchara is worshipped by a large part of the population as one of the most important goddesses in Gujarat, and particularly associated with male transvestism and transgenderism (and thus particularly to the hijras). The origin of her worship is as follows: Bahuchara was a young maiden passing through the forest in Gujarat. When they were attacked by thieves, Bahuchara cut off her breast fearing for her modesty and offered it to the thieves in place of her virtue. The act secured her deification, and the “practice of self-mutilation and sexual abstinence by her devotees [is] to secure her favour” (Nanda, 1999, p. 25). See Kanodia, 2016 for more stories of her iconography, myths, and interventions.

the practice of mourning widows, and the practice of badhai giving blessings to newborn babies or brides and bridegrooms demonstrate hijras as practising daily Hindu rituals.

The famous Hindu festival that happens annually in Koovagam, a small village in Tamilnadu, is another marker of Hindu religious identification of the hijra community. For this eighteen days long festival, hijras across the country gather in large numbers and participate in the festival. Koovagam festival is organised commemorating the martyrdom of Arjuna's son Aravan who was sacrificed for easing the deadlock created by the war between the Kauravas and the Pandavas. When the battle became endless with both sides fighting without any fail, the gods intervened and suggested a solution announcing that the winner would be the clan in which a young hero would sacrifice himself. Aravan accepted this challenge and came forward but with a condition to fulfil his only wish that he does not wish to die as an unmarried man. But no father was ready to make his daughter miserable with lifelong widowhood. In this critical moment, Vishnu (incarnated as Lord Krishna in the epic) came forward to help the Pandavas by transforming himself into a heavenly maiden, became Mohini, and married Aravan (Pande, 2004). In the last two days of the festival which marks its climax, participants commemorate the marriage of Aravan to Mohini by enacting it and it is led by the people who do not conform to the gender binary of masculinity and femininity. Hijras dress themselves in bridal outfits and take the role of Mohini and are married to Aravan by priests in the temple. After the marriage gets over, "the deity/husband is accompanied by his 'new' brides in a procession around the temple. With the scent of incense in the air, with their hair bedecked with flowers, dressed in their finest bright silk saris and jewellery, the brides rejoice" (Pande, 2004). After these grand festivities that night, on the last day of the festival, hijras wear white dresses and mourn the death of Aravan. This marks the end of the 18th day Koovagam festival of that year. Overall, the Koovagam festival is significant to hijras and other transsexual and/or transgendered people as it is celebrated as an assertion of their identities and legitimization of

their existence. Also, it facilitates one of the largest gatherings of the hijra community and other transgender people across the country, which helps them to make new circles and maintain current ones.

As hijras are adhered to Hindu philosophy and practise Hindu rituals, they also perform various Islamic rituals and customs. Hijras' naming practices, engagement in everyday Muslim rituals, shrine visitation and participation in shrine festivals are examples of Islamic religious identifications adopted by hijras. Performing namaz especially on Fridays, celebration of Muslims festivals, pilgrimage to Mecca, Medina and Karbala, receiving Muslim names in official registers, greetings with 'salam alaikum', eating halal meats, the practice of burial in the time of death of a hijra instead of cremation; all indicate hijras' religious identification as Muslims (Reddy, 2005).

4.1 Syncretism of Hijras' Religious Identifications

While constructing their religious and gendered selves, hijras simultaneously followed explicitly Muslim religious practices and embraced Hindu customs and rituals as it is visible from the above analysis. Even though Reddy (2005) talks about hijras in Hyderabad being attached more to the religion of Islam, she also notes that the same community venerates 'Bedhraj Mata' to whom "all hijras throughout the country worship" (Reddy, 2005, p. 108). They actively participated in the Bonalu Panduga festival, an annual festival performed by Hindus in Hyderabad. Nanda (1999) also mentions that worshipping Bahuchara Mata, fasting in Ramadan and celebrating Muharram did not seem to be an anomaly for hijras, but it was rather a normal way of their life. Studying hijras of Bangladesh, Adnan Hossain (2012) also come across with the hijras who simultaneously follow both religions by tracing their lineage to two goddesses even though they are identified as Muslim by birth. They conducted a Sufi

identified religious festival named *Sinni*²², and at the same time, participated in the *Baraiya*, a Hindu festival, also. Muslim hijras of Bangladesh proclaim their adherence to a Hindu goddess Maya Ji, and hijras born and adopted Hindu names show their allegiance to Mariom, a Muslim Sufi hijra, and they don't see any paradoxical state between these.

“Even I am a practising Muslim, I participate in Hindu festivals and many of my friends from the community join us to participate in the Urs when we go to Ajmer. We visit the houses of people from every religion when we go for badhai. Whenever I go for badhai in a mohalla, there will be people from different faiths. So, I cannot visit houses of only Muslims and avoid others. We have to respect their faith. Every faith is equal to us. We are following the legacy and footsteps of our *guzrugon*/ forerunners and they were open to all people and religions. Even our guru is from another religion, we follow our own religion and faith. They don't compel us for anything and we have no responsibility to them with regard to our religious affiliation”. This was Huda's response when I asked her about the hijra tradition of paying a visit to every sacred space affiliated with any religion, whether Hinduism, Islam, or any other religion.

