

*Reclaiming the Sacred Threshold: An Ethnographic
Study of Contemporary Female Piety and Spatial
Agency at Dargah Mai Sahiba*



By Tashfi Arooba

Introducing the Researcher



I am Tashfi Arooba, a final-year undergraduate student pursuing my B.A. (Honours with Research) in History at Gargi College, University of Delhi. My academic journey is fueled by a desire to explore the narratives that often slip through the cracks of mainstream historical records- specifically, the intersections of gendered piety, sacred geographies, and living oral traditions.

For me, history is far more than a passive study of dusty archives or chronologies of rulers. I view it as an active, ongoing dialogue that lives in the physical environment around us. Training as a historian has taught me to look closely at "silences" and "gaps" in classical records, prompting me to question how marginalized groups, particularly women, have historically negotiated their positions of authority. I am fascinated by how the past is not static, but is continuously reinterpreted, contested, and performed through the spaces we inhabit today.

This study was developed during my eight-week internship as an Art Researcher with the Anand Foundation, which focused on documenting the vibrant, intangible cultural heritage of Delhi. This project became a deeply personal journey, fueled by my lifelong love for this city. To me, Delhi is not merely a collection of historic monuments or hurried urban avenues; it is a living, breathing palimpsest where the sacred and the everyday constantly touch. Exploring the contemporary life of Dargah Mai Sahiba in Adchini allowed me to connect intimately with the city's enduring heartbeat, understanding how its spiritual fabric is quietly sustained not by imperial grandiosity, but by the everyday faith, resilience, and compassion of its people.

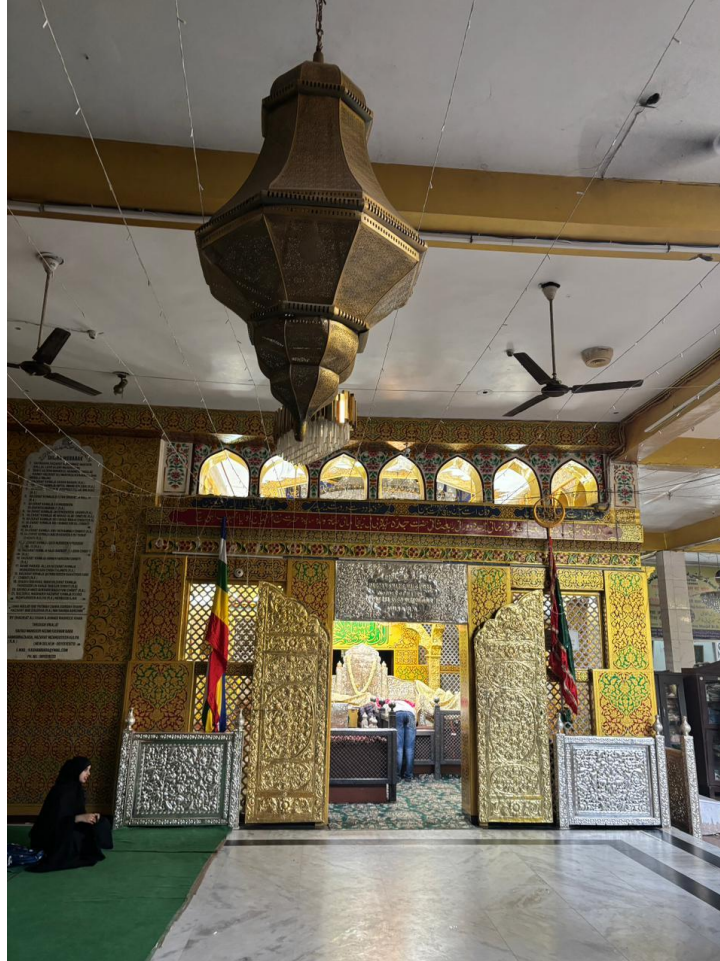
Intangible Heritage and the Contemporary Devotional Landscape of Delhi

The historical fabric of Delhi, long recognized as *Hazrat-e Dilli* (Blessed Delhi), is structured by a complex dialectic between temporal governance and spiritual authority. While the imperial architectures of the Delhi Sultanate and the Mughal Empire represent the spatial codification of state power, the city's spiritual continuity has historically been preserved within its Sufi shrines. These sacred spaces function not merely as sites of theological instruction, but as living repositories of intangible cultural heritage, where communities negotiate personal anxieties, social exclusions, and economic survival.

