SPACE, POWER, AND STORIES:
HAGIOGRAPHY, NATIONALIST DISCOURSE, AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF
SACRED SPACE AT THE KHWAJA SAHIB IN AJMER, INDIA

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The Khwaja Sahib, the dargāh or shrine of the Sufi Muʿīn al-dīn Chishtī (d. 1236 C.E.) in Ajmer, India, is quite like many others in northern India: it houses a Muslim saint, though many of its visitors are not Muslims; it has come under governmental control both before and since Partition/Independence; it has a complex history that reflects the political, social, and economic climate of its history; and, finally, within its walls, the dargāh boasts both delimited and shared sacred spaces for various Muslims, Hindus, and Sikhs. What separates this dargāh, though, is that it has not experienced purposeful destruction as a means by which a ruler or government established his or its power. Rather than raze older masjids or mosques and makeshift shrines, local rulers—and Mughal emperors in particular—merely created new edifices or enhanced the existing structures.¹ This allows for a truly eclectic mixture of architectural types, but also implies that the complex itself has both expanded and made room for the myriad buildings and emphases these buildings bring with them. Furthermore, as it will be shown below, the hagiography of the saint proves to be ultimately important in the construction of sacred space, theoretically as well as literately, as devotees and kings alike have established areas within the shine complex that are linked to and often fundamentally based upon the hagiographical tradition. While there are many potential examples of the link between hagiography and architecture, the purpose of the analysis here is to examine how the mythologization of the saint affects the built space of the shrine, especially in the case of patron and Mughal emperor Shah Jahan (r. 1627 – 1658 C.E.).

In what follows, I necessarily take seriously the claims of hagiography, historicity, and the general, accepted legends that reflect divergent hagiographical traditions. According to Carl W. Ernst:

In considering a civilization such as medieval India, in which religious perceptions played an important role, it is necessary to examine the sources critically, in terms of their professed objectives, interests, and contexts. Chronicles, epics, hagiographies, dramas, inscriptions, and poems may all treat the same subjects and persons,

¹ In fact, until October 11, 2007, when a bomb exploded in the shrine complex, there had been no noted violence or destruction at the shrine. In May 2010, two individuals were brought in for questioning by the Rajasthani anti-terrorist squad (ATS), but as of yet no one has been formally charged or arrested. It is suspected, however, that Hindu fundamentalists are responsible. For an English-language report, see for example: “Ajmer bombing: Rajasthan cops pick up MP industrialist,” The Hindustan Times, 16 May 2010. Accessed via HTTP 10 October 2010: http://www.hindustantimes.com/Ajmer-bombing-Rajasthan-cops-pick-up-MP-industrialist/Article1-544404.aspx.
but with widely varying purposes and points of view.\(^2\)

Accordingly, the aim of this essay is to sift through the varying and multiple narratives so as to point to the ways in which devotion, architecture, and the persona of Mu‘\(\text{in} al-d\(\text{in}\) have been constructed, employed, and utilized over time. To do so, I will examine two narratives, and demonstrate how these narratives affected the shaping of sacred—and mundane—space at the Khwaja Sahib. Ajmer is, of course, a site that draws over 1.5 million (multi-religious) pilgrims at the annual ‘\(\text{urs}\) or death anniversary festival of the saint.\(^3\) It is not, however, a location, as one might expect, for religious nationalist ideology or rhetoric, as other shared sacred spaces have been. I will also argue, therefore, that despite plenty of opportunity to portray Ajmer in a nationalist light, this has not heretofore been the case, challenging some notions of pilgrimage spaces as necessarily susceptible to nationalist rhetorics.

The case of Ajmer is an ideal one to test the boundaries of hagiography, history, and construction, given the unique status of its saint Mu‘\(\text{in} al-d\(\text{in}\) Chishti. He is widely considered the originator of the Chishti lineage, a Sufi tariqa or order, which is largely, if not entirely, South Asian in historical development and cultural expression. Unlike other Chishti figures, he personally has left no written work, and the \textit{malfuzat} or the collected discourses and quotations of a saint\(^4\) are limited to just one author, al-‘\(\text{Arifin}.\(^5\) Though considered by scholars to be the best available,\(^6\) we cannot expect that the collection is perfect. For example, in his compiled notes, al-‘\(\text{Arifin misattributes known writings of other Sufis to Mu‘\(\text{in} al-d\(\text{in},\) offers a wide range of dates for Mu‘\(\text{in} al-d\(\text{in}\)‘s arrival in Delhi and Ajmer that contradict each other, and places the saint in conversation with saints who were born far after his death.\(^7\) Certainly inconsistencies are commonplace in \textit{malfuzat} literature, and more broadly in documents located within a similar time period, but because the text of al-‘\(\text{Arifin is the only one of this type related to Mu‘\(\text{in} al-d\(\text{in},\) we are left in a particularly unstable position to even establish a reliable timeline. In other words, because the historical documentation is spurious, in the case of Mu‘\(\text{in} al-d\(\text{in},\) we are forced to rely on other forms of knowledge, namely hagiography. As mentioned above, in the course of what follows, I will therefore take seriously the hagiographical record and explore its links to the shrine at Ajmer.