An interesting note on the syncretism of Islam and Hinduism can be seen in hijras' religious practices when it comes to the burial ceremony of a hijra. While explaining ceremonial procedures after the death of a hijra guru, Reddy (2005) notes that the *celas*, disciples of the hijra guru, shall behave like a Hindu widow at the death of her husband by removing their jewellery, breaking their bangles and wearing a simple white saree in the time of mourning. However, remaining burial rites and practices are followed as per the Islamic burial rituals. Whatever their natal faith, hijras are buried as per Islamic tradition rather than cremated. When a hijra dies, her body is thoroughly washed like in the Islamic death customs of *ghusl*, and the

²² A Sufi festival which has been already mentioned in the second chapter in detail.

body is placed in the grave in the direction towards Mecca as Muslims do. Hence, it becomes an interesting case of intermingling of different religious identities.

Looking at these notions, hijras religious identifications can be understood as deriving from an amalgamation of Hindu or Muslim rituals and practices. While hijras exercise various Islamic practices with regard to the sartorial, purificatory, burial customs and everyday rituals, they simultaneously worship a Hindu Goddess, follow Hindu discourses of asceticism through that they obtain their divine power to confer fertility and thus acquire social legitimacy (Jaffrey, 1996; Nanda, 1999; Reddy, 2005; Ung Loh, 2014). Also, hijras assimilate Hindu religious and mythological elements into their religious practices while professing affiliation to Islam thereby making a notion of “blurring of gender and religious boundaries in their everyday practice as Muslim/Hindu men/women” (Reddy, 2005, p. 102). In this sense, hijras create new interpretations of religious identity through constructing and legitimizing their identities by adopting obviously paradoxical religious practices.

The backdrop of this syncretic manner of hijras religious identity maybe, as Preston (1987) located it, the cumulative backgrounds of the hijras who joined the community which facilitate the borrowing and adopting rituals and practices from diverse religious backgrounds. Hijras from different religious, linguistic, caste and regional backgrounds join the community, become disciples of a guru and continue to live there with their guru till death. Even though this joining process may seem very difficult and challenging from an outsiders’ view, hijra groups accept initiates from different backgrounds fairly and easily (Ung Loh, 2011). This fluidity of the hijra community in accepting and embracing differences results in an amalgamation of religious practices and identifications adopted from different religious backgrounds. This plurality and amalgamation of religious practices among hijras, adopting and adapting those practices to different temporal, spatial, and regional contexts, always helped them to negotiate conflicting religious identifications. Reading Bangladeshi hijras’ syncretic

engagements of Hinduism and Islam, Hossain (2012) notes that most hijras are not concerned with this heterogenous appropriation. So, Hossain reads this syncretic practice of hijras appropriating from both Islam and Hinduism as it leads to the collapse of the classificatory contradiction of Hindu versus Muslim. According to him, Muslim hijras position their Hindu identifications within the outline of an open and transcendent Islamic cosmology.

4.2 Hijras' Special Preference Towards Islam

Even there is this amalgamation of religious practices 'borrowing religious identifications' (Ung Loh, 2014), hijras show a special connection with the religion of Islam as Reddy's respondents from the hijra community of Hyderabad assert, "We are all Musalmans now" (Reddy, 2005, p. 99). In her ethnographic study on hijras of Hyderabad, Reddy (2005) extensively analyses hijras' leaning towards Islamic beliefs and practices. Reddy contends that they show a strong preference towards Islam and "whatever their parents' religious affiliation, on joining the hijra community in Hyderabad, these individuals identified generically as Muslims" (Reddy, 2005, p. 105). She analyses hijras' identification as Muslims looking at Islam as an 'orthopraxy' rather than 'orthodoxy', highlighting the practice rather than belief. Although her account of 'Muslim hijras' may be read as limited by the historical, cultural, and social context of Hyderabad as a Muslim space, many other scholars also discuss hijras adoption of Muslim belief and practices in detail (Jaffrey, 1996; Nanda, 1999; Preston, 1987). Reddy (2005) mentions two of her respondents, both of whom were pious Hindu hijras. After joining the community, they were needed to undergo circumcision as an archetypal marker of Muslim male identity. Also, hijras actively participate in major Muslim festivals happening in Hyderabad. They are a significant part of the Muharram²³ festival mainly organised and performed by Shia Muslims, remembering the historical battle of Karbala. Hijras actively

²³ The first month of the Islamic Year or the Hijri calendar.

participate in all rituals related to this festival, which long for ten days, including the mourning procession known as Shabe Matam e Hussain, conducted on the 10th of Muharram every year. The rituals related to the death of a hijra marks Muslim religious identifications very distinctively from ghushl (ritual of washing the body of the deceased) to dafn (burial), although these rituals are performed in a very secretive manner. Reddy (2005) notes that hijras are buried rather than cremated after their death, whatever may their natal religion and the process is more or less similar to the customs of the burial of a Muslim. Also, the body of the deceased hijra is placed in the grave as in the case of a Muslim, facing towards Mecca.

