E-ISSN: 3048-6041 | Volume- 3, Issue- 11 | November 2026

# Jamaat Khana as a Centre of Religious and Political Negotiation: Chishti Sufism, Social Networks, and Power in Thirteenth Century India

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## Abstract

The Chishti Sufi hospice of the Delhi Sultanate, known in the sources as the *jamā'at-khāna* (Jamaat Khana), is usually described as a place of piety, charity and withdrawal from the state. This article argues that it was equally a public arena of negotiation in which religious authority, material redistribution and political legitimacy were exchanged under conditions of asymmetry. Combining critical source analysis of Persian hagiographic and chronicle literature with a hand-coded prosopographical dataset and social network analysis (SNA) of 22 actors and 26 ties across the "long thirteenth century" (c. 1200–1325), the article makes three claims. First, the Jamaat Khana was a multifunctional institution whose open, communal design distinguished it from the shaykh's private cell and made it visible to all social strata. Second, Chishti negotiation with rulers rested on a strategy of refusal as symbolic capital: declining land grants and office preserved moral independence, which in turn made the shaykh's recognition valuable to sultans in a period of dynastic instability, Mongol pressure and the Balbanid and Khalji reconfiguration of kingship. Third, network evidence shows that engagement with the court was brokered: Baba Farid and Nizam al-Din Auliya have the highest betweenness centrality (0.674 and 0.662), while poet-courtier disciples such as Amir Khusrau were the only actors tied to four different rulers, and two of six ruler-nodes connect to the Chishti network solely through such brokers. The article advances a model of the Jamaat Khana as a boundary institution and offers a replicable network method for medieval Persianate sources.

**Keywords:** Jamaat Khana; Chishti order; Delhi Sultanate; Sufism and state; social network analysis; Nizam al-Din Auliya; medieval India

## 1. Introduction

In the thirteenth century, the Delhi Sultanate consolidated a precarious Turko-Persian polity on the northern Indian plains. Its rulers faced the threat of Mongol raids on the north-west frontier, factional contestation among Turkish slave-nobles, and the challenge of governing an overwhelmingly non-Muslim agrarian society (Jackson 1999; Kumar 2007). The Sufi orders that took root in these same decades — Chishti in Ajmer, Delhi and Ajodhan; Suhrawardi in Multan — offered a different kind of authority, grounded not in the sword or

Published: 24 November 2026
DOI: https://doi.org/10.68504/SPIJSH.2026.v3.i11.45964
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the fiscal ledger but in sanctity, hospitality and moral example. How did these two forms of authority relate?

The standard answer, associated with the pioneering work of K. A. Nizami, is that the Chishtis practised deliberate distance from the state: they refused land grants, avoided courts and organised

their community around poverty and reliance on God (Nizami 1961; Rizvi 1978). Simon Digby has complicated this picture by showing that sultans and shaykhs made competing claims to authority and that relations were conditioned by patronage, personal charisma and succession politics (Digby 1986, 1990). Yet the institution in which these relations were actually enacted — the communal hall of the hospice, the *jamāʿat-khāna* — has rarely been treated as an analytical object in its own right.

This article makes the Jamaat Khana its unit of analysis. It asks: **RQ1** — What was the Jamaat Khana as an institution, and what distinguished it spatially, economically and socially from other Sufi spaces? **RQ2** — How did Chishti shaykhs negotiate with political power without accepting incorporation into it? **RQ3** — What does the structure of documented relationships among shaykhs, disciples and rulers reveal about who brokered these negotiations? The contribution is threefold: a conceptual model of the Jamaat Khana as a boundary institution; a transparent, hand-coded dataset of thirteenth-century Chishti–state ties; and a network-analytic reading of that dataset that qualifies the "withdrawal" thesis.

**Scope and periodisation.** The "long thirteenth century" here runs from the establishment of the Sultanate (1206) to 1325, the year of Nizam al-Din's death. The extension is a source-critical necessity: the richest textual evidence for thirteenth-century Chishti practice was compiled in the early-to-mid fourteenth century, and the institution was already mature under Baba Farid (d. 1265/66) and during Nizam al-Din's formative decades (Section 3).

## 2. Conceptual Framework and Literature

### *Sufi institutions and the state*

The historiography of Sufism in South Asia has moved from viewing shaykhs as agents of conversion to viewing them as embedded social and political actors (Eaton 1978, 2003; Ernst and Lawrence 2002). Comparative work on the "formative period" of Sufism stresses that the hospice (*khānqāh*, *ribāṭ*, *zāwiya*) crystallised as an institution between the tenth and thirteenth centuries and that its relation to rulers varied by region and order (Karamustafa 2007; Trimingham 1971). For India, Rizvi's survey remains the fullest account of the Sultanate's Sufi orders (Rizvi 1978), while Aquil (2007) and Alam (2004) situate Sufi engagement within wider debates on political Islam and cultural politics. Digby's essays on the tension between the Sufi shaykh and the sultan, and on the transmission of relics and succession among Chishti masters, demonstrate that authority was constantly negotiated rather than settled (Digby 1986, 1990).