Let us start at the beginning by examining the stories of how Mu‘\(\text{in} al-d\(\text{in}\) came to India, and specifically Ajmer. First, the brief account from al-‘\(\text{Arifin’s records states the following: the Sufi wandered from Baghdad, where he studied; back through Persia, where he is thought to have been born; and finally, purposefully, into the capital of the Delhi Sultanate.\(^8\) Having visited Delhi, and, more importantly, having met with two other Sufi \textit{pirs} or masters, he


\(^3\) ‘\(\text{urs\) literally means union, and refers to the Sufi conception that death is really a union or marriage with the Beloved, God. ‘\(\text{urs festivals mark the death of the saint’s physical body, but his marriage to God. As a reference point, its 1.5 million pilgrims rival the hajj to Mecca.

\(^4\) \textit{Malfuzat} refers to both the genre of literature of compiled works of a sheikh by his students as well

\(^5\) Dalil al-‘\(\text{Arifin, Malfuzat-i khavajah Mu‘\(\text{in} al-d\(\text{in Sajazi Chishti} (Delhi: Mujtaba’i, 1883).

\(^6\) For example, see P. M. Currie, \textit{The Shrine and Cult of Mu‘\(\text{in al-din Chishti of Ajmer} (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1989), 31; Ernst, \textit{Eternal Garden}, 77-80; and Bruce B. Lawrence, in personal communication, email dated 19 November 2008.

\(^7\) Currie, 36, 39-40.

\(^8\) Currie, translating al-‘\(\text{Arifin, 37.}
badly wanted to move on toward Ajmer; he had learned that even though Delhi, and by extension the rest of the lands controlled by the sultan, was under Muslim rule, but Ajmer itself was actually controlled by a Hindu king. Mu‘īn al-dīn went to Ajmer to meet this Hindu king, and, as the malfuzat reports, to eventually convert him. The issue of conversions of Hindus specifically will be raised below, but for now, it is important that history and our primary historical document—however spurious—recall that the saint wanted to spread Islam.

Second, the most accepted and oft-repeated depiction of how the saint arrived in Ajmer is hagiographical or from tazkirat, which are the collected stories, anecdotes, and miracles of the saint. This version of the story begins in a way that more or less resembles the account of the saint’s student al-‘Arifin: Mu‘īn al-dīn knew that Delhi was controlled by the Sultanate, but he was also aware, as most probably were, that a Hindu king retained feudal control of Ajmer, as well as the surrounding villages and countryside. But the stories’ similarity ends there. In the tazkirat, Mu‘īn al-dīn leaves Baghdad for the singular purpose of arriving in Ajmer to fulfill the vision that he has in a dream in which Muhammad tells him to go to Ajmer, in order to spread the world of Islam and help the poor. The story continues, and incorporates the Hindu king as well. The king—who, in the hagiographies, remains nameless—also has a dream in which a foreign man came to his kingdom and “swayed the hearts” of his subjects. Upon the Sufi saint’s arrival, the king dispatches his army who ride on camelback to the area of Rajasthan that is now Ajmer. Upon arriving, the king’s army asks Mu‘īn al-dīn to leave, and he accepts, saying that though he will leave, the camels will not. Miraculously, the saint’s words ring true, and the camels became stick to the ground, leaving the army unable to leave their posts. A few days later, with the curse still intact, the king is at the end of his rope, so he begs the saint to come to his court, remove the curse, and restore the camels to their original health.Mu‘īn al-dīn complies, and as a boon, the king gives him all the land that the camels had inhabited while in their stationary condition. Some versions also include an ending in which the king bows before the saint and converts, thus becoming the first member of the Chishtī order in India.