Along with resembling to and following these kinds of practices identified as Muslim in its nature, hijras also lend their legitimacy through medieval narratives that refer to an era of their prestige and honour where they were given eminence and high positions in and outside the court of empires. Drawing on the eunuchs' position in the royal space of Mughal courts, Nanda (1999) argues that, in the Indian context, Islam provides a historical and practical framework of accommodating the hijra community. Nanda also notes that the inclination of hijras towards Islam was due to the prominent role of the eunuchs in the making and managing of the Muslim empires, which has been remarked by her own hijra respondents' nostalgic reminiscences of the honour and respect given to the hijras by the Muslim rulers. Jaffrey (1997) goes further claiming that hijras are the direct successors of the Islamic institution of eunuchdom. This also strengthens the assertion of Reddy's respondents as they are more attached to the religion of Islam and Muslim practices, which in turn help us to trace the background of hijra engagements in the Sufi shrine. Ung Loh (2011) argues that hijras' positionality on the margins of society indeed allows them for more fluid and syncretic religious practices. Given the marginal position of shrines as a space occupied mostly by the people who live on the margins of society and as the shrine itself is a marginalised space compared to other public spaces, hijra presence in such a site makes them and the space more attached to each other as hijra community is

always excluded and side lined to the margins. Therefore, in the backdrop of hijra attachment to the religion of Islam and to various streams within it, especially with Sufism, it will be timely to trace out larger dimensions of similarities and commonalities shared by hijras and Sufism.

4.3 In Search of the Soul: Hijra and Sufism

“We are like sannyasis, and we are *faqiri* people. Although we are not entitled to be called Sadhu, Vikari, or Pir, we are like them. Our lives are like that of Pir’s and faqir’s. That’s why everyone gives us respect, and we have such a tremendous izzat from this identity”. This was Huda’s response when I asked about her spiritual belongingness and connection with Sufism. Here a major dimension of hijra engagement with Sufism can be unveiled, looking at hijras often comparing their lives with that of ascetic people and thereby striving for a distinct spiritual identity. Hijras are connected to Sufism and Sufi thoughts with their longstanding connection with the concepts and ideals of asceticism which is an inevitable attribute of Sufi lives. Asceticism stands for the retreat to the adobe of self-disciplining, and it signifies the lives of people who sacrifice this-worldly affairs to be rewarded by other-worldly pleasures. Even though there is no choice for hijras in the case of self-sacrifice as they are forced to live like that, ideals of asceticism open a lot of possibilities for hijras through which they have been creatively shaping their identities and legitimising their existence.

Hijras often characterize their gender distinctiveness in terms of the soul rather than limiting themselves to the different aspects of bodily practices. This notion of hijras embracing their subjectivity as a manifestation of inner life can be seen in studies of many scholars (S Bashir, 2011; Kugle, 2007). Many references regarding this indicate the commonality between hijras and Sufi saints in ascetic practices that strive to sacrifice worldly desires and practices. Following hijra identification of ascetic discourses and practices, several concepts which portray or align with the hijra subjectivity can be subtracted from Sufi thoughts and ideas. For example, Hussaini (2012) takes two Islamic concepts of liminal spaces. First, Al Aa’raf (The

Heights) is mentioned in the seventh chapter of the Quran to denote people staying in ambiguity in an in-between space of heaven and hell. Second, the Sufi concept of barzakh, an intermediary space in Islamic eschatology. She employs these concepts of liminal spaces to show that hijras incorporate an in-between position that situates neither here nor there on the gender or sex differences. She argues that hijras also embody character traits of the people of Al Aa'raf, standing in the middle of social and corporeal barzakh, staying in between or beyond the conventional sex or gender binaries, continually making their hope alive for a better life. "Like the People of the Heights [in between the Heaven and the Hell], they are at once both honoured and rejected; somehow they are both looked up to and yet marginalized. They are marginalized, yet they keep hope alive for a better life, aspiring to one day be accepted by mainstream society" (Hussaini, 2012, p. 74).

This idea of *Bayniyyah* or in-betweenness makes the hijra subjectivity more distinct and hijras' spiritual strive more profound. Bayniyyah is strongly aligned with hijra existence and subjectivity as hijras hold an in-between position regarding the heteronormative gender conceptions. "Hijras do not simply reside in liminal social spaces but are also quite literally the liminal faces of South Asian society. In their appearance, manners, and style, they are those who cannot neatly be divided as male or female, masculine or feminine, homosexual, or heterosexual, and so on. They are neither-here-nor-there on the dualities of gender and sexuality, living in the barzakh, in the intermediate world, between male and female, masculine and feminine" (Hussaini, 2012, p. 85). Standing in a position of liminality, hijras are capable of appropriating and employing various religious symbols and practices that permit them to practice heterodox religious rituals, which in turn helps them to assert and legitimise their identity through Hindu and Muslim identifications.

Apart from holding a liminal position on gender differences, hijra bodies also have another intermediary space between the public and private. Medieval eunuchs guarding the harem and

staying in the vestibule of the house marks this middle position of hijras from where they can engage with both sides having access to both realms. In such a space where one should ask for permission to proceed as it marks the beginning of the boundary of segregation for normative genders, gender variant people like hijras, *mukhannath* and eunuchs had access to both spaces and often they had the control of such spaces. Medieval eunuchs acted both as the guards of the royal harem and the people assigned to keep the moral and spatial etiquette related to the Islamic laws of gender segregation and seclusion. They had enormous power in matters related to the security of royal space even, for example, some eunuchs in the Mamluk dynasty of Cairo kept *amirs* outside for a while till they got the *idhn* (permission) from the king who is their master. This notion of transgressing spatial boundaries based on gender segregation can be seen in the case of hijras visiting Sufi shrines. For example, women devotees are not allowed to enter the inner sanctum of the shrine of Nizamuddin Awliya of Delhi, whereas hijras can perform their prayers and other activities either by staying outside where women are allowed or by entering the inner sanctum where only men are allowed. As hijra bodies hold such a fluid nature that makes them possible of the transgression of normative gender positions, the Sufi concepts of bayniyyah/ barzakh/ a'araf are, therefore, important ideas which can open up different dimensions and dynamics of hijra spirituality.