### *Theoretical lens*

Three concepts structure the analysis. First, Weber's (1978) distinction between charismatic

and legal-rational authority helps explain why a sultan's bureaucratic power could not simply absorb a shaykh's personal sanctity. Second, Bourdieu's (1986) notion of **symbolic capital** — prestige that is recognised as legitimate because it appears disinterested — explains why refusal of material rewards could increase, not decrease, a shaykh's social power. Third, network theory supplies tools for locating **brokerage**: Burt's (1992) "structural holes" and Granovetter's (1973) "weak ties" suggest that actors who bridge otherwise disconnected groups hold a distinctive influence, measurable through betweenness centrality (Freeman 1977; Wasserman and Faust 1994).

### *Gap*

Existing scholarship offers rich narrative accounts but seldom makes explicit the structure of relationships on which its claims about "distance" or "engagement" rest. Nor has it systematically treated the Jamaat Khana as a space that mediated between social worlds. This article addresses both gaps.

## 3. Sources, Data and Method

### *Source base and its limits*

The evidence is overwhelmingly Persian and mostly hagiographic. The most important text is Amir Hasan Sijzi's *Fawā'id al-Fu'ād*, a record of 188 assemblies (*majālis*) of Nizam al-Din Auliya conventionally dated 1307–1322 (Lawrence 1992). Amir Khwurd's *Siyar al-Auliyā'* and Hamid Qalandar's *Khair al-Majālis* were compiled later, in the mid-fourteenth century. Chronicles — Minhaj al-Siraj's *Ṭabaqāt-i Nāṣirī* (1260) and Ziya al-Din Barani's *Tārīkh-i Fīrūz Shāhī* (c. 1357) — supply the political frame but say little about hospices (Hardy 1960). Table 1 evaluates each source.

**Table 1.** *Principal sources and their evidentiary value*

| Source | Author/date | Type | Value for this study | Principal limitation |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Fawā'id al-Fu'ād | Amir Hasan Sijzi; assemblies 1307–1322 | Malfūẓāt (recorded conversations) | Most direct evidence of daily practice in Nizam al-Din's Jamaat Khana; attitudes to rulers | Retrospective on the thirteenth century; idealises the shaykh |
| Siyar al-Auliyā' | Amir Khwurd; mid-14th c. | Hagiographic biographical collection | Narratives on Kaki, Farid, Nizam; ruler anecdotes | Miracle motifs; later Chishti self-image |
| Khair al-Majālis | Hamid Qalandar; c. | Malfūẓāt of | Continuity after Nizam al-Din | Post-dates the period |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| | 1350s | Chiragh-i Dihlī | | |
| Ṭabaqāt-i Nāṣirī | Minhaj-i Siraj; 1260 | Court chronicle | Political context to c. 1260 | Sparse on Sufis; court perspective |
| Tārīkh-i Fīrūz Shāhī | Ziya al-Din Barani; c. 1357 | Political-ethical chronicle | Balban and Khalji court; Sidi Maula affair | Moralising; Barani's own agenda (Hardy 1960) |
| Akhbār al-Akhyār | ʻAbd al-Haqq Dihlawi; late 16th c. | Sufi biographical dictionary | Later memory of the silsila | Distant in time; dependent on earlier texts |

*Source: Author's assessment; Lawrence (1992); Hardy (1960); Nizami (1961); Rizvi (1978).*

Two source-critical principles guide interpretation. First, hagiography is treated as evidence of **how communities remembered and legitimised practice**, not as a transparent record of events; anecdotes are reported as "tradition" unless corroborated. Second, no direct quotations are reproduced here; all sayings are paraphrased from cited editions and translations, and readers should verify wording and pagination against the originals.

***Prosopographical dataset***

The author compiled a dataset of thirteen actors (Table 2) and a broader set of 22 nodes (adding rulers and princes) by extracting relationships documented in the sources and standard secondary literature. Each tie was coded into one of six types: spiritual lineage (initiation and succession), court patronage, reverence/contact, office/court, rivalry/tension and repression. The dataset is an **interpretive coding**, not a census: absence of a tie means absence of documentary evidence, not evidence of absence.