We see in these two examples similarities in the travel routes of the saint, and insofar as his purpose for being there is concerned. What varies, however, is how the saint comes to occupy Ajmer. The latter example, that of the hagiographical records, assumes a miracle that either forced the king to award him the land, or convinced the king of Mu‘īn al-dīn’s true power so much so that he converts. In either case, we see the figure of the Hindu king acknowledging his and his army’s defeat to the peaceable Sufi. Ajmer, I argue, in its inception blends the religious (Mu‘īn al-dīn, his miracle, and possibly his conversion of the Hindu king) and the political (the king, his army, the bestowal of property). However, unlike other pilgrimage sites, Khwaja Sahib does not have the record of religious or political violence associated
with it, as some would suggest we ought to expect.\footnote{16} Despite the generalization—and seeming truism—that India is a place of pilgrimage,\footnote{17} the specific ways in which Ajmer is a shrine to many people of varying faiths calls into question the ways in which sacred space is used as political space. Certainly, as mentioned above, the Khwaja Sahib is not necessarily a special case as many dargâhs, temples, and gudwaras are and have been the sites of religious pluralism despite their obvious and ostensibly exclusive religious groundings.\footnote{18} That being said, it is important to note that a number of scholars, focusing on nationalism and religious nationalism in particular, have been keen to point out how sacred space is demarcated in overly and overtly political ways. For example, Peter van der Veer discusses the ways in which pilgrimage is one of the major rituals that stand to mark a community; he notes that the establishment of community boundaries is almost always violent.\footnote{19} As he explains the importance of pilgrimage, van der Veer pays particular attention to the ways in which pilgrimage is a tool used by various contemporary religious nationalist groups in India, like the Muslim Tablíqi Jama’at or the Vishva Hindu Parishad (VHP). He claims such groups do so as a process of organizing geographical space in terms of the sacred, centering around mosques and Mecca or unifying diverse Hindu temples respectively.\footnote{20} However, in the case of Ajmer, it is unclear how the space is used politically in terms of the maintenance of boundaries: as far as the historical record is concerned, nearly every ruler, local and national, has donated some sum of money to the shrine, and it has yet to come into the view of the national government or nationalist organizations as a place of contested religious significance.

While van der Veer rightfully points out the ways in which religious nationalist discourse has sought to structure sacred space precisely by decrying the plurality of histories and traditions of any given place,\footnote{21} I hope, in what follows, to point out the ways in which the pilgrimage to Ajmer has had a very different history of political action and meaning-making. In fact, I aim to demonstrate that instead of polarizing devotees along religious lines, the Khwaja Sahib seems to attract growing numbers of pilgrims of multiple faiths precisely because of the hagiography and popular conception of Mu’īn al-dīn as broadminded. For instance, the very conception of the saint rests rather firmly within a rhetoric of tolerance:

\[\text{[Mu’īn al-dīn’s] piety and humanism attracted a band of followers round him and he founded the Chishti sīlṣīla [lit., chain; Sufi order], which flourished because it produced respected spiritualists and propounded catholic doctrines. It attracted Hindus without demanding conversion to Islam, and taught dhikr (remembrance} \]
of God) without asking for an initiation into the Sufi fold.22

In other words, the remembered persona of Mu‘īn al-dīn has allowed his dargāh to escape the type of nationalist rhetoric from both Hindus and Muslims described above.23 Thus, it is important to examine how we may rightly understand the political function of this shrine in light of the hagiographies which shape the concept of the saint himself, and, subsequently, the reasons people chose to make such a pilgrimage.

Interestingly, the hagiographic tradition conceals within it the sort of story type that van der Veer sees as paradigmatic to the construction of nationalist discourse surrounding sacred spaces. Again, I do not believe that in the particular history and popular imagining of the shrine at Ajmer this type of nationalist rhetoric has been utilized in the same way that van der Veer would imply. However, it is true that the potential for this type of discourse is circumscribed in the hagiography. Van der Veer writes that nationalism seeks ‘‘facts’ in order to ‘prove’ that the imagined nation exists both in and beyond history.‖24 Furthermore, he discusses the ways in which a religious nationalist discourse requires that sacred spaces in particular be beyond time, i.e., that they are imagined as timeless.25 More importantly, perhaps, is van der Veer’s stress on the notion of national and religious identity being read in such a way so as to remove historical time and replace it with a sense of infinite past. By this I mean to indicate that, taking van der Veer’s claims of religious nationalism vis-à-vis pilgrimage seriously, the hagiography of Mu‘īn al-dīn very easily lends itself to a reading in which identities are constructed outside the bounds of time while constructing a sense of space simultaneously. What is interesting, of course, is that this is precisely the opposite of what has happened.

The Sufi saint is, in one account, reported to have come to Ajmer from Persia because of his communication with Muhammad in a dream. It is unnecessary to list the reasons why the Prophet would and could be considered both timeless and an important historical actor; what is important here, however, is that the timelessness of the Prophet intersects with the historical persona of Mu‘īn al-dīn, thereby marking the Sufi as sacred, as well as marking the place of his residence, Ajmer, with similar religious merit. In this vein, this anecdote could serve to establish a Muslim narrative of belonging within the modern nation-state of India, or as always having been a part of the geographic identity. It is possible, I argue, to establish a nationalist reading from a Muslim perspective. As yet another example, the aforementioned instance in which the saint first arrives in Delhi at the seat of the ruling elite and then, upon hearing that Hindus were still maintaining some local control, departs for the city of Ajmer, we can see the ways in which a political grounding of power reorients the need for the establishment of religious authority.