Also, hijras often employ Sufi terms and hermeneutics to mark their identity. Pamment (2019) shares an excerpt from the interview by a Pakistani television channel with Bubbli Malik, a hijra and trans activist, as her response to the Transgender Protection Act in Pakistan. “Bubbli Malik translated the new act and its transnational transgender terms into distinct Sufi hermeneutics familiar within Khwajasira lineages, referring to a physical reality (*zahir*) that is discrepant with an inner self (*batin*) or the soul (*ruh*)” (Pamment, 2019, p. 301). The mystic ideas of *batin* (inner life) and *ruh* (soul) are significant to Sufism. Being an essential part in the process of embracing Sufism, the notion of *batin* plays a vital role in reforming a mureed and

that leads his way towards the divine world of love and blessedness. Pamment argues that these spiritual and mystical vocabularies point out towards the everyday hijra spirituality. She further notes that Bubbli Malik's extraction and usage of Sufi ideals and thoughts for conveying global transgender terms to the common public suggests that "such pious performatives are enriching, rather than being replaced by the liberal language of human rights" (Pamment, 2019, p. 303). Vaibhav Saria's (2021) depiction of hijra lives as a form of political theology and emancipatory mode of being that often surpasses the liberal notion of political order and rationality also points towards this notion of spirituality hijras strive for. Jaffer (2017) and Pamment (2019) take the Sufi idea of faqiri to denote the creative appropriation of Sufi discourses by hijras. "The term faqir is derived from faqr, which means emptying out. Faqiri is the process of emptying out the world from oneself so that space is created for the love of God" (Jaffer, 2017, p. 9). It refers to the practice of living by abstaining from worldly aspirations, cutting off familial and societal relations, and engaging in an alternative lifestyle. It signifies sacrifice because it necessitates someone to leave all the worldly pleasures and ambitions behind solely focusing on spiritual passion.

Being alienated from the rest of society and compelled to live on its peripheries, hijras are compelled to lead their lives, establishing a parallel social organisation that cut off their natal familial relations, while Sufi philosophy also focused on cutting off worldly desires and relations for perfect spiritual excellence. Jaffer argues that this similarity facilitates a powerful momentum for hijras by which they can easily legitimise their mode of living systems and organisations. Jaffer elaborates: "The concept of faqir is especially appealing for legitimising alternative lifestyles and communities cut off from society . . . [and] enables hijras to make sense of their social position in spiritual terms" (Jaffer, 2017, p. 184). Pamment notes that while hijras do not adhere to any specific Sufi orders or particular shrines, they share antinomian attributes of qalandariyya, an order of Sufis known as faqirs and whom Karamustafa (1994)

calls as “unruly friends of God”. Jaffer argues that using the notion of faqiri as a metaphor for hijras provides a powerful narrative for their lives as the very identity of a hijra is constituted through the long histories of loss and sacrifice, beginning from the loss of their natal families to the moment of exclusion they face in the midst of common public. Huda’s reference of ‘We are like sannyasis, and We are faqiri people’ also indicates to this powerful ascetic identity hijras tries to adopt to get legitimacy in the society they live in.

4.4 Sukoon – Hijras Seeking Refuge in Sufi Shrines

Apart from Sufi ideals and discourses that align with the hijra ascetic experiences, it is imperative to trace what makes them encouraged to visit Sufi shrines and other Islamic pilgrimage sites. What are those factors that ‘attracts’ them to visit these sacred sites? How do those factors have a distinct attribute that hijras are not getting from other public spaces they engage with?

When she was asked about her feelings inside the Sufi shrine of Khwaja of Ajmer, Huda replied to me that “*rooh me sukoon ka mahsoos hota he* (I feel like my soul becomes so tranquil at peace). Whenever I visit a dargha, I become mentally relaxed there and feel like I don’t have any more stress. ‘Whenever I go there and visit Garib Nawaz, I had such an inner feeling that the Wali is listening to my prayers.’”. Huda had stayed in the shrine of Khwaja of Ajmer in the holy month of Ramadan. She was happier when she started sharing her experience during those times. “I felt like I was staying in a part of heaven. I fast every single day in Ramadan and it was my routine to visit Dargha for Iftar. After breaking fast, I return to where each group of the hijra community stays with their respective gurus. At 9’o clock evening, I again go to Mazar (shrine) and do tawaf²⁴, pray to Allah for everyone, and recite Qur’anic verses I know by heart.

²⁴ The ritual of performing circumambulations around the tomb of the saint

Then I stay there inside Dargha till fajr (morning prayer) and return to my home after having sehri and performing Namaz e fajr from there”.

Sharmila and Sheela, who were visiting a shrine in Ajmer, also share their experiences in Sufi shrines. Sharmila, a hijra guru, based in Delhi, has already visited almost all darghas in India and once, she had visited Bagdhadh to pay tribute to a Sufi saint. Sheela, Sharmila’s daughter, visits Ajmer sharif every year walking barefoot from Delhi’s Mehrauli to Rajasthan's Ajmer Sharif. When she was asked about her visit to Ajmer travelling such a long way and bearing such hardships, she replied that it is ‘Deewangi’, i.e., the spiritual madness she has with the Sufi saint Khwaja. When Manasi, a hijra disciple, was enquired what does she feel when she visits Ajmer Sharif, she replied that she feels that of getting ‘sukoon’, i.e., peace of mind, by visiting the shrine of Garib Nawaz and she will always follow Khwaja and his teachings until her death as the Khwaja has fulfilled all her dreams and aspirations. Saniya, a hijra who has visited Ajmer for the last seven years, also shares that she comes to Khwaja’s shrine so that her longings are realised and dreams are fulfilled and she leaves the tomb feeling very happy (Shakir, 2016).