**Table 2.** *Selected actors in the prosopographical dataset*

| **Actor** | **Dates (CE)** | **Base** | **Role/affiliation** | **Stance toward state grants and office** |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Muʻin al-Din Chishti | d. 1236 | Ajmer | Founder figure of Chishti presence in India | Reputed ascetic; biography thinly documented |
| Qutb al-Din Bakhtiyar Kaki | c. 1173–1235 | Delhi | Chishti shaykh; revered by Iltutmish | Declined court role (tradition) |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Baba Farid | 1188–1265/66 | Ajodhan | Chishti master; Nizam al-Din's pir | Redistributed gifts; avoided landed grants (tradition) |
| Nizam al-Din Auliya | 1238–1325 | Delhi / Ghiyaspur | Chishti master; Jamaat Khana at Ghiyaspur | Distributed gifts the same day; avoided court |
| Baha al-Din Zakariya | c. 1170–1262 | Multan | Suhrawardi shaykh | Engaged with rulers; wealthy hospice |
| Najm al-Din Sughra | fl. 1230s | Delhi | Shaykh al-Islām under Iltutmish | Held state religious office |
| Sidi Maula | d. 1291 | Delhi | Jalālī dervish with open hospice | Funding opaque; executed by Jalal al-Din Khalji |
| Amir Khusrau | 1253–1325 | Delhi | Poet-courtier; Nizam al-Din's disciple | Served multiple courts |
| Amir Hasan Sijzi | c. 1254–1337 | Delhi | Poet; compiler of Fawā'id al-Fu'ād | Courtier and disciple |
| Nasir al-Din Chiragh | c. 1274–1356 | Delhi | Nizam al-Din's successor | Continued distance from court |
| Amir Khwurd; Hamid Qalandar | 14th c. | Delhi | Hagiographers | — |

*Sources: Nizami (1955, 1961); Rizvi (1978); Lawrence (1992); Digby (1986, 1990). Dates are conventional and some are disputed.*

***Network analysis***

The dataset was analysed as an undirected graph with NetworkX (Hagberg et al. 2008). Metrics comprise density, average degree, diameter, average path length, transitivity, degree and betweenness centrality. Betweenness was used as the principal indicator of brokerage (Freeman 1977). A simple robustness test removed the two disciple-courtier nodes (Khusrau and Sijzi) to gauge how many rulers depended on them for connection to the Chishti network. The graph is small and reflects documentary selection; results are therefore heuristic rather than statistically inferential.

## 4. The Jamaat Khana: Institution, Space and Practice

### *Terminology and design*

*Jamāʿat-khāna* literally means "house of the congregation". In Chishti usage, the term denotes the large communal hall, typically of modest construction, in which disciples lived, prayed, ate and received visitors — distinct from the shaykh's private cell (*ḥujra*), where he withdrew for devotion and rest. The hospice was thus a **bipartite space**: a public congregation hall and a protected inner room. The Jamaat Khana Masjid at the shrine of Nizam al-Din in Delhi, of early fourteenth-century date, preserves the name and the memory of this arrangement, although the dating and patronage of the present building are debated and its architecture is later than the period studied here.

### *Four functions*

The sources permit four functions to be distinguished analytically (Table 3); in practice, these were fused in the daily life of the hospice.

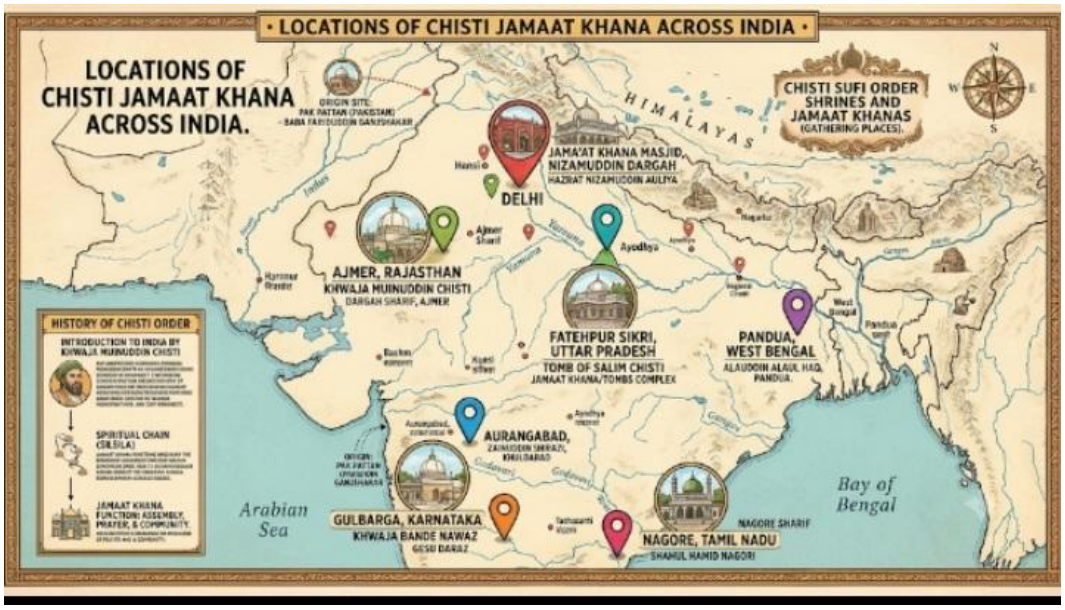
**Table 3.** *Functions of the Jamaat Khana*