Historically, the scholarship on Indo-Islamic piety in South Asia has been dominated by male-centric genealogies (*silsilas*) and state-centric chronicles or *tadhkiras*, rendering the contributions of female mystics largely invisible. This report addresses this imbalance by shifting the analytical lens away from classical hagiographical chronologies and toward contemporary cultural practices and ethnographic inquiry at the Dargah of Mai Sahiba in Adchini.

Conceptually, the *dargah* literally “the gate of the court” embodies home. For the women dwelling within these areas as nurses, caretakers, ascetics the shrine functioned as a continuation of the *khanqāh* which became the spiritual household. Its heart, the *sahn or courtyard*, remained a democratic theater where disparate communities shared space through ritual hospitality. Their custodianship of *hujrahs* or tiny meditation cells translated domestic maintenance into theological care, the cleaning of a chamber becoming the polishing of the self

Bibi Zulekha, popularly revered as Mai Sahiba, was the mother of the premier Chishti saint of Delhi, Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya. Her shrine, situated in the modern urbanized village of Adchini in South Delhi, serves as a vital counterpoint to the monumental, male-dominated sacred architectures of the city. Rather than viewing the shrine as a static historical monument, this analysis treats it as a dynamic, interactive space where marginalized demographics, specifically women, reclaim spiritual and spatial authority. By examining the contemporary ritual cycles, spatial politics, and informal micro-economies of Dargah Mai Sahiba, this project demonstrates how female piety operates as a form of relational agency that sustains the emotional and ethical infrastructure of contemporary Delhi.



(Credits: Author)

Fig: Signage marking the sacred entrance

To contextualize this spatial agency, it is necessary to contrast the dominant historical methodologies of the two primary Sufi orders that shaped the Delhi Sultanate: the Chishtiyyah and the Suhrawardiyyah. The following matrix details their divergent engagements with state power, wealth, and public space, illustrating how these historical postures continue to influence the spatial and institutional structures of modern Delhi's shrines.

This historical division highlights the unique position of Chishti-linked female spaces. Operating outside the formal structures of state-sanctioned religious authority, the Dargah of Mai Sahiba preserves the classical Chishti ideal of spiritual purity while transforming it into a highly accessible, vernacular sanctuary for modern urban communities.

Textual Legacies of *tadhkiras*

Each *tadhkira* mirrors its time, recording not only miraculous events but also the implicit social contracts of sainthood. In the Chishti lineage, Amīr Khurd's *Siyar al-Awliyā'* (ca. 1350) exemplified how saints ought to be remembered. It is a work suffused with masculine piety and directed primarily toward a male audience. Khurd's text naturalized the exclusion of women from public sanctity.

Yet the metaphysical imagination of Sufism is strikingly feminine. The Arabic *raḥma* (divine mercy) derives from *raḥim* (womb), making motherhood the primal metaphor of creation. Even the key metaphysical terms- the *nafs* (self) that must be purified and the *dhāt* (Divine Essence) to be unveiled are grammatically feminine. Sufi poets such as Bābā Farīd and Amīr Khusrau employed the language of brides and lovers to express yearning for the Divine, transforming the feminine into the very medium of divine desire. The *Siyar al-Awliyā'* exemplifies this architecture of absence. While it portrays countless male disciples and patrons, women appear merely as mothers or wives, confined to the household's periphery. . In the Indo-Islamic context, female spirituality was subsumed under male ascetic narratives: women became caretakers and facilitators of holiness rather than autonomous seekers.