In these ways, Mu‘īn al-dīn’s actions become read within a narrative of conversion, and quite readily fit into a rhetoric favored by the VHP, among others, that describes Muslims as foreigners, bent on converting local Hindus, and labels shrines not merely as anti-Hindu but,
importantly, as anti-Indian. To reiterate, the available textual evidence does not, in any way, support these readings. My purpose here was to demonstrate not their veracity but their viability, given the hagiographical tradition and the context of nationalist discourse in India today. In fact, this is quite the opposite of the consensus scholarly position. Syed Liyaquat Hussain Moini writes that over the course of the shrine’s early history that

[t]he various customs and ceremonies that developed under the patronage and control of the Mughals, Rajputs, and Marathas generated an atmosphere of mutual understanding among different sections of society and gave stimulus to the growth of cultural affinity and a spirit of congeniality between Hindus and Muslims of the subcontinent.

The space and place of the Khwaja Sharif has witnessed Muslim and Hindu, as well as Sikh, rulers, pilgrims and devotees, with remarkably little violence, and with no confirmed communal violence, defying, perhaps, the expected outcome of such rich legendary sources.

Reading the historical record of the dargāh alongside theorists of religious nationalism is important so as to highlight the ways in which the shrine challenges the conception of the sanctification of space as a process by which insider-outsider groups come to be formed. However, as is clearly shown by the various interpretations of the shrine complex, the space is not characterized by the reasons that Mu’īn al-dīn comes to Ajmer, but simply that Mu’īn al-dīn was at Ajmer. This is to say that the charismatic personality of Mu’īn al-dīn trumps, in the modern understanding of the shrine, any political rhetoric for the Khwaja Sahib’s inherit significance. It seems that, in fact, practitioners are wholly uninterested in a factual account of Mu’īn al-dīn’s arrival in Ajmer; it is, in some conceptions of the space of the shrine, necessary that Mu’īn al-dīn would have not gone to Delhi first, as the malfuzat implies, but rather arrived in Ajmer as part of a fulfillment of Muhammad’s injunction, as the tazkirat states. It is vital, to put it differently, that the shrine has a grounding in the power of the saint: the image of Mu’īn al-dīn enchanting the camels for three days, winning over the king with his power, and gaining the shrine’s property is a more compelling image for devotees and pilgrims than a Sufi setting off for a city to try to convert its ruler. It is this conception, and not one of a religio-political nature, that is repeated frequently in the textual sources.

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26 This is, of course, a well-rehearsed nationalist and teleological history, which has its roots in Orientalist discourses of South Asia. For critiques, see as examples that include, but are not limited to: Muzaffar Alam, The Languages of Political Islam: India 1200-1800 (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2004); Catherine B. Asher and Cynthia Talbot, India Before Europe (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006); Marshall Hodgson, Rethinking World History: Essays on Europe, Islam and World History (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993); Bruce B. Lawrence, “The Eastward Journey of Muslim Kingship: Islam in South and Southeast Asia,” in The Oxford History of Islam, edited by John L. Esposito (New York: Oxford University Press, 1999),395-434.


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The conception of the shrine as sacred space relies not on historical evidence, but on the truth claims of a tradition and its compiled anecdotes; more importantly, however, the built landscape of the shrine relies on these anecdotes, legends, and conceptions. The dargāh, of course, did not start as a dargāh, and during the saint’s lifetime, it was a simple structure, consisting of a chilla, which is essentially a cellar-like room built into the ground and used for meditation, and one larger building which housed students and what we might call a classroom-like space. The area that was to become the shrine became known, during Mu‘īn al-dīn’s lifetime, as a place where communal meals were given; from the very start, in both the hagiographical and historical records, Mu‘īn al-dīn and his followers provided meals, normally once a week, to the poor. While Mu‘īn al-dīn was alive, Ajmer was under the control of the Chauhan dynasty, who ran the state under the feudal system of the Sultanate; these rulers were Hindu, but were also large financial benefactors in the establishment of the shrine. At some point between 1230 and 1350 C.E., a Chauhan king had two hugely fortified walls built, and these walls constitute the north and west walls that still surround the shrine. It is unclear whether or not these walls were for the express purpose of protection, since Ajmer was and would continue to be a military stronghold for all its rulers. It is clear, though, that the Chauhan king was aware of the significance of the shrine because at the time the walls were constructed, the king also made donations to the dargāh itself. At this time, the dargāh was just a simple house-like structure that contained the body of the saint, as it was not until much later that the dargāh gained its elaborate dome, edifice, and surrounding masjids or mosques. However, since members of the Chishtī order were housed, taught, and held ceremonies there, donations to the dargāh would have been considered a clear sign of support. It therefore appears as if the local Hindu kings used the physical location of Ajmer as a political—and perhaps military—stronghold, but still allowed and even supported the Sufis who used the space for religious and housing purposes to have autonomy.