| Function | Practices documented in the sources | Social effect |
|---|---|---|
| Religious | Congregational prayer, remembrance (dhikr), audition (samāʿ) in the Chishti tradition, discipline of novices, teaching assemblies (majālis) | Formation of disciples; transmission of the silsila; ritual community |
| Economic | Communal kitchen (langar); receipt of unsolicited gifts (futūḥ) and their redistribution; refusal of fixed endowments | Food security for the poor; circulation of wealth; independence from patrons |
| Social | Open reception of visitors of varied status — scholars, soldiers, artisans, travellers, and, according to hagiographers, non-Muslims | Cross-cutting sociability; a bridge between Turko-Persian elites and local populations |
| Political | Private counsel, intercession, receipt of officials, prophecy and blessing narrated in the tradition; refusal of audience or office | Legitimation of rulers at a distance; moral critique; conflict avoidance |

*Source: Author's synthesis from Lawrence (1992); Nizami (1955, 1961); Rizvi (1978); Ernst and Lawrence (2002).*

The economic function is analytically pivotal. Hagiographies insist that shaykhs accepted gifts only when they came unasked and redistributed them, retaining nothing overnight — a discipline that translated a moral ideal (reliance on God, *tawakkul*) into a political fact: no dependence on any patron. A later disciple's image of gifts flowing into Nizam al-Din's

hospice like a tributary into a river, and of visitors thronging it from morning till evening, expresses how the Jamaat Khana was imagined as a node of redistribution rather than of accumulation.




### *Geography of the tradition*

Chishti centres formed a chain across the north-western and central Sultanate (Fig. 1 and Fig. 2). Ajmer, under the Ghurid and early Sultanate order, was the earliest node; Delhi became the imperial centre of the tradition through Bakhtiyar Kaki; Ajodhan on the Mongol-exposed frontier was Baba Farid's base; Nagaur, Hansi and Kaliyar were seats of prominent khalifas. The pattern shows a tradition oriented to towns, trade routes and garrison zones — the same spaces where the Sultanate's power was concentrated.

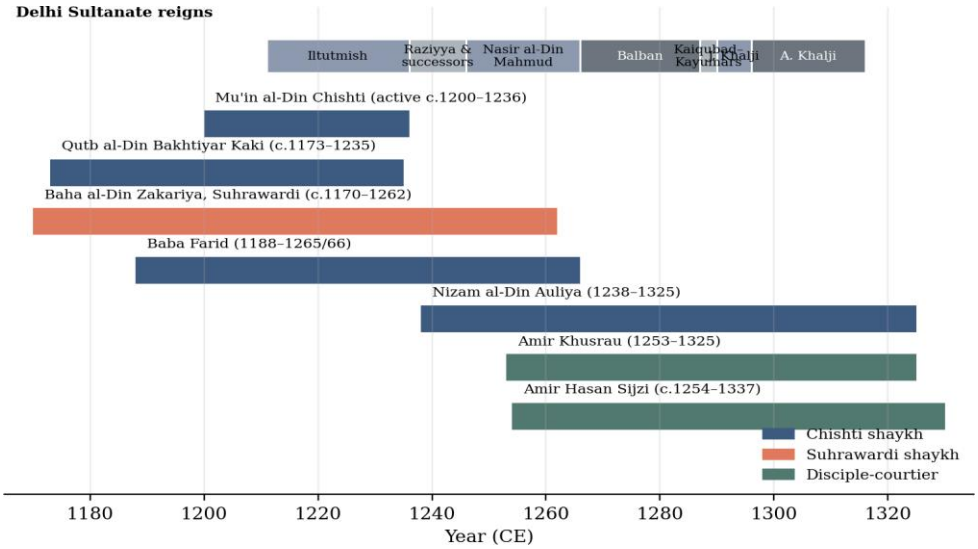



**Fig. 1.** Lifespans of principal Chishti and comparison figures against Delhi Sultanate reigns (c. 1165–1335). *Source: Author's compilation from Nizami (1961), Jackson (1999), Kumar (2007). Dates are conventional; the bar for Mu'in al-Din shows the approximate period of activity.*

