

Work and Devotion: The Constitution of Subjectivities among Working-Class Muslims in Urban India

Final Paper for Re:work

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Gulzaar was a highly skilled artisan, accomplished in a form of embroidery called *zardozi*, which is notable for the often heavy use of metallic wires.<sup>1</sup> He lived in a quarter (*mohalla*) of Old Delhi known as Lal Kuan, located on the western fringes of the seventeenth century Mughal city. I came to know Gulzaar because he and some members of his family were recognized by the government as National and State award winners in *zardozi* work. To be recognized as a National or State award winner was an extremely prestigious honor, mainly because it gave artisans access to government sponsored exhibitions across the country (and sometimes abroad) where they could set up stalls and sell directly to consumers. Gulzaar's father, also an award winner, was widely known throughout Delhi for being a highly skilled master artisan (*ustad*) and a specialist embroiderer of wedding saris, which typically incorporated copious amounts of intricate *zardozi* work. In addition to attracting apprentices (*shagrid*) from Old Delhi, including many female students, he also attracted apprentices from cities as far away as Bareilly, Rampur and Lucknow. One former apprentice, Gul, recounted a story to Gulzaar about his father. Gul remembered that when he was learning the craft, Gulzaar's father had broken his hand. But despite his handicap, he was still able to show his apprentices the correct techniques of *zardozi*. Gul and the other apprentices dubbed their teacher's technique as "*toota tariqa*" or the broken method.

During many visits to Gulzaar's home, where I was able to conduct structured interviews as well as casually interact with the his family, I came to know how important it was for him to have a sense of rootedness in Old Delhi through his family's history of doing *zardozi* work within the space of the old city. He spoke proudly of his possession of old designs that originated from the time of Bahadur Shah Zafar, the last Mughal emperor who was exiled from Delhi by the British after the failed "sepoy mutiny" of 1857. These designs were kept in registers that had been salvaged from his great-grandfather's workshop after it was set alight during the riots following Independence and the partition of India and Pakistan in 1947. These designs were extremely valuable for Gulzaar because they represented a direct connection to "the time of the Mughals" (*Mughalon ka zamana*), a time when work was idealized as being of the highest quality because it was patronized by the Muslim elite. As another artisan put it, "zardozi was work meant for kings". If an artisan, like Gulzaar, could

trace their family's history of doing work in Old Delhi to the time of the Mughals, then this connection meant that the artisan was amongst the ranks of the “*asli karigar*” or the original, authentic artisan.

When I met Gulzaar in 2007, he was in his late-forties. He had saved enough money to rent a small space near his home and was able to open a workshop. He had previously worked for his brother in a workshop that was owned by their father. Gulzaar employed several artisans and one master artisan – Gulzaar was primarily in charge of overseeing the production process and making the designs, but sometimes he also acted as an *ustad* – and mostly produced embroidered items for the local market and emerging export markets<sup>ii</sup>. Despite the higher status he acquired after setting up his own workshop – he became a *karkhandar* or workshop owner who embodies micro capital<sup>iii</sup> as opposed to just a *karigar* or artisan/worker – he was depressed about the kind of work he was being commissioned to do. He had hoped for the opportunity to produce high-end zardozi work or “*asli zardozi*” so that he could work on old designs from the time of the Mughals that required precise (*bareeq*) needlework, often described as “clean work” (*saaf sutra kaam*). However, the reality of the market was that there was increased demand – local and overseas – for so-called crude work (*chalu kaam*) that required beads and sequins instead of traditional metallic wires. He said that he missed doing original zardozi based on designs from the time of the Mughals.

I asked Gulzaar if his parents or grand-parents would recognize the work being done today as zardozi. He said that they would not consider such work to be zardozi and he continued by remembering a family saying. Gulzaar recalled that “when I was young and learning the craft at home, the elders (*buzurg*) used to say that ‘whenever there is a court (*darbar*) in heaven, all the cushions are embroidered with zardozi’.”

Gulzaar went on to articulate how the ways of working, and the attitudes to work had changed as a consequence of the recent accelerated demand for crude craftsmanship. He said in contrast to the work being done today, zardozi demanded a high level of devotion (*ibaadat*) from artisans. It required the cultivation of patience (*sabr*), both in the process of learning skills and in the execution of the needle. The apprentice, after being accepted by the master, was considered first like a slave (*ghulam*) and had to work hard at tedious tasks. But once the apprentice had developed the right amount of bodily discipline he could begin working with the needle on textiles. Gulzaar said that he would have to work for hours in silence at his *karchob* (wooden frame) and was taught to think about each stitch as an act of devotion to God. He said that cultivating this kind of attitude towards work took years of training. In contrast to this regimen, workshop owners today could not afford to

provide lengthy periods of training. Gulzaar also remarked, with a tone of condescension, that today's artisans just think about work as merely a job, showing up to the workshop only when they need the money. He said “instead of quietly remembering the name of God while working, artisans in my workshop sing along to Bollywood tunes”.