All these conversations and narratives refer to hijras’ longing for a spiritual blessedness along with the notion of sukoon they embrace while visiting Sufi shrines. It becomes more relevant when it is compared to their own experience in other public spaces they engage with. Huda told me that she gets a peaceful state of mind when she visits a dargha in contrast to her experience in other public spaces like public streets, markets, railways, bus stations, etc. Even when they go for badhai to the neighbourhoods and nearby streets and markets, the way people treat them is far different from that of the way they are welcomed and treated inside a shrine. “I have many friends in Ajmer who treats me like a member of their own families. They often call me via phone, always enquire about my wellbeing and share their lives and experiences. You may be surprised when you know how big my friend circle in Ajmer is, which includes

people from every gender, age, religion, and I always pray Allah for them whenever I perform namaz”.

In Pakistan, the shrine of Lal Shahbaz Qalandar, a 13th century Sufi, is one of the popular sacred sites for hijras and particularly his urs is very special to them as they actively participate in the annual festival and perform rituals. Pamment (2019) narrates her journey into the shrine of Lal Shahbaz Qalandar with her hijra friend, Saima Butt, to participate in the urs, annual commemoration festival happening at the shrine every year. “On the journey to the shrine of Lal Shahbaz Qalandar, we (myself a white cis woman, a Pakistani cis woman, and Saima) face persistent snickers, bullying, sexual intimidation, and harassment from security forces and passers-by, and yet the trauma of the world outside dramatically fades as we enter the inner sanctity of the shrine” (Pamment, 2019, p. 305). Pamment further explains the proceeding rituals like touching the coffin and garlanding flowers in the shrine space. After Saima finished her initial rituals, people in the shrine, including women and men, approach Saima asking for prayers. She is considered as having an intercessory role in approaching the divine; as one devotee told pamment, “prayers will fly faster”. This narration directs towards honour and space given to hijras by fellow visitors in a shrine and that marks the spatial distinctiveness of shrine space with regard to other public spaces. Here, hijras are being approached as mediators between the divine and human, which is the major function of a Sufi saint and his shrine. As the notion of baraka or charisma embraces the shrine space making it sacred geography, hijras’ presence adds to this blessedness for their role to stand as an intermediary taking legitimacy from their sacred power of *badhai*.

As visible from the previous conversations and narratives, the idea of sukoon has a vital role in attracting to and facilitating a distinct space for hijras. Therefore, understanding this notion of sukoon will unveil deeper dynamics of hijra experience inside a Sufi shrine and how shrine space becomes distinct from other public spaces they engage with. Sukoon signifies a state of

peaceful mind that becomes possible only when the space, time and actors we engage with are so tranquil in every sense. Here hijras take refuge in the Sufi shrine as it is such a space that recognises them and facilitates a peaceful atmosphere to engage with the divine and find solace in the divine love. Also, the framework of being recognised and respected can be used to read this idea of sukoon as the notion of recognition is a vital human need for their existence. Differing from other public spaces they engage in, this framework of recognition they get from the Sufi shrine space helps them to construct a dignified and powerful image of hijra self and identity that challenges the stigmas and marginalised status assigned to them.

As the centrality of Sufism is connected to the idea of refining and purifying the soul/spirit (ruh) and disciplining the self (nafs), the idea of sukoon is also very much aligned with these Sufi concepts and ideals in many ways and the searching for its various dynamics will obviously open up new ways of performing hijra spirituality. In Arabic, nafs literally means ‘self’, and it can be translated as ‘ego’ or ‘psyche’. It is the preliminary stage of a triad which starts with the nafs at the lowest position and the ruh (soul/spirit) at the highest position mediating qalb (heart) in between these two realms. In Sufi thoughts, nafs is considered the lowest and unrefined level of human existence dominated by emotions, desires, and evilness. So, the concept of *jihad ul nafs* (killing nafs or battling nafs) means to control one’s desires and attain the status of perfection by submitting his life to God. Prophet Muhammed’s (PBUH) saying to his followers when they had just returned from a battle portrays the importance of battling nafs. He said: ‘Welcome! You people have come from the lesser to the greater jihād’. He was asked. ‘And what is the greater jihād?’ ‘The jihād against the nafs,’ he replied (Bukhari, 2003).

Al Ghazali²⁵ (1972) narrates the Sufi definition of nafs as desire, emotion and anger that enslaves human beings. Sufism takes the concept of nafs as the culmination of evil attributes and orders its followers to battle this evilness and worldly desire. Sufi ideology identifies three stages in the transformation of nafs; an-nafs al-'ammārah (the inciting nafs), an-nafs al-luwwāmāh (the self-accusing nafs) and an-nafs al-muṭma'innah (nafs at peace). When someone is encapsulated by worldly desires and surrenders to the devil without trying to make any efforts to get out of it, his/her nafs is nafs ammara. It is the lowest level that always encourages humans to commit evil. The next stage nafs lavvama starts when he/she tries to control those bad emotions and desires seeking forgiveness. This level creates a space for repentance and yet not make him reach a perfect position even though he aspires. Nafs mutmainna is the final stage that makes a human being perfect having an inner calmness and satisfaction by renouncing worldly desires and becoming submissive to God in all manners. It is an ideal stage that creates a satisfied soul encircled with calmness, tranquillity and peace. It makes him firm in his faith in God by leaving all sinful behaviours.