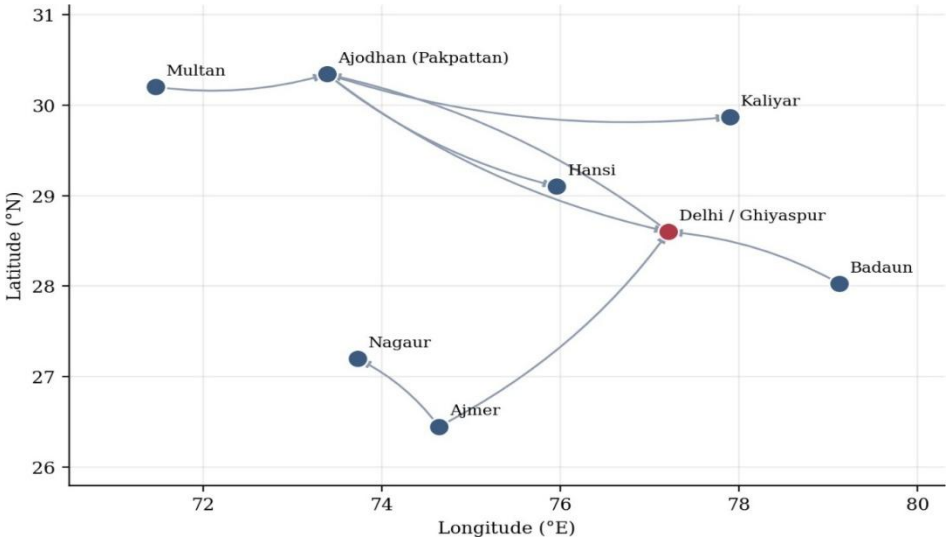



**Fig. 2.** Principal Chishti centres and lines of transmission (schematic, not to scale). *Source: Author's compilation.*

## 5. Negotiating Power: Case Analysis

Table 4 codes five documented or traditionally reported episodes involving rulers and hospices between the reign of Iltutmish and the early Khalji period. They illustrate distinct modes of interaction: reverence without incorporation, gifts and prophecy, court patronage of disciples rather than shaykhs, mediated contact, and repression.

**Table 4.** *Coded episodes of ruler–hospice interaction*

| Episode | Period | Mode | Outcome as narrated | Main sources |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Iltutmish and Bakhtiyar Kaki; the office of Shaykh al-Islām | 1211–1236 | Reverence; non-incorporation | Sultan honours Kaki; formal religious office remains with Najm al-Din Sughra; tradition of tension between the two shaykhs | Siyar al-Auliyā'; Nizami (1961) |
| Ulugh Khan (later Balban) and Baba Farid | before 1266 | Gifts; prophecy | Cash gifts accepted for distribution; landed grant not retained (hagiographic narrative); Farid legitimises future rule | Siyar al-Auliyā'; Nizami (1955) |
| Prince Muhammad of Multan and Khusrau/Sijzi | c. 1280–1285 | Court patronage of disciples | Chishti-trained poets serve the frontier court; the shaykh himself stays in Delhi | Barani; Habib (1950) |
| Jalal al-Din Khalji | 1290– | Repressio | Open hospice, suspected as a focus of noble conspiracy; | Barani; Digby |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| and Sidi Maula | 1291 | n | Sidi Maula executed | (1990) |
| Jalal al-Din / Ala al-Din Khalji and Nizam al-Din | 1290–1316 | Mediated contact | Sultans seek an audience; shaykh declines a direct meeting; messages pass through intermediaries | Fawā'id al-Fu'ād; Siyar al-Auliyā'; Barani |

*Source: Author's coding. Narratives marked "tradition" or "hagiographic" are not independently corroborated.*

***Legitimacy for distance***

The Iltutmish and Farid–Ulugh Khan episodes share a structure: the ruler seeks something intangible — blessing, recognition, a share in the shaykh's prestige — and the shaykh grants it while declining to be incorporated into the material hierarchy of grants and offices. Iltutmish's 1229 investiture by the 'Abbasid caliph gave him external legitimacy, but the local, embodied legitimacy of a revered shaykh was a separate resource (Jackson 1999). Balban, whose kingship stressed hierarchy, court ceremony and the sanctity of the ruler, needed the moral endorsement of respected religious figures even as he sought to dominate the nobility (Barani; Kumar 2007). The Jamaat Khana was where such endorsement could be obtained in public.

***The Sidi Maula contrast***

The Sidi Maula affair (1291) illustrates what the Chishti strategy avoided. According to Barani, a large, freely provisioned hospice in Delhi became the meeting place of nobles and malcontents, and the new sultan, Jalal al-Din Khalji, acted against its master. Whatever the truth of the conspiracy charges, the episode shows that an open hospice with opaque funding and an aristocratic clientele was politically dangerous. Chishti discipline — transparent redistribution, refusal of grants, avoidance of factional entanglement, and a non-aristocratic clientele — can be read as institutional insurance against precisely this risk (Digby 1990).

***Delegated engagement***

The Prince Muhammad episode shows that Chishti disciples could enter courts even when their masters did not. Amir Khusrau served a succession of rulers, and Amir Hasan Sijzi moved in comparable circles, while both remained devoted to Nizam al-Din. Delegated engagement allowed the shaykh to keep clean hands while the silsila retained information, access and goodwill in the court. The next section tests this reading quantitatively.

## 6. Network Results

The graph comprises 22 nodes and 26 ties (Fig. 3). Spiritual lineage accounts for 12 ties, reverence/contact for 6, court patronage for 5, and one each for office/court, rivalry and repression. Density is 0.113, average degree is 2.36, average shortest path length is 2.87 and diameter is 6. Transitivity is low (0.117), indicating a branching, tree-like structure rather than a tightly clustered community — as expected for a lineage network.