Marriage then became the next testing ground of sanctity. Chishti discourse framed wives both as moral trials and as spiritual companions only when self-effacing. Works like al-Hujwīrī's *Kashf al-Mahjūb* warned against worldly attachment, casting marriage as a potential derailment of mystical focus. Women who endured hunger beside their husbands, or renounced luxury, were memorialized for patience rather than for spiritual insight. In one account, the wife of Ḥamīd al-Dīn Nāgaurī exemplified virtue by rejecting royal gifts and reminding her husband of *ṣabr* (endurance) her piety contained within obedience

The historical retrieval of female Sufi authority requires a critical, diagonal reading of medieval hagiographical texts, or *tazkirahs*. Within the Indo-Persian literary tradition of the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, the construction of sanctity was heavily gendered, serving to consolidate male-dominated chains of spiritual transmission (*shajrah*).

The primary hagiographical record of the Chishti lineage in medieval India, the *Siyar al-Awliya*, compiled by Amir Khurd (Sayyid Muhammad bin Mubarak Kirmani) between 1351 and 1382 AD, portrays an environment almost entirely populated by male mystics. In this text, women are relegated to the structural margins, described by modern scholars as mere "drops of rain" in a vast ocean of male achievements.

This hagiographical compression was achieved through specific rhetorical and cultural mechanisms of erasure :

- **The Practice of Relational Anonymity:** Due to socio-linguistic conventions in medieval South Asia that deemed it disrespectful to refer to noble or pious women by their first names, female mystics were consistently identified through their male relatives. They appear in the records as the "mother of Baba Farid" (Bibi Qarsum) or the "sister of the Sheikh," effectively subsuming their individual spiritual achievements under male authority.
- **The Rhetoric of Spiritual Manhood:** When a female mystic's spiritual excellence could not be ignored, hagiographers *validated her authority by metaphorically stripping her of her gender*.

This is exemplified by the historical reception of Bibi Fatima Sam, a thirteenth-century ascetic revered as the "Rabia of Delhi". Despite her profound spiritual status, primary sources justify her authority by asserting that she was "not a woman, she was a male in female appearance". Similarly, the renowned Sheikh Nizamuddin Auliya frequently invoked the gender-transcendent proverb: "When a lion emerges from the forest, who asks if it is male or female?". While this statement acknowledges spiritual equality, it relies on a masculine symbol of power ("the lion") to make female authority intelligible to a patriarchal audience.¹

- **The Denial of Institutional Succession:** The structural boundaries of the *silsila* remained rigidly patriarchal. Baba Farid famously lamented that if it were religiously lawful to bestow the *khirqah* (the cloak of spiritual succession) upon a woman, he would have granted it to his highly qualified daughter, Bibi Sharifa. This institutional exclusion solidified spiritual transmission as an exclusively male prerogative, ensuring that women could function as caretakers and mothers, but never as formal spiritual successors (*khalifas*).

This South Asian pattern of textual silencing stands in stark contrast to earlier Middle Eastern historiographical traditions. The tenth-century biographical anthology *Dhikr al-niswa al-muta'bbadat al-sufiyyat*, compiled by the Khurasani scholar Abu Abd al-Rahman al-Sulami, documents nearly eighty female mystics, listing them by their individual names and detailing their specific practices of abstinence (*zuhd*) and servitude (*ubudiyya*).

Al-Sulami's work successfully dismantles the "Rabia Myth" which is the academic tendency to view Rabia al-Adawiyya as a singular, anomalous exception by proving that female spiritual leadership was a widespread, recognized phenomenon in the early Islamic world. In contrast, the subsequent medieval Indian hagiographies, such as Abdul Haqq Muhaddith Dehlawi's sixteenth-century *Akhbar al-Akhyar*, represent a narrowing of this biographical space, compressing female lives into brief, cautionary anecdotes of domestic virtue.

Historical	Key Textual	Geographical and Temporal	Primary Mode of Spiritual	Mechanisms of
------------	-------------	---------------------------	---------------------------	---------------