Generally, the concept of nafs is discussed by connecting it to the particular meaning of renunciation of sexual desire and intercourse, which is actually only a part of it. Following this, a lot of readings look at the hijra emasculation practice as a potential Sufi practice hijra engage (Hussaini, 2012; Jaffer, 2017; Naqvi & Mujtaba., 1997). Compared to the Sufi thought of killing nafs, Hussaini (2012) argues that the practice of emasculation helps hijras to attain the status of renunciation of worldly longings and sexual desires. According to Naqvi and Mujthaba (1997), the hijra act of emasculation connotes their sacrifice and spiritual devotion and thus signifies the adoption of Sufi philosophy. These readings look at the Sufi concept of

²⁵ A prominent philosopher, theologian, jurist, logician and mystic of 11th century. He is a much-celebrated scholar of all time as he has heavily influenced almost all disciplines of knowledge. Here we take his insights on nafs from *Ihya Ulum ul Din* (The Revival of Religious Sciences), one of his most influential contributions which covers almost all disciplines of Islamic knowledge from jurisprudence (fiqh), theology (kalam) to mysticism (Thaswawuf).

nafs through a bodily or physical act hijras practice through emasculation. Apart from this act of killing desire, there is another realm of nafs that makes hijras more allied with the metaphysical and mystical experience of Sufism which possible the emancipation and liberation from the worldly/physical desires along with providing a space for spiritual elevation and satisfaction.

Taking a cue from Al Gazzali's reading of nafs to the three stages, the hijra experience inside a Sufi shrine can be read in the light of nafs al mutmainnah. Here the concept of an-nafs al-muṭma'innah (nafs at peace) is best to be taken to read the notion of sukoon in a Sufi shrine space. Sukoon refers to an elevated state of mind that combines peace, wisdom, and tranquillity. It connotes the notion of healing souls, which eventually lead humans to the level of ethical and spiritual perfection. As the centrality of Sufism lies in its focus on the soul (ruh) and hijras are very much connected to that concept in many ways, their references to the inner feeling of sukoon make them more attached to the concepts of Sufi thoughts than the corporeal practice of emasculation. They imagine their selves in a spiritual sense that makes them feel staying in a spiritual realm and sometimes making possible the transgression of normative gender positions in a society. Therefore, I think it will be timely to analyse the underlying dynamics of hijras' strive for spiritual selves and their imagination of emancipation from stigmas and exclusions.

4.5 Imagining Emancipation: Suffering, Spirituality and Future World

Hijras hold a marginal position in this world as they are always excluded, stigmatised and rejected everywhere. As discussed in detail in previous chapters, they live on the margins of society, community, space, history, religion, etc. Throughout history, the hijra or trans gendered bodies were labelled as something created to live on the margins, suffering all kinds of stigmas, exclusions and violence. Although shifts and transformations are happening in

common perceptions about hijra lives with the help of contemporary queer and identity politics, the pace is languid and hijras are still living in the plight.

Having said that the notion of sukoon enormously helps hijras find a solace and refuge in the Sufi shrine space, this section enquires how we can read hijra imagination of liberation from these unending sufferings of this world. Here, Weberian analysis of negatively privileged groups and future life (Weber, 1954) is taken to understand hijra spirituality, liberation and emancipation. Weber's analysis of power and distribution of power within a community is well suited to understand the dynamics of hijra spiritual engagements in a deeper sense. Weberian understanding of power is distributed to three phenomena within a community: 'class', 'status group' and 'party'. According to Weber, the notion of power is measured on the basis of the chance of someone to realize his or her will in a social action, even if it is against the choice of others who are part of that action. He argues that the striving for power is conditioned by the dynamics of social honour and the sense of dignity, which helps a human being to live with honour and pride varies based on his status group.

Weber notes that status groups (German: Stand/Stände) emerges from the fundamental nature of society that is embedded in what Weber calls as the "community" (Gemeinschaft) and it is where honour, affection, scorn, privilege, and morality are constituted and assigned by mechanisms unique to that specific community. The status group to which everyone in society belongs will be determined by a specific social estimation of honour which may be either positive or negative. Weber uses these terms of "positively privileged" and "negatively privileged" to explain how relative senses of dignity and honour originate and interact. A status group is defined relative to other status groups and their relative honour, rights, privileges, and responsibilities. Thus, negatively privileged status groups are defined by the advantages of the positively privileged people and vice versa.