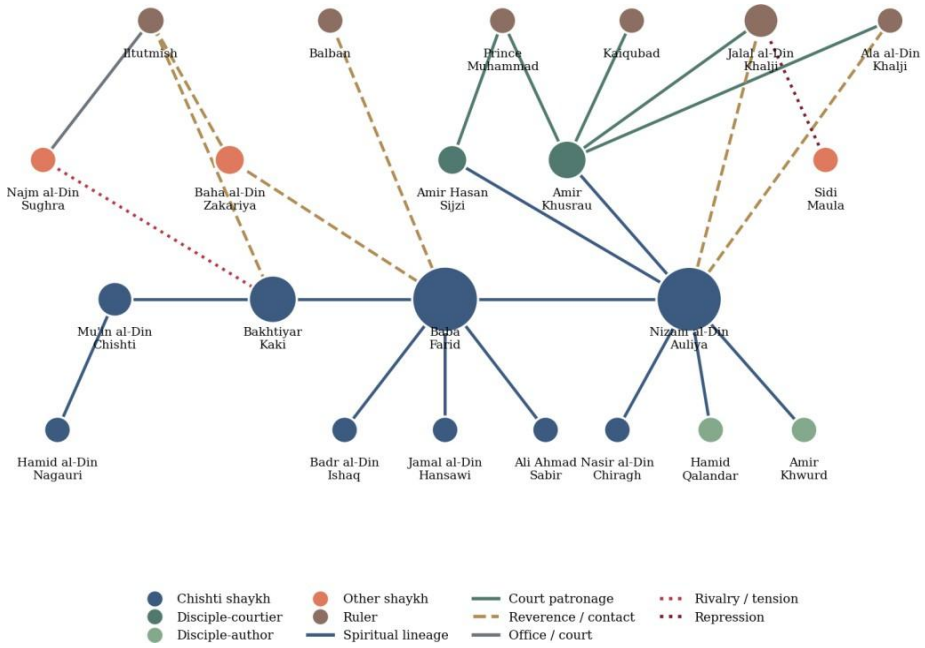



**Fig. 3.** Network of Chishti shaykhs, disciples, other shaykhs and rulers (node size proportional to betweenness centrality). *Source: Author's coded dataset.*

**Table 5.** *Network summary statistics and centrality ranking*

| **Indicator** | **Value** | **Indicator** | **Value** |
|---|---|---|---|
| Nodes/ties | 22/26 | Betweenness: Baba Farid | 0.674 |
| Density | 0.113 | Betweenness: Nizam al-Din Auliya | 0.662 |
| Average degree | 2.36 | Betweenness: Bakhtiyar Kaki | 0.295 |
| Average path length | 2.87 | Betweenness: Amir Khusrau | 0.150 |
| Diameter | 6 | Betweenness: Jalal al-Din Khalji | 0.095 |
| Transitivity | 0.117 | Degree: Nizam al-Din/Baba Farid/Amir Khusrau | 8/7/5 |

*Source: Author's computation (NetworkX). Interpretation is heuristic; see Section 8.*