Female Mystic	Source	Context	Charisma	Representation / Erasure
Rabia al-Adawiyya	<i>Tazkirat al-Awliya</i> (Attar). ¹	Eighth-Century Basra, Iraq.	Pure love of God (<i>Ishq-e-Haqeeq i</i>); absolute asceticism.	Often mythologized as an isolated, exceptional anomaly to avoid normalizing female leadership.
Bibi Fatima Sam	<i>Siyar al-Awliya</i> (Amir Khurd).	Thirteenth-Century Delhi, India.	Absolute poverty; intense contemplative devotion; designated as the "Rabia of Delhi".	Described in primary texts as a "male in a female appearance" to validate her authority within a patriarchal framework.
Bibi Qarsum	<i>Siyar al-Awliya</i> .	Thirteenth-Century Punjab, India.	Miracles of compassion; healing the blind; maternal ethical instruction.	Identified primarily through her maternal relationship to Baba Farid; her individual spiritual identity is subsumed.
Bibi Sharifa	<i>Siyar al-Awliya</i> .	Thirteenth-Century Punjab,	Rigorous asceticism;	Explicitly denied the

		India.	administrative and spiritual capability.	<i>khirqa</i> of succession by her father, Baba Farid, due to institutional gender barriers.
Bibi Zulekha (Mai Sahiba)	<i>Fawa'id-al-Fu'ad</i> (Amir Hasan Sijzi); <i>Siyar al-Awliya</i> .	Thirteenth-Century Adchini, Delhi.	Unshakable patience (<i>sabr</i>); direct communion with the Divine; maternal spiritual mentorship.	Revered as the spiritual anchor of Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya; her home was transformed into her burial shrine.

Table 1: Comparative index of early and medieval female mystics

The true legacy of these female mystics survived not in the libraries of the elite, but in the physical, spatial, and oral traditions preserved by subaltern communities. By shifting the focus to contemporary spatial practices and material culture, we can observe how the descendants and devotees of these women have bypassed textual erasure, constructing an alternative archive written in stone, thread, and daily ritual.

Sacred Architectures: Spatial Demarcation, the Jaali, and Architectural Intimacy

The physical topography of Delhi's Sufi shrines operates as a visual and spatial archive of gendered devotion. Unlike the grand, monumental, domed mausoleums constructed for major male saints, which occupy highly visible public squares, the shrines dedicated to female mystics are frequently characterized by an architecture of interiority, situated within residential courtyards, narrow alleyways, and screened enclosures.

This architectural difference represents a spatial translation of the theological concept of modesty (*parda*), turning seclusion into a physical metaphor for divine intimacy. The primary architectural element of these female spaces is the *jaali* (marble or red sandstone lattice screen), which regulates visibility, temperature, and movement.



(Credits: Author)

Fig: Devotional threads tied to 'jaali'

The *jaali* serves a dual theological and spatial function :

- **Refraction of Divine Radiance:** The intricate geometric perforations of the *jaali* filter the intense Delhi sunlight, casting patterned shadows across the marble floors. This visual effect corresponds with the Sufi metaphysical concept of *Nur* (divine light) which is believed to be *too blinding to be witnessed directly*. The divine presence is thus refracted through creation, allowing the devotee to experience the sacred through a structured play of visibility and concealment.
- **The Interface of Supplication:** Rather than functioning as a barrier of exclusion, the contemporary use of the *jaali* has turned it into an interactive interface of prayer. Devotees, predominantly women, press their faces, hands, and chests against the stone lattices, establishing a tactile connection with the interior grave chamber. By tying colorful threads (*mannat*) to the apertures of the screen, they leave behind a physical symbol of their unspoken anxieties, turning the static architectural barrier into a dynamic, shifting archive of human desire.

This spatial choreography is highly visible within the **Mehrauli complex of Khwaja Qutbuddin Bakhtiyar Kaki, which houses several significant female graves**. The first is the modest cell of Bibi Sara, a disciple and caregiver of the saint, whose low-roofed, simple enclosure embodies the Sufi ideal of humility in death. *Access to this cell is restricted to women*, creating a protected, gendered enclave where female pilgrims can seek solace away from the public, male-dominated spaces of the main courtyard.

Nearby lies the tomb of Daiji, or Bibi Hambal the saint's wet nurse-whose grave faces the old mosque, and the adjacent grave of the saint's wife, representing the spatial integration of domestic care into the institutional foundations of the Chishti order.

The historical role of women in shaping these sacred spaces was further expanded during the Mughal era through royal female patronage. **Mumtaz Mahal Begum, the mother of Mirza Jehangir, famously initiated the annual *Phool Walon Ki Sair* (Festival of the Flower Sellers) after making a vow at the Mehrauli shrine of Qutbuddin Bakhtiyar Kaki**, an event that continues to unite the local Yogmaya Temple with the Sufi dargah in a unique, syncretic performance of inter-religious harmony.