Positively privileged groups defend their privilege, power, honour, and status ideologically. For them, there is a habitus that this privilege is given to them through their immediate earthly “being” (Weber, 1993, p. 105), and they believe that their kingdom is “of this world”. So, they create a segregated status position that forces negatively privileged people to do physical labour for they are not suited for such works, including menial tasks. In this context of oppression, negatively privileged groups create a habitus, which includes stereotypes about a providential mission and explanations for why and how their true honour was stolen by a cruel and deceitful dominant Stand against whom their own disadvantage is measured. The excluded and marginalized groups place their sense of dignity either in what they believe to be happening in the future life of this world or the world beyond, or in the providential mission they expect. They believe that the sense of dignity lies on the proclaimed promise for the future which indicates their salvation in a world hereafter. Therefore, the negatively privileged people from subordinated communities try to construct a counter mechanism by which they can liberate themselves from this oppressive and exclusionary social status. Here, the idea of ‘otherworldly salvation’ arises among the negatively privileged so that they believe that their liberation and emancipation lies in the world hereafter in a future world. Weber emphasizes that such negatively privileged groups are often deeply religious and develop a strong sense of identity to sustain collective honour in the context of discrimination. Weber notes that the less privileged people’s “particular need is for salvation from suffering. They do not always experience this need for salvation in a religious form, as shown by the example of the modern employed people. Furthermore, their need for religious salvation, where it exists, may take diverse forms. In particular, it always, though in various degrees of imprint, involves a need of just “compensation,” that is, “reward” for one’s good deeds and “punishment” for other’s injustice” (Weber, 1993, p. 107). Weber argues that the privileged people approach religion as a mechanism to legitimize their existence, status and conduct in this world. He notes that the

need for salvation arises when there is distress; for example, social and economic oppression is one of the natural sources of the need for salvation (Weber, 1993).

Looking at the characteristics of a caste system in India, Weber notes that the most extreme case of status segregation is found in the case of caste as its basis is rooted in the notion of purity, impurity and stigmatisation, leading to the severe exclusion of subordinated lower castes. Here the status segregation based on the caste system varies from that of ethnically segregated groups as the caste system creates vertical segregation making social systems of super and subordinated groups. In contrast, ethnic segregation is horizontal and unconnected in its existence. "Ethnic co-existence, based on mutual repulsion and disdain, allows each ethnic community to consider its own honour as the highest one; the caste structure brings about a social, subordination and an acknowledgement of "more honour" in favour of the privileged caste and status groups"(Weber, 1954, p. 934).

Weber's understanding of status group (*stande*) is best suited to read this spiritual feeling of hijra community and their striving for a liberatory paradigm that they believe it will construct a way towards their emancipation from any modes of exclusions and stigmatisations they face in this world. Weber tries to figure out the notion of salvation striving by the socially, politically, and economically marginalized and less privileged social strata. Weber's concept of *stande* (status group) can be read in the light of the meanings around the notion of 'this world' and 'other world' (الدنيا والآخرة). In a sense, Ghazali's narration of finding happiness in the ultimate reality and afterlife (Al Ghazali, 2008) also align with Weber's imagination of salvation. According to Al Ghazali, happiness lies in the transformation of the self, and that this transformation is fundamentally based on the realization that one is a spiritual being. Ghazali contends that the ultimate ecstasy is found in discovering the ultimate reality which is possible through thinking about the afterlife because, for him, the happiness in this life is temporary and momentary. However, Weber's idea of modernity and how it engages with

religion is needed a thorough critical analysis as his sociology of religion is centred around the dynamics of modernity and its connection with various accounts of religious norms and notions.

To sum up, this final chapter attempted to conceptualise some of the underlying notions of hijra presence in a Sufi shrine. It argued that by visiting Sufi shrines and engaging with the Sufi ideals and concepts, hijras construct a distinct spiritual identity for themselves, which helps them enormously to negotiate the marginal position they encounter in everyday lives. Taking a cue from Weber's analysis of status group and the notion of honour, this chapter tried to read hijra emancipation from this exclusionary world to a future liberatory hereafter. In short, it can be concluded that the Sufi shrine facilitates hijras not only a space to elevate their spiritual satisfaction but also makes them capable of finding solace and refuge, which helps them to negotiate their marginality.

Conclusion

Hijras' religious engagements go beyond the idea of religion as a set of normative rules and morals having another domain of spiritual striving and consciousness. This dissertation tried to trace out this notion of hijras' spiritual engagements as it leads us towards another phase of their lives having divine and spiritual dimensions. This study tries to argue that hijra engagements with Sufism, its thoughts and discourses along with their presence in Sufi shrine space inspire us to think of a spiritual vocabulary hijras try to construct and that lead us to explore an interesting intersection of gender, religion, space and spirituality.

Sufism is considered as the mystical tradition of Islam seeking to embrace divine love and wisdom. It is the stream of Islam through which believers try to find out the ultimate truth of divinity through spiritual belief, rituals and practices. Even though the beginning of Sufism can be traced to Prophet Muhammad's time itself, it became codified and disciplined in the eighth century like any other Islamic knowledge traditions like jurisprudence and theology. Sufism was centred around individual Sufi sheikhs in the formative periods of its historical evolution. The transformation of Sufism from individual cults to larger organisations happened in the twelfth century and that began with the emergence of different Sufi *tariqah* (order) across the globe. The history of Sufism shows that the Sufis have played a major role in the formation of various communities by engaging with the masses, especially people from the marginalized, educating them, shaping and transforming their everyday religion and spirituality. Throughout history, Sufi saints and their shrines were a place of refuge, shelter and healing for the marginalized and that often legitimized their existence in many ways in a society where they always face stigmatization and exclusions. This is the point of departure that inspires this dissertation to look at hijra engagements in Sufi shrines as hijras hold a marginal position in a stigmatized world and they are very frequent many Sufi shrines.