The relationship of the shrine to the Chauhan dynasty is notable; the Chauhans were in control throughout Mu‘īn al-dīn’s time in Ajmer, and continued to be so until about 1365 C.E. The Chauhans, as Hindus, provided much fodder for the Muslim followers of Mu‘īn al-dīn, as well as many anecdotal tales that take the intersection of Hindus and Muslims seriously. The best examples of this come from parts of the hagiography which stress Mu‘īn al-dīn’s tolerance of any other form of religious purity, since these stories almost always involve the saint encountering an ascetic of a different stripe—most often Hindu yogis but occasionally Buddhist and hath yogis as well. These anecdotes always begin the same, stating that Mu‘īn al-dīn was known to walk to a lake near Ajmer, and

29 Dhaul, 24.
30 Sahrib, 13.
31 Currie, 42.
32 I have been unable to locate the name of this king or a specific date; but the accepted range of dates and person responsible for the construction do point toward a member of the Chauhan dynasty, prior to 1350 C.E. See, for example, Har Blias Sarda, Ajmer: Historical and Descriptive (Ajmer: Scottish Mission Industries, Ltd., 1911), 33-38.
33 Sarda, 38.
34 Suvorova, 17.
35 Though the Anasagar Lake is the closest to Ajmer, one might be able to suggest that the lake is actually Pushkar, known for its famous temple to the Hindu god Brahma, as the man-made lake at Ajmer is reportedly added much later. This would further add credence to the relationship of the yogis to the Sufi(s), and the mythological weight attached
subsequently that here, he would meet a yogi, who was deep in meditation, and usually alone. From here, the stories vary widely, but take the form of three primary examples.

It is clear that each of the three is used for its own purpose, but each is recounted more than once by authors from within the tradition. Thus, these stories are not competing versions of the same, but instead represent three distinct anecdotes taken to provide three different meanings. In the first of the three, Mu‘īn al-dīn approaches the lake, with his collection of murids or students following, and sees a yogi deep in meditation. Mu‘īn al-dīn leaves the yogi undisturbed, walks away, and then turns to his students and tells them they should be like this yogi and learn from him, for he is in deep and truthful concentration on—and even conversation with—God. This is a striking tale, since it takes the murid/murshid relationship and inverts it slightly: the murshid—the master—is typically depicted in an all-knowing manner, where his teachings are always second only to those of Muhammad as a master with special, privileged religious and spiritual knowledge. That Mu‘īn al-dīn would suggest that his students could learn from the yogi, effectively place himself alongside the yogi, is remarkable, as it clearly implies an equivalency between otherwise competing religious masters. This anecdote is told in such a way that the saint’s tolerance, acknowledgement of other religions, and humility is elevated.

In the second version of the encounter, Mu‘īn al-dīn goes to the lake, students in tow, and sees the yogi deep in meditation. This time, the relationship of the saint to the yogi becomes even more extreme, because instead of merely asking his students to be like the yogi, Mu‘īn al-dīn outwardly states that he will himself learn from the yogi: “This man’s piety is higher than mine, and I am in his debt,” Mu‘īn al-dīn is reported to have said. This is obviously poignant, as we not only see the saint giving credibility to a yogi, as in the first anecdote, but we also see Mu‘īn al-dīn actively place himself below this Hindu ascetic. While it is clear that this specific story is repeated often, it is unclear in what context(s); from what I can tell, it seems that since Partition/Independence this anecdote in particular has not been related as often as the first. That being said, prior to Partition/Independence, and even during the Freedom Movement, it seems that some Sikh, Muslim, and Hindu leaders collectively employed this anecdote as an example of a historical and religious figure who did not stress conversion of the Other, but rather, gained enlightenment from the Other.

In contrast, the last story in the series does not stand as an example of how Mu‘īn al-dīn found himself alongside or in the debt