The Dargah of Mai Sahiba in Adchini represents the ultimate development of this architecture of intimacy. Bibi Zulekha was buried in 1250 AD in the modest, earthen room where she lived and raised her family. Today, this original domestic space has been renovated and expanded, yet it retains its intimate, residential character.

The main grave chamber houses two graves: the **larger tomb of Mai Sahiba** and the smaller **grave of her daughter, Bibi Jannat**, with the **grave of her granddaughter, Bibi Zainab**, situated nearby. The ceiling of the chamber is decorated with intricate glasswork, and twin chandeliers hang directly above the tombs, casting a warm, golden, and multi-hued light over the

red roses offered by devotees.

An inscription on the northern wall of the chamber reads:

"Her Holiness Bibi Zuleikha Saheba, the venerable mother of his holiness Sultan-ul-Mashaikh, Mehboob e Ilahi Sheikh Nizamuddin Auliya, may God purify their graves, repaired to the next world on the first of Jumada II in the year 648 Hijra (31 August 1250 AD)".

The entrance to this chamber is marked by a beautiful, silver-plated door, which acts as a threshold between the busy lanes of Adchini and the silent, luminous interior of the sanctuary.

While the inner sanctum is often maintained by male custodians, the spatial experience of the shrine is dominated by the women and children who crowd its outer courtyard (*sahn*) and press against its screened windows.

Ritual Ecologies: Weekly Cycles, Communal Kitchens, and Syncretic Festivals

The temporal and social life of Dargah Mai Sahiba is governed by distinct ritual cycles that foster a unique, inclusive community culture. *While the majority of Sufi dargahs in Delhi experience their highest visitor numbers on Thursdays, Dargah Mai Sahiba is unique in its devotion to Wednesday as the auspicious "Ruhani Dua" (Spiritual Prayer) day.*

This weekly temporal shift draws over five thousand devotees every Wednesday, bringing a massive crowd of women and children into the inner and outer chambers of the shrine. The popular belief sustaining this weekly cycle is that Mai Sahiba, as a mother who endured extreme poverty and domestic hardships, is uniquely empathetic to the private suffering of women and is swift in granting their wishes.

This weekly gathering is closely tied to the communal kitchen (*langar*), which serves yellow *tehri* a vegetarian dish of yellow rice cooked with chickpeas (*chana*) and potatoes (*aloo pulao*). The preparation and distribution of *tehri* are free to all visitors, embodying the classical Chishti commitment to unconditional hospitality (*haquq al-ibad*).



(Credits: Author)

Fig: In conversation with women visiting the dargah during 'langar' on Wednesday

A powerful oral tradition at the shrine states that the kitchen's daily expenses are paid for with money mysteriously discovered early in the morning inside the dargah. This narrative of miraculous self-funding reinforces the shrine's autonomy and spiritual authority, assuring devotees that they are receiving nourishment directly from the saint's table.

This practice of sharing *tehri* is rooted in the historical narrative of Bibi Zulekha's life of poverty. Medieval records recount that during periods of extreme starvation in the household, when there was no food for her children, **Bibi Zulekha would patiently say, "Nizam! Today we are the guests of Allah"**. This spiritual reframing of hunger as divine hospitality deeply shaped the personality of Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya, who would often ask his mother, "When will we be Allah's guest again?"

In contemporary practice, this historical starvation is inverted; the distribution of free yellow rice ensures that no visitor to Mai Sahiba's home leaves hungry, translating historical suffering into contemporary material abundance.

On an annual scale, the devotional energy of the shrine peaks during the three-day Urs celebrations, held from March 9 to 11 to mark her death anniversary. The duration of this festival is three days.

During this period, the quiet courtyard of Adchini is transformed into a highly active public space, packed with devotees, **floral displays, and overnight *qawwali* recitals**. The air is filled with the aroma of communal food, including *besan rotis*, biryani, and *tehri*, which are distributed continuously to the crowds.