Apart from analysing Sufi shrine space by looking at its distinctiveness from other public spaces with the inherent baraka or aura of the saint and the way it helps in establishing a blessed place, this study tries to read Sufi shrine space as a sacred geography that makes it possible of the formation, interaction and further development of texts, territories and communities. Sufi shrine spatially becomes distinctive as it is always established upon the powerful memory of saints and their lives, and shrine as a memory space helps many communities who are aligned with the Sufi shrine, especially marginalized, to claim that space as their own remembering their longstanding historical relationship with the saint. Also, as it is a space that gives easy access to marginalised sections in contrast to other public spaces, Sufi shrines often provide legitimacy to the communities associated with it and facilitate a space to congregate and meet people. However, this is not to claim that the divisions of class, race, caste, gender and religion never existed in shrines or do not matter in any manner because all these distinctions are there in varying degrees. Nonetheless, Sufi shrines provide a space for different communities and people to meet and interact across the boundaries of common public spaces and of their usual networks.

This dissertation looked into hijra engagements with Sufism and Sufi shrines through the lens of marginality as hijras hold a position outside the normative sex or gender binary alongside they are sidelined almost everywhere and compelled to live in the peripheries suffering multiple forms of marginalisation, stigmatisations and exclusions. To understand hijras' engagements in any space, it is so significant to look at their lives and the engagement in that space in relation to the forms of marginalisation they experience there. Therefore, their engagements in a Sufi shrine should be analysed based on their positionality on the margins and how they negotiate with shrine space to deal with the exclusions they have been experiencing from everywhere for a long time. This dissertation looks at hijra engagements in Sufi shrines based on this notion of marginality that includes both hijras' marginal position and the shrine's

marginal space. Apart from finding out different dimensions of such a similar positionality of the people on the margins in a marginal space, this study also tried to understand how hijras are connected to Sufism and Sufi thoughts by looking at their appropriation of spiritual vocabularies along with their connectedness with the ideals of asceticism which is an inevitable attribute of Sufi lives.

As this study explores the spatial distinctiveness of Sufi shrines from other public spaces, the dissertation has tried to look at the notion of public space and particularly the notion of Sufi shrines as public space. Following Hannah Arendt (1958), Habermas (1989a) and others, here the public space is defined and measured in accordance with the amount of openness and accessibility it provides. In the case of Sufi shrines, the saint's grave not only builds a space comprising of shrine, mosque, adjacent market, street and neighbourhoods, it also creates a complex network of communities. Here what makes the shrine space distinctive from other public places is that the openness of the shrine is so broad and vast by which these communities from various strata can easily get access into the shrine regardless of any differences they have in between. Especially, it acts as a refuge and shelter for marginalized communities even though that space itself is marginalized in many ways. Taking a cue from Victor Turner's concept of 'liminality', this dissertation argues that the attachment of marginalized communities with the Sufi shrine is based on the liminal status of a Sufi shrine space. Even there are many dominant readings in this regard like analysing Sufi shrine as a sacred space (Van der veer, 1992), public space (Habermas, 1989a) or counter public space (Jaffer, 2017), the notion of liminal space is well suited to conceptualize and understand hijra engagements in a Sufi shrine as hijras themselves holding a liminal position on gender or sexual differences.

Taking a cue from Gayatri Reddy's (2005) observation of 'hijras' special preference towards Islam', this study tried to unearth the dynamics of spiritual being hijras strive to possess through their engagement with Sufism, the mystical tradition of Islam. It tried to look at how hijras

imagine their position in a future world in contrast to their existence in a stigmatized world that explores hijra spirituality as a liberatory paradigm through which hijras define their existence in this world and relates it to that of a better hereafter. Following Weberian analysis of negatively privileged groups and the notion of status group, this work addresses the hijra spirituality as a means towards imagining their salvation in a future world that transcends all kinds of exclusions and stigmatizations of this world. Drawing on the hijra accounts of Dargha engagements, mosque visitations and Haj pilgrimage, this work addresses the hijra spirituality as a form of political theology and emancipatory mode of being that often surpasses the liberal notion of political order and rationality. Despite seeing hijras as just another group of marginalised and stigmatised others, as it always happens, this dissertation tries to look into their piety, spirituality and faith that will almost trouble our reading of queerness and the common perceptions of hijra lives.

To sum up, this work concludes that by visiting Sufi shrines, participating in rituals and engaging with Sufi thoughts and discourses, hijras try to construct a distinct spiritual identity which gives them sukoon and makes them capable of liberating themselves from different modes of exclusions, stigmatization and marginalization they have to face in other public spaces they engage with. Of course, this notion of distinct spiritual vocabulary is not constructed only through their engagement with the Sufi tradition, Sufi shrines and saints, but there are several other dimensions that heavily contribute to the formation of hijra spirituality in more profound terms, and that is the point from where this project can be expanded to unearth much deeper dynamics of hijra spirituality. Hijra engagements in Muslim religious festivals, rituals and pilgrimages needed a thorough and detailed enquiry that can open up new possibilities of studying spirituality, gender, religion, and identity. Overall, it will help us study various dimensions of hijras' religious imaginations and spiritual longings, which will open doors to understanding deeper dynamics of how hijras engage with the notion of faith.

However, this study has its own limitations, as mentioned in the introduction. Due to the outbreak and further spread of the pandemic COVID 19, I have had to drop the field inquiry and data collection plan at a Sufi shrine in Delhi, which led me to rely heavily on reviewing existing primary sources and secondary literature on this area of the research. Since the amount of literature directly related to my work has been ridiculously minuscule, expanding the scope of the work without extensive fieldwork has been rather difficult. Still, I could meet some hijras of Hyderabad who visit Sufi shrines frequently and their responses helped me to have a first-hand insight into the topic. Although that was very less in number, it was enriching this research in many aspects.

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