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34 Again, the accuracy of the stories about Mu‘īn al-dīn are unimportant, as I am merely establishing the variety of ways he is described, and the similarity between these anecdotes. This is fruitful in both the historical and contemporary works available, as the anecdotes remain starkly similar.
35 Currie, 89. See as well Moini, Chishti Shrine of Ajmer, 10-11.
36 In the works published before the mid-1940s, each of the three story types appear in equal numbers. In many of the works after, this particular instance where Mu‘īn al-dīn gains knowledge from the yogi appears far less frequently, and sometimes not at all.
37 Indira Vyas, Freedom Movement in Rajasthan: with Special Reference to Ajmer-Merwara (Jaipur, India: University Book House Pvt. Ltd., 2004), 80-86.
38 Sharib, 14.
of Hindus, but instead, how he bested, miraculously, a particular yogi and converted him to Islam. The story has a relatively parallel beginning: the Sufi saint encounters a yogi at the lake. But in this version, Mu‘īn al-dīn is without students, while the yogi is described as having many by his side. On seeing Mu‘īn al-dīn, the yogi challenges him to perform a miracle, since he has heard that the saint is known for such things. As a matter of mystical show-and-tell, the yogi first demonstrates that he can lift the water out of the lake—letting it hover over the lake’s floor—and then dares Mu‘īn al-dīn fit the entirety of Pushkar lake into his silver drinking cup. The saint does so, and the yogi, in front of his students, exclaims that he has thought wrongly of the Sufi saint, converts to Islam on the spot, and asks to become a member of the Chishtī order. Not only does Mu‘īn al-dīn convert the Hindu yogi to Islam, but also to his own Sufi order, which can be read to demonstrate the relative truth of Islam as well as the particular religious authenticity of Mu‘īn al-dīn himself.

It is this last story that was to have a lasting impact on the physical structure of the shrine. Even though the three anecdotes highlighted above exist side by side and are told as such, it seems that this last one gained particular relevance during the Mughal Empire. Akbar (r. 1556 - 1605 C.E.), the first emperor to give great attention to the shrine, did not favor this story, but his successors, especially his grandson Shah Jahan, placed a good deal of emphasis on Mu‘īn al-dīn’s conversion of the yogi and his students. Like his predecessors, it is said that Shah Jahan undertook a pilgrimage on foot from Delhi to Ajmer. Upon arriving in Ajmer in 1638 C.E., Shah Jahan gave an enormous sum of money to build what is still the largest masjid in the complex, and it is reported that at this time, after declaring his plans to build a mosque, he officially proclaimed himself king of all contested north-western territories.

Two authors cite that during his time in Ajmer, immediately after declaring his rule, Shah Jahan made references to the Pushkar Lake, Mu‘īn al-dīn’s experience with Allah at the lake, and the special significance of the spot given that a “number of yogins” converted there. Dhaul, whose work is largely focused on the architectural history, suggests that the scale and composition of Shah Jahan’s masjid was more of a political statement than a religious one; it is the masjid closest to the tomb itself. However, a stronger argument that the masjid was built in such a manner as to bolster Shah Jahan’s power would be based upon its very location. The structure of the complex necessitates that when one prays in the appropriate manner facing Mecca (westward from Ajmer), one’s back would necessarily face the tomb itself, because the Shahjahani Masjid is to the immediate west of the tomb. This is normally considered wholly unacceptable, for turning one’s back on the saint is unforgivably disrespectful. Furthermore, given that Shah Jahan became king and built the masjid immediately after conquering the Mewars, and that the mosque is oriented not only toward Mecca but also toward their former seat of power, it is evident that the physical location of his masjid is power structurally represented.

It imperative to keep in mind that the Ajmer shrine is a complex of multiple masjids that loosely encircle the central feature of any shrine, the tomb itself, in

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42 Sharib, 17.
43 Narayan, 79.
order to best understand how the Shahjahani Masjid is notable. The construction of the Shahjahani Masjid, given its size and proximity to the tomb, entirely changed the orientation of sacred space and ritual. When a Muslim pilgrim enters the complex, he typically moves from mosque to mosque, offering prayers and paying homage, before entering the mausoleum. From the mid-seventeenth century onward, these pilgrims would enter the Shahjahani Masjid last, and it is at this last point before going to the dargâh itself that one would turn his back on Mu‘īn al-dīn for the first and only time within the complex. Even though this masjid is the last obstacle to the tomb, it seems that in this space the pilgrim’s body is physically reoriented in a way that is not consistent with typical codes of respect and decorum.

Notice, of course, that in all of the other mosques of the complex—four total, plus four other spaces reserved for the prayers of women—the devotee was able to face both Mecca and the saint. If we take this together with the abovementioned notion that Shah Jahan built his mosque in light of Mu‘īn al-dīn converting yogis as well as with the intention of permanently declaring his kingship to the Mewars, it seems that this masjid stands to downplay the impact of the saint himself and play up the ability for conversion—into a religion or a kingdom.

Shah Jahan’s construction of religious and political space very closely resembles the actions of twentieth- and twenty-first-century religious nationalists in India. It seems that he utilized a seat of power and religious significance to establish his reign, not by destroying parts of it but by incorporating himself into the timeless rhetoric of the structure, thereby linking himself and his empire with the shrine and its history. This resembles actions and discourse that typifies religious nationalist rhetorical patterns, with particular reference to the establishment of a national identity, insomuch as a timelessness facet is valued. Surely Shah Jahan was not establishing a nation in a contemporary or modern post-Enlightenment sense, but he was looking to create and enforce through symbol and local idiom (i.e., the physical shrine itself) a place for himself among the other Mughal rulers and, more importantly, as opposed to and more formidable than the former local Hindu kings.