## **Beginnings**

The description above sets the context and basis on which I developed my project at Re:Work. Gulzaar's story and narrative about work was not uncommon among one broad segment of my informants – highly skilled artisans who were long-time residents of Old Delhi. Many, like Gulzaar, had family connections to the old city stretching back to at least the early nineteenth century, when the city was the center of Mughal power in India (albeit diminished). Most were in their late forties, fifties and sixties and had undergone their apprenticeship training well before the recent economic liberalization in India, which gained momentum in the 1990s and resulted in increased overseas trade relations. Of course, historical scholarship informs us that craft production has always been oriented to both high quality, luxury markets, as well as to mass markets, bazaars and household consumption (Blake 1991; Roy 1996; Sahai 2006). Furthermore, the trends that Gulzaar describes regarding the decline of quality work with the introduction of new markets and new demand is also not unique to the present. However, what is far less understood is how artisans themselves have, in the past and today, negotiated these changes (see Kumar 1986; Sahai 2006; Wilkinson-Weber 1999).

The intention at the beginning of my research on artisanal production was to foreground the typically unheard voices of artisans who were having to constantly adjust and re-orient their lives to rapid changes happening during the course of their lifetime. In this vein, what initially caught my attention was the common vocabulary that these artisans used to describe the challenges and different aspects of their working lives. It was a lexicon that expressed multiple experiences, such as master-apprentice relations, senses of belonging to the city and its history, and differentiating their own subject-position as “*asli karigar*” (original/authentic artisans) from newer and lesser skilled entrants into the industry.<sup>iv</sup> As I thought more about the vocabulary used by artisans, I began to understand this language in terms of artisans' experience of contemporary precarious work and in broader relation to their historic marginalization from nation-state discourses of what constituted “traditional Indian craft communities” (Venkatesan 2009).

My doctoral dissertation explored how these urban Muslim artisans navigated their subject positions of inhabiting the margins by constructing localized meanings of authenticity. I explored in depth

how the notion of “*asli*”, which can be translated as original, real or authentic, was articulated and embodied through various encounters – for example with the state – and in various settings such as in spaces of work. Rather than being a stable and fixed category, I saw authenticity as a fluid and negotiable characteristic that artisans could re-shape and re-work to make life’s uncertainties somewhat more manageable. I referred to “sites of performance”, or the different situations and interactions in everyday life where the authentic (*asli*) self became constituted.<sup>v</sup> I argued that within these sites the so-called authentic self was always performative and realized through outward-oriented, intersubjective relations.

One of these sites of performance was the embodiment of ideal work practices. I discussed the ways in which artisans articulated and embodied devotion and how such expressions related to their self-perception as “*asli karigar*” or authentic artisans. I argued that my informants, who are a segment of a larger group of urban Muslim informal workers, had cultivated an ethics of work through historic entanglements with Sufis. It was through devotion as a conceptual axis that, with Sufi interventions, developed into an approach to work that can still be deciphered today.

As a fellow at Re:Work over the past ten months, I have explored this initial argument further, paying particular attention to global history dynamics and the relationship between work and ethics. I now turn to discuss these themes that I have been focusing on at Re:Work.

### **Work as Devotion: Summary of Research Project at Re:Work**

As mentioned, my research project at Re:work explored a question that I began initially thinking about in my doctoral dissertation. I wanted to better understand the extent to which certain Islamic traditions in India, namely those passed down within Sufi orders, influenced the work practices as well as the meaning of work among subaltern Muslims. As such, I began to scrutinize my fieldwork notes and interview transcriptions more closely and explored whether the everyday language and terminologies used by artisans could provide an everyday form of “evidence” suggesting the resilience of Sufism, especially for subaltern Muslims. Work as devotion was the starting point of this project.

It was in thinking about Sufism as a discursive tradition that I began to be interested in how words and idioms could be “mobilized” (but not necessarily with intentionality) to counteract the systemic and everyday exclusion experienced by my informants. Could the terminologies I heard in Old Delhi serve as a “lexicon of empowerment” (Green 2008a) that brought work into a wider and

legitimizing sphere *because* the lexicon rendered work practices within an Islamic fold? Could terms related to artisanal work such as, for instance *darbar* (royal court), *ghulam* (slave), *buzurg* (elder or noble), *asli* (original, real, authentic), and *ibaadat* (devotion) to name a few, be read as idioms that had travelled with the global reach of Sufism? And finally, could these vocabularies provide a different angle from which to understand forms of “ethical agency”?

In order to address these questions, I wanted to firstly better understand Sufism from a global history perspective, and examine its particular history and sphere of influence in a South Asian context. Secondly, I wanted to understand the role of Sufism in constituting religious ethics as “ordinary ethics” (Das 2012) that manifested in and through everyday work practices.

The idea to look into the confluence of religious traditions and work practices was motivated by broader concerns regarding the urban poor in India, and especially Muslims within this segment. The aim of this research project was to engage with broader themes and debates in order to (1) challenge contemporary perceptions of the urban Muslim poor as being predisposed to Islamic fundamentalism; and (2) contribute to the growing scholarship on “lived Islam” by considering the resilience of Sufism in everyday life and especially its relation to work. Below I will provide some background to these two issues and discuss how my research project aims to engage with them.