(Credit: Author)

Fig: Ablution - sacred streams cleansing earthly sorrow

Parallel to the Urs is the highly syncretic procession known as the ***Chadiyon ka Mela*** (Festival of Staffs). Every year, pilgrims traveling on foot to the Urs of Khwaja Moinuddin Chishti in Ajmer Sharif gather in Delhi. As part of their journey, they visit the local dargahs of Delhi, carrying tall, colorful, decorated staff (*chadis*).

Their stop at Dargah Mai Sahiba in Adchini is a crucial ritual requirement; before seeking blessings from the supreme master in Ajmer, the pilgrims - representing a diverse mix of Hindu, Sikh, and Muslim communities must first pay their respects to the mother of Delhi's premier saint.

This procession demonstrates the shrine's role as an inclusive, pluralistic civic space where rigid social, class, and sectarian divisions dissolve into shared, mobile expressions of devotion.

Ethnographic Encounters

To understand Dargah Mai Sahiba as a living institution, we must engage with the everyday narratives of the women who inhabit, maintain, and utilize its space. During intensive ethnographic fieldwork conducted at the shrine between October and December 2025, ten informal interviews were carried out by me with female devotees aged twenty-five to seventy-eight.

These encounters reveal that female agency at the shrine operates through what can be termed "relational piety", a capacity for self-assertion, economic survival, and emotional processing framed within the idioms of service (*khidmat*). The following narratives of three regular interlocutors- Rukhsana, Safia Begum, and Tamanna.

Rukhsana: The Commercialization of Intercession

Rukhsana, a slender woman in her late forties, has positioned herself for years near the western arch of the shrine's courtyard, selling embroidered devotional cloths (*chaadars*) to visitors. Her trade is highly specialized; her inventory is color-coded to correspond with specific spiritual requirements, where **orange signifies physical healing, green represents domestic reconciliation, and white is reserved for gratitude.** Rukhsana does not merely engage in commercial transactions; she acts as a crucial ritual guide for incoming pilgrims, instructing them on how to approach the grave, how to hold the cloth so it "breathes," and how to whisper their petitions.



(Credits: Author)

Fig: Ritual stall selling devotional fabrics and roses

Her commerce is fluid and relational, with prices fluctuating between forty and sixty rupees based on her assessment of the buyer's sincerity rather than a fixed market rate. Rukhsana's own presence at the shrine is driven by personal grief.

She told me that her son went missing after a domestic dispute, and she believes that "the saint carries letters where people cannot go". Through her work, Rukhsana professionalizes her piety; her economic survival is sustained by her spiritual expertise, and her position at the threshold of the arch allows her to exercise a quiet, recognized authority over the ritual actions of others.

Safia Begum: The Ecological Interface of Care

At the outer edge of the courtyard, beneath the shade of an ancient neem tree, Safia Begum performs a specialized ritual known as *aanchal ki dua* (the prayer of the veil). Safia invites distressed female pilgrims to sit with her, draws the hem of their veils (*dupatta*) into her hands, and recites quiet prayers, asking the wind to carry the supplicant's thoughts to the saint's court. She recites softly:

"Jo baat dil mein hai, use hawa tak le jao" (Let the wind carry the thoughts that are in the heart).



(Credits: Author)

Fig: Ancient trees' courtyard canopy

She finishes the ritual by tying three fresh neem leaves into the fold of the veil and requesting that the pilgrim purchase a small bottle of mustard oil to anoint the tree trunk.

Safia charges no direct fee, relying instead on voluntary donations, and explains her practice as a form of ecological therapy, stating that the neem tree "softens heavy spirits". Within the circle of the neem tree's shade, Safia creates a space of intense mutual support that bypasses formal, male-led liturgical structures, offering lower-income women immediate, non-judgmental comfort.