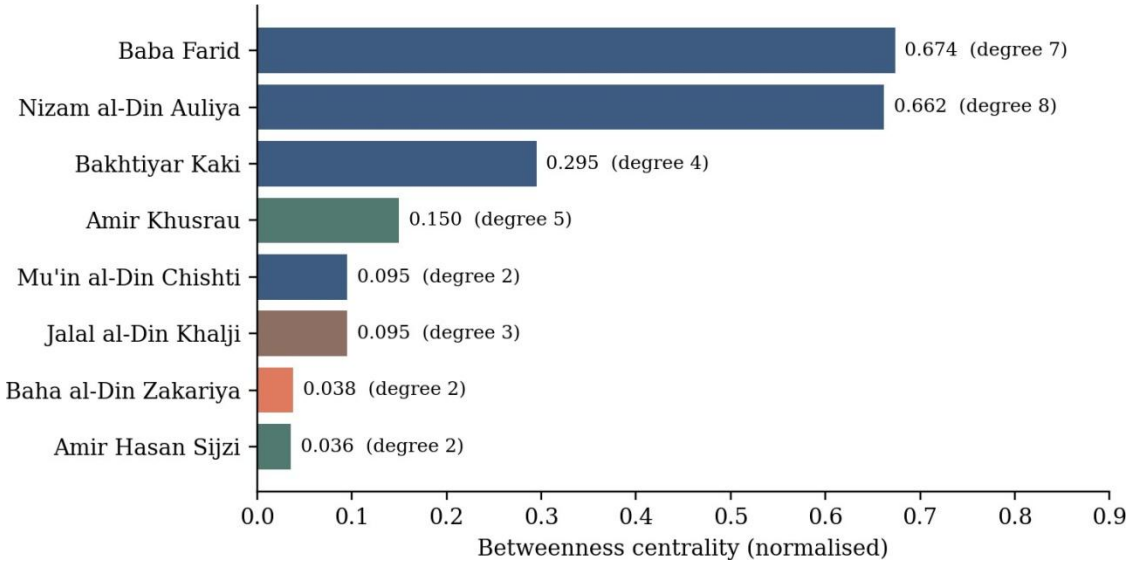



**Fig. 4.** Top eight actors by betweenness centrality. *Source: Author's computation.*

**Finding 1: two shaykhs are the bridge.** Baba Farid (0.674) and Nizam al-Din (0.662) have by far the highest betweenness, followed by Bakhtiyar Kaki (0.295). Their position reflects the double role of a master: he links backward into the initiation chain and outward to rulers, other shaykhs and disciples. Farid connects the early chain (Mu'in, Kaki) to Balban, Baha al-Din Zakariya and Nizam al-Din; Nizam al-Din connects the chain to the Khalji sultans, to the literati and to successors.

**Finding 2: disciple-courtiers hold a structural-hole position.** Amir Khusrau has degree 5 and is tied to four different rulers (Prince Muhammad, Kaiqubad, Jalal al-Din and Ala al-Din), more than any shaykh. When Khusrau and Sijzi are removed, the graph fragments: Prince Muhammad and Kaiqubad become isolated, meaning that two of the six rulers in the dataset are connected to the Chishti network **only** through disciple-courtiers. Iltutmish and Balban, in contrast, are connected through direct reverence for shaykhs; Jalal al-Din and Ala al-Din are tied both directly (attempted contact) and through Khusrau. Path lengths from rulers to Nizam al-Din range from 1 (Jalal al-Din, Ala al-Din) to 3 (Iltutmish).

**Finding 3: conflict is peripheral and personal.** The sole repression tie (Jalal al-Din–Sidi Maula) and the rivalry tie (Sughra–Kaki) link non-Chishti or non-central actors; no tie in the dataset records open conflict between a sultan and a Chishti master of the central lineage. This is consistent with — though it does not prove — the effectiveness of the refusal-and-brokerage strategy.

## 7. Discussion

### *The Jamaat Khana as a boundary institution*

Figure 5 summarises the argument. The Jamaat Khana stood between three worlds: the state and elite, the urban and rural public, and the Sufi community itself. It exchanged recognition and gifts with the first, hospitality and allegiance with the second, and used a layer of brokers to manage the boundary. Its design — a public hall beside a protected cell — reproduced this structure in space.

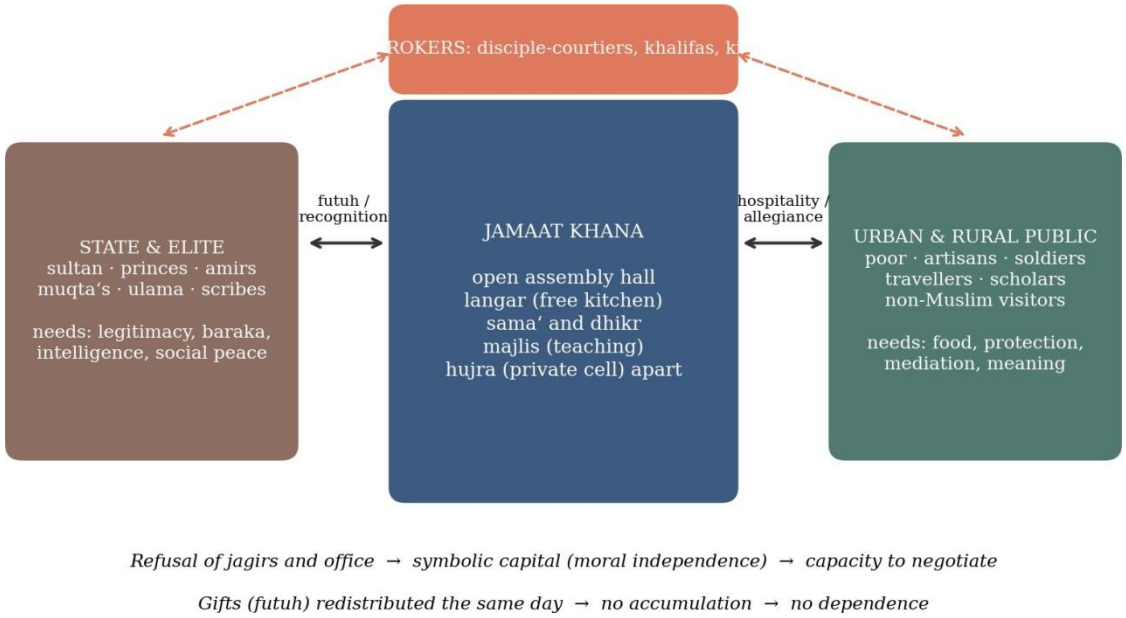



**Fig. 5.** Conceptual model of the Jamaat Khana as a boundary institution. *Source: Author's framework.*

### *Refusal as symbolic capital*

Bourdieu's (1986) concept of symbolic capital clarifies why the Chishtis' material refusals were not political withdrawal. Prestige derived from disinterestedness is convertible into influence precisely because it appears not to be sought. When a shaykh redistributed a sultan's gift on the same day, he displayed both his independence and the sultan's generosity to a public that saw the redistribution. Legitimacy therefore flowed to the ruler in exchange for the shaykh's dignity being left intact. The exchange was asymmetric — the sultan controlled coercion, the shaykh moral standing — but neither could fully dictate the terms.