It should be noted, however, that Shah Jahan’s actions differ widely and significantly from those of contemporary India and especially religious nationalists. By placing his masjid in a higher place of importance than the saint, and in light of the fact that he did not destroy the neighboring Hindu temple or even the Mewars’ additions to the Khwaja Sahib, his actions more readily establish his rule over all subjects, and, more specifically, aimed to create an identity that was centered on his authority rather than a collective identity. His actions

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47 I am purposefully using masculine pronouns to describe pilgrims, as there is much debate historically and culturally as to whether or not women participate religiously in the described way within the complex. There are a few separate structures in the complex, as will be discussed below, for women, lending some credence to my description of pilgrims as male and portrayal of masjids as male-only or male-dominant spaces.

48 These are dedicated, separate women-only prayer spaces, sometimes located in a smaller structure next to the main masjid, and sometimes a cordoned-off area of the main masjid with a separate entryway.

49 In contrast, however, some art historians have suggested that the Shahjahani Masjid was not built by Shah Jahan at all, but rather in his honor. See Anthony Welch, Hussein Keshani and Alexandra Bain, “Epigraphs, Scripture, and Architecture in the Early Delhi Sultanate,” *Muqarnas* (vol. 19, 2002), 40.

50 Van der Veer, 141.
did not create, maintain or enforce religious boundaries, as van der Veer’s aforementioned argument might have us expect. Shah Jahan did not actually enforce Muslim customs or belief systems, as is evidenced by his own placement of the Shahjahani Masjid in between the tomb and Mecca, nor did he fully destroy the Hindu influences and presence in the Ajmer region, or even in the shrine complex itself. Along these lines, I argue that Shah Jahan aims to assert his power over a specific local audience—namely, the Mewars and their regionally located subjects, though not necessarily subjects defined only by religious discourse.

The wives and daughters of Jahangir and Shah Jahan were particularly involved in the construction of edifices for women’s or men’s prayer and women’s use in ways that point toward their personal devotion, which underscores the importance of interpreting architecture as symbolic devotion. Most notably, Jahan Ara Begam, Shah Jahan’s eldest and reportedly favorite daughter, commissioned the Begami dalan—a large, gazebo-like structure that provides shade and is used quite in the manner of a picnic area. This dalan, and the two other, smaller ones, all exist in areas of the complex that reflect women’s relationships to Mu’in al-dīn as opposed to their fathers or husbands; 51 two flank the Akbari masjid, and the Begami dalan sits on the immediate east side of the dargāh, traditionally a place of honor and a symbol of extreme devotion. 52 Again, it should be kept in mind that Shah Jahan’s masjid, built before the dalan, did not claim this space of honor and devotion, and instead is located to the west of the dargāh. Because he did not claim the honored place for himself, Shah Jahan’s daughter purposefully chose to commission a building at this honored site. This would further support the aforementioned argument that Shah Jahan did not build his masjid with the express purpose of honoring Mu’in al-dīn, but did so to state his preeminence over local elite, former rulers, and all subjects.

The anecdotes that speak to Mu’in al-dīn’s saintly power and his relationship to local non-Muslim actors (kings and swamis alike) as well as the Shahjahani Masjid are but two examples of the manifestation of sacred space that hinges upon the hagiographical tradition. Other features of the dargāh complex have also been built with special reference to hagiographical tradition, but in the interest of space I have not discussed these here. Suffice it to say they exist and came into existence based essentially on the same pattern we have seen above: a commonly accepted or oft-repeated hagiographical anecdote stands as an integral aspect of the mythology of Mu’in al-dīn; a king—or, in recent years, members of the government 53 —creates a structure to establish power, honor the saint, or a combination of the two; and, lastly, a chain of pilgrims who also are validated in their belief by the construction of sacred space honoring this hagiography follow.

In this way, the shrine has, over time, become a place where the hagiography, history, and the physical structures are intertwined. This is, no doubt, a common feature of many places of worship, especially in the South Asian landscape. However, given that this shrine is largely the product of Mughal emperors, that we have a fairly good record of these emperors’ histories, and that the contrasting hagiographical anecdotes are also readily

51 See for example, Yatin Pandya, Concepts of Space in Tradition Indian Architecture (Ahmedabad, India: Mapin, 2005).

52 Dhaul, 65. It seems that the devotional aspect of the east side stems from the idea that, while in the complex, one would be facing Mecca only by way of also simultaneously facing Mu’in al-dīn.

53 For example, Queen Victoria gave as a gift a pair of Italian crystal chandeliers, see Watson, 163.
available and well-documented, the Dargāh Khwaja Sahib stands as an excellent place from where we can investigate this relationship. If the anecdotal is a particular thread of historiography that comes to matter most to pilgrims, then how is it that certain aspects of the stories come to be stressed?