Tamanna: Reclaiming the Mother's Sanctuary

Tamanna, a woman in her mid-thirties from Old Delhi, visits the shrine exclusively on Wednesdays, bypassing the grand, male-consecrated complex of Hazrat Nizamuddin Auliya in favor of Mai Sahiba's smaller tomb. Tamanna's life has been severely disrupted by domestic abuse due to childlessness. Subjected to medical treatments and familial silence, she found in the Adchini Dargah a unique therapeutic space. Her ritual consists of sprinkling rosewater over the marble tomb, pressing her cheek directly against the *jaali* screen, and conversing with the spirit of Bibi Zulekha. Each Wednesday she brought roses, sprinkled it slowly over the marble tomb, then whispered petitions through the *jaali*. "I ask her to make me able to bear what I have, if not a child."



(Credits: Author)

Fig: Lived stories shared during the interview

For Tamanna, the gender of the saint is of paramount importance: ***"a woman understands a woman's pain," and "men tell you to be patient; women teach you how to survive patience"***. Her interactions with the tomb are conversational rather than formal; she frequently *leaves symbolic objects, such as a baby's anklet or a small toy, tucked into the lattice*. Although she is occasionally scolded by formal caretakers for blocking the path or crying too loudly, Tamanna views these spatial restrictions as minor compared to the domestic violence she faces at home. "They say my womb is cursed," she said, eyes fixed on the stone floor. Doctors prescribed treatments; her mother-in-law prescribed silence. At her cousin's suggestion she began visiting this *makbara* dedicated to the saint's mother, Bībī Zuleikha. "*When I stand here,*" she continued, *"I feel someone older is listening who is not judging, just listening."*

Her devotion illustrates how the shrine functions as a feminist *"listening archive"*, a physical space where marginalized women can externalize private trauma, find social validation among other women, and translate shame into articulate speech. Her decision to visit the mother's tomb over the son's is represented by the probability.

These ethnographic encounters demonstrate that female agency in modern Delhi is not expressed through political rebellion or the overt rejection of religious norms. Instead, it is found in the quiet, creative reuse of sacred spaces. By turning the thresholds, courtyards, and lattices of Dargah Mai Sahiba into spaces of economic survival, emotional recovery, and mutual support, these women actively challenge the male-dominated structures of formal religious authority, proving that the sacred is kept alive through everyday acts of care and resilience.

Politics of Preservation

The physical maintenance and contemporary survival of Dargah Mai Sahiba as an active, welcoming space rely heavily on its hereditary servitors (*khuddam*). Today, the shrine is managed by a formal Management Committee led by the Sajjada Nasheen, Syed Asif Ali Nizami, and the Chief In-Charge, Syed Aamir Ali Nizami. These servitors belong to the prestigious Nizami family, who have served as the custodians of Delhi's primary Chishti shrines for over seven hundred years.



(Credits: Author)

Fig: Nizamia free health center sign board

The family's deep authority was highlighted globally in 2017, when the elderly Syed Asif Ali Nizami and his nephew Nazim Ali Nizami briefly went missing during a spiritual pilgrimage to Pakistan, drawing intense diplomatic attention before their safe return to Delhi.

In the context of contemporary urban Delhi, these servitors operate as "spiritual entrepreneurs". They are tasked with the dual responsibility of maintaining the physical infrastructure of the shrine including modern marble cladding, protective metal latticework, and security notices warning visitors against pickpockets while preserving the public perception of the saint as a "living presence" (*zinda pir*). This is achieved through the narration of stories detailing Bibi Zulekha's immense patience, her historic miracles of starvation, and her direct communion with God.

The servitors must also navigate complex social and theological challenges in a rapidly

modernizing metropolis. Shrines like Dargah Mai Sahiba are frequently targeted by reformist and orthodox critics who view popular Sufi practices- especially the heavy presence of women, ecstatic emotional displays, and the tying of threads as un-Islamic superstitions.

To protect the shrine from such hostility, the management balances mystical practices with scriptural respectability. They integrate formal educational spaces, such as madrasas, within the complex and enforce clean, disciplined codes of conduct.

This active, diplomatic stewardship is essential to prevent "servitor displacement"- a process where traditional, locally embedded caretakers are replaced by cold, state-run bureaucratic administrators. When such displacement occurs, the highly personal, interactive, and comforting character of a shrine is often replaced by a rigid, dogmatic atmosphere that excludes the very women who sustain its devotional economy.