### *Comparison with the Suhrawardi model*

The Chishti approach becomes clearer against its Suhrawardi contemporary in Multan (Table 6). Baha al-Din Zakariya's hospice was endowed, his relations with rulers direct, and his wealth substantial in the traditional accounts; the Chishtis defined themselves in part against that model (Nizami 1961; Rizvi 1978). The contrast should not be overdrawn: the two orders coexisted, and Farid's personal relations with Multan's Suhrawardis were cordial in the tradition. Rather, they represent two strategies for the same problem — securing autonomy and public legitimacy in an unstable polity.

**Table 6.** *Two strategies of religious–political negotiation in the thirteenth century*

| Dimension | Chishti (Delhi, Ajodhan) | Suhrawardi (Multan) |
|---|---|---|
| Material base | Unsolicited gifts, redistributed daily; no fixed endowment | Endowed hospice; landed and cash resources reported |
| Relation to office | Refusal of state religious office and jagirs | Direct engagement with rulers |

| | | |
|---|---|---|
| Political mediation | Through disciples, kin and intermediaries | Directly by the shaykh |
| Main risk | Marginality; dependence on fragile networks of devotees | Incorporation; loss of moral independence |
| Source of symbolic capital | Disinterestedness and poverty | Learning, wealth, proximity to power |

*Source: Author's synthesis from Nizami (1961); Rizvi (1978); Digby (1990).*

***Testing the propositions***

**Table 7.** *Propositions and assessment of the evidence*

| **Proposition** | **Evidence** | **Assessment** |
|---|---|---|
| P1. The Jamaat Khana was a multifunctional public arena, not only a devotional space | Table 3; hagiographic descriptions of visitors and hospitality | Supported, with source-bias caveat |
| P2. Refusal of grants and office produced symbolic capital that made negotiation possible | Cases in Table 4; contrast with Sidi Maula | Supported; largely inferential |
| P3. Engagement with rulers was brokered by disciples and kin | Network Findings 1–2; Khusrau and Sijzi | Supported within the dataset |
| P4. Chishti–state relations were mainly conflictual | Finding 3; Table 4 | Not supported: conflict is peripheral |

*Source: Author's assessment.*

## 8. Limitations

The study has clear limits. The sources are retrospective, hagiographic and written from within the tradition; their "tradition-level" anecdotes cannot be verified independently. The network is small and hand-coded, so centrality scores partly reflect the density of documentation around the best-recorded figures, especially Farid and Nizam al-Din. Ties are undirected and unweighted, which flattens differences between, for example, a lineage tie and a single reported encounter. The dataset omits the thousands of ordinary visitors who used the Jamaat Khana, and hence the perspective of the poor, artisans and women that the institution served. Finally, this article does not settle debates about individual episodes; it uses them as coded evidence. Future work could enlarge the dataset systematically from the full text of the *Fawā'id al-Fu'ād*, add directed and weighted ties, and compare with hospices in Bengal, the Deccan and Sindh.

## 9. Conclusion

The Jamaat Khana was neither a retreat from politics nor an arm of the state. It was a boundary institution in which the Chishtis translated poverty into authority. By refusing land and office, redistributing gifts and channelling engagement through disciples and kin, the shaykhs of the thirteenth century preserved an independent moral voice that sultans found useful and dangerous to ignore. The network evidence confirms the outlines of this model: the highest centrality lies with the master-figures who bridge lineage and rulers, and disciple-courtiers hold the structural position that links courts to the silsila without implicating the shaykh. The argument revises the "withdrawal" thesis without abandoning it: Chishti distance from the state was a **managed relationship**, not an absence of one. The approach — critical reading of Persian hagiography combined with transparent network coding — is replicable and suggests a productive path for studying other religious institutions of the Sultanate and early Mughal periods.

### Declarations

**Funding:** None declared.

**Conflict of interest:** The author declares no competing interests.

**Data availability:** The coded dataset is summarised in Tables 2 and 4 and can be reconstructed from the sources cited; the network was analysed with NetworkX.

**Ethics:** Not applicable.

**Note:** Dates are conventional and vary between sources. Sayings and anecdotes are paraphrased; consult the cited editions for exact wording and pagination.

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