Of course, this question is essentially unanswerable, largely because it is tantamount to asking why people believe. On the other hand, it is clear that this dargāh has played an important role throughout its nearly seven hundred year history, and maybe this is due to its location, its rulers, and its saint. As mentioned early on in this essay, Mu'īn al-dīn’s relationship to Pushkar comes into question—and perhaps into focus—in the recorded stories of his interactions with yogis; perhaps his shrine is important precisely because of its proximity to another holy site. Or, as was also mentioned above, from Akbar onward, Ajmer held a special significance for the Mughal throne, and, eventually, for the British throne as well; perhaps the combination of its proximity to Pushkar and its importance to Chishti order Muslims simply made it a well-defined political stronghold. It is also possible that Mu’īn al-dīn himself, with his widely known devotion to the poor and to feeding his neighbors regardless of religion, commands this type of following even now; perhaps such a generous man in life could be equally generous to his devotees, regardless of faith, after death. I am swayed by the idea that it is all of these things, at once and combined: the shrine, to gain importance, needed political ties and influence, and this Akbar and his sons—especially Shah Jahan—surely provided; to gain relevance to these politicians, Ajmer needed to be in a contested place, and with Pushkar just a few kilometers away, and with Hindu and Sikh rulers claiming Ajmer-Mewar for themselves, the shrine’s location fit the bill; and, lastly, Mu’īn al-dīn’s fame and prestige as a man who was a publicly available renunciant lends credence to his charisma, and perhaps provides a reason as to why people—Hindus and Muslims, Sikhs and Buddhists—would allow his saintly title to hold merit.

In any event, the shrine has held incredible value and this reverence—stemming from a political or religious impetus, or both—has physically affected the space of the shrine. At its earliest, it was most likely a small house-like structure, where Mu’īn al-dīn and his followers would live, teach, and offer food to local people. Then various rulers, Hindus and Muslims alike—and it seems one Sikh king—built structures that allowed the shrine some fame and prominence. With these structures came a shaping of the sacred: from Akbar to Aurangzeb, in spite of the latter’s reputed (though contested) detestation of all things Sufi, five masjids and four dalans were constructed, and the dargāh itself had a more permanent edifice established as well as the gilding of its dome at least four times.  

54 During Aurangzeb’s rule (1658-1707 C.E.) there was some unrest in the northwest area of the Mughal Empire, largely because of his appearance as a religious zealot and his taxation on all non-Muslims. This set the stage for an agitated reaction to the Mughals in Ajmer specifically, and as Sikhs came into power in the area (c. 1690s), under the leadership of Guru Gobind Singh, a revolution was staged (1699). Sikhs gained control of Ajmer for only five years, but it seems that three construction projects were started during this time. See Sarda, 97 and also Harjot Oberoi, The Construction of Religious Boundaries: Culture Identity and Diversity in the Sikh Tradition (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994), 100, for a discussion of this predecessor or or the early Khalsa movement.

55 For a historical debunking of Aurangzeb’s pseudo-fundamentalist reputation see, for example: Katherine Butler Brown, “Did Aurangzeb Ban Music? Questions for the Historiography of his Reign,” Modern Asian Studies, (vol. 41,no. 1, 2007), 77-120.
times. The masjids and the improvements made to the tomb could not have been enough to encourage pilgrims; however, that these physical structures were built by kings who themselves believed—according to the hagiography—in the power of the saint commanded the attention of pilgrims and, moreover, ordered the pilgrimage physically. It goes almost without mention that the Khwaja Sahib has been meaningful and been used to create meaning since its inception nearly seven hundred years ago.

Despite theories of nationalism that could easily be applied to the shrine complex, the actual historical records do not show a rhetoric of preeminence or of a timelessness of Muslim (or Hindu, for that matter) presence in Ajmer. Shah Jahan’s construction of his namesake masjid could and should, I have argued, be understood in terms of local power struggles rooted in elite discourse, rather than a religiously defined contestation. The formation, the physical building, of structures itself has structured the ritual experience of the shrine complex, most notably with the Shahjahani Masjid. This edifice demands homage and prayers be made with the king’s building closest to Mecca—a bold statement demonstrating Ajmer’s role in local imaginations of power and procedure. Furthermore, the construction of physical space has relied upon anecdotal, hagiographical narratives that thematically fit the particular Sanskrit background of the South Asian elite culture, as evidenced most obviously in the miraculous abilities attributed to Mu‘īn al-dīn Chishtī. We have seen therefore that, on the one hand, the construction of physical space in Ajmer certainly leads to the construction of the sacred space. And, on the other, that sacred space itself has been constructed by the hagiographical tradition of the South Asian Sufi sheikh and his devotees alike.

56 Dhaul, 43, 64, 71.

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