The Nizamia Charitable Trust

Established in 1983 by Syed Dr. Mohd Ali Nizami, a direct descendant of Hazrat Nizamuddin Aulia. This trust bridges the gap between centuries old Sufi values and the pressing socio-economic challenges of contemporary urban Delhi. By institutionalizing the classical Chishti ideal of *khidmat* (selfless service), the trust ensures that the dargah acts not only as a spiritual sanctuary but also as a vital socio-economic safety net for marginalized and underprivileged communities.

The trust's operations are deeply rooted in the universal principles of love, unity, and inclusion, transcending boundaries of faith, caste, or region. It channels public devotion into highly structured, impactful initiatives across several key areas:

- **Combating Hunger:** Expanding upon the informal, daily practice of sharing *tehri* and communal meals at the shrine, the trust runs dedicated feeding programs designed to ensure that no vulnerable visitor or local resident goes to sleep hungry.
- **Healthcare as a Lifeline:** Recognizing that illness often plunges lower-income families deeper into poverty, the trust provides critical healthcare support. This includes maintaining specialized funds for medical relief, general surgeries, and essential cataract operations, offering immediate comfort to those left out of formal medical infrastructures.
- **Education and Breaking Poverty Cycles:** In alignment with the shrine's historical legacy of intellectual and ethical instruction, the trust actively funds educational initiatives. It views education as the primary tool to dismantle generational cycles of poverty among the youth who frequent the precinct.
- **Women's Empowerment and Skill Training:** Mirroring the Dargah of Mai Sahiba's unique status as a female-centric sanctuary, the trust places a strong emphasis on women's

empowerment. Through localized vocational and skills training programs, it equips marginalized women with the tools needed to build independent, dignified futures.

- **Emergency Relief and Resource Accessibility:** Beyond daily care, the trust manages crisis-driven initiatives, including seasonal relief (such as distributing blankets during Delhi's harsh winters), emergency aid, and sustainable water accessibility projects for underserved areas.

Ultimately, the presence of the Nizamia Charitable Trust demonstrates that the contemporary relevance of Dargah Mai Sahiba extends far beyond its physical architecture. By actively running these welfare programs, the hereditary custodians honor their ancestral legacy of universal compassion (*sulh-i kul*), transforming the sacred threshold of the shrine into a space of collective survival, dignity, and hope.

Transforming Silence into Epistemic Renewal

The Dargah of Mai Sahiba in Adchini proves that women held great spiritual power in history, even if old books do not say much about them. For a long time, male writers chose to leave women out of main historical records. They did this to protect male-led groups and family lines. When these old writers did mention holy women, they only talked about them as good mothers or quiet housewives, hiding their true religious authority.

However, studying the actual building of the shrine and looking at daily rituals reveals a completely different story. The physical space of the dargah and the way people worship there today show that Mai Sahiba was a powerful leader on her own. Her authority did not depend on men. The silent history of Sufi women was never a lack of power, but rather a choice by male writers to keep them out of the history books.



(Credits: Author)

Fig: Man lighting candles at the shrine

However, as the contemporary life of the Adchini shrine demonstrates, this textual compression is completely overturned by the active, physical presence of the thousands of women who populate its courtyard every week. At this shrine, female sanctity is defined not through formal administrative titles, but through a maternal model of empathy, patience, and relational healing.

By operating as a safe, non-judgmental sanctuary, Dargah Mai Sahiba provides marginalized women with a vital platform for emotional recovery and economic survival. Here, agency is expressed not through the open defiance of patriarchal structures, but through the creative reuse of sacred spaces. Whether through Rukhsana's commercialized guidance, Safia's ecological

prayers, or Tamanna's intimate conversations with the tomb, these women turn the physical elements of the shrine - the arches, the tree, and the *jaali* screen into active tools for personal survival and mutual support.

Ultimately, this study of Dargah Mai Sahiba demonstrates that the spiritual and cultural vitality of modern Delhi is sustained not by monumental stone structures or formal theological dogmas, but by the quiet, daily gestures of the women who gather at its thresholds. In their prayers, their shared meals, and their tied threads, the ancient Sufi promise of universal compassion (*sulh-i kul*) remains a living, breathing reality, offering a message of hope and resilience to a rapidly changing world.