### *Challenging Perceptions of Urban Muslims in India*

In 2006 a report was published by the Government of India known as the Sachar Report. Its mandate was to make critical assessments on the social and economic conditions of Indian Muslims. The report concluded that the Muslim community is marked by acute marginalization, particularly evidenced by education levels as “Muslims have fallen behind on every educational parameter since Independence in spite of being more urbanized than most communities.” (Hansen 2007:50) And it is urban poverty among Muslims that has risen; according to estimates from 2004-2005, for the first time, urban poverty was recorded as being higher than rural poverty. The report is specific in identifying “traditional artisan occupations of Muslims (weaving, carpentry, metal work, mechanics, etc)” as being largely excluded from India's “new economy”, a product of three decades of ongoing liberalizing reforms (Hansen 2007:51). Furthermore, a national “politics of forgetting” – one that constructs the ideal of the Indian middle-class as consumer-citizens – excludes India’s urban poor and working classes from national political discourses of development (Fernandes 2004).

In such conditions of marginalization and exclusion, the urban Muslim poor in particular has been stigmatized as being the anti-thesis of the “secular” modernizing aspirations of the nation-state: they are perceived as being predisposed to religious fundamentalism and communalism, and they are viewed as inhabiting backward, ghettoized spaces. Against this background of stigma, I have referred to urban Muslim artisans specifically as belonging to a class that constitutes India's forgotten citizens.

By focusing on how work itself is given meaning in the everyday lives of urban workers, I think we can at least conceptually move away from seeing these groups as being solely driven by their conditions of poverty – the assumption being that the urban poor, by virtue of being poor, are more likely to accept extremist religious ideologies (Bayat 2007). Instead, I hope that my research project will be able to position urban Muslim artisans as having a historically constituted language of work – largely drawn from a fund of Sufi idioms – that can provide a resource to “hold anomie at bay... by arousing a shared sense of transcendence and significance” (Lindholm 2008:144).

### *Living Islam, the Ethical Turn, and Sufism*

As I mentioned, the main questions of this research project are: How has the language of work been historically constituted? In what ways do the vocabularies of work remain resilient and give meaning to work for urban Muslim artisans in India? In asking these questions this project aims to contribute to debates, largely within anthropology, on “living Islam” and the cultivation of ethical dispositions. The notion of living Islam challenges studies that take “Islam” as a general blueprint or an all-encompassing social structure that can make sense of Muslim societies (Geertz 1971; Gellner 1981). It was Talal Asad (1986) who articulated a conceptual shift by re-formulating Islam as a discursive tradition based on the founding texts, the Qu'ran and hadiths (Prophetic traditions). This conceptual shift – viewing Islam as a powerful tradition based on the authority of texts and consequently on the authority of scholars of these texts – has informed many recent studies, materializing into a “ethical turn” in the anthropology (Brenner 1996, Deeb 2006, Henkel 2008, Hirschkind 2006, Mahmood 2005, Rudnyckij 2009).

While these studies demonstrate how Islam, as a discursive tradition, shapes people's ethical lives, often challenging liberal notions of agency (Mahmood 2005), there are two salient critiques that can be foregrounded. Firstly, the point of departure remains Islam; more recently anthropologists have begun studying the multiple ways in which Islam is lived in everyday life, therefore making the point of departure Muslim lives rather than Islam (Marranici 2008:7; Marsden 2005; Schielke

2009). Secondly, there is in my view an over-emphasis on those people who are affiliated with reformist trends in Islam and especially those who “consciously present themselves as pious, committed Muslims...in other words, people who share a sense of activist commitment” (Schielke 2010:2). By elaborating on the resilience of Sufism in the everyday life of my informants, I hope that my research will show a different way in which ethical agency is constituted – that is, not through overt engagements with religious movements or institutions, but instead through the meanings attached to work.

### **Sufism in Everyday Life**

I use the phrase “resilience of Sufism” because over the last hundred and fifty years (at least) Sufism as a tradition in the South Asian context (but also other parts of the world) has been systematically stigmatized (I will discuss the logics of this in the next section). A multitude of Sufi practices are generally described as shrine cults that attracts Muslims and non-Muslims alike who engage in Sufi saint “worship” (cf. Robinson 1983; see also Werbner and Basu 1998). Sufism in India is also conventionally described as a “syncretic” religion, mainly because it seemingly adopts practices of Hindu worship into its own form of saint veneration<sup>vi</sup>. When I explicitly asked my informants what they thought about Sufism, the most common reply was that the shrine complexes have become corrupt, operating like businesses. They singled out the pirs (living spiritual leaders) for their corrupt behavior, saying they act like businessmen who, in return for their services of being intermediaries between people and God, ask for cash payments.

And yet, all of my informants regularly visited Sufi shrines in Delhi, and if possible in Ajmer in Rajasthan.<sup>vii</sup> They said they did not visit shrines for purposes of using the pirs or the saint himself as intermediaries; instead they went to pay their respects (*izzat karna*) to the saint because he was an exceptionally learned person, and considered to be close to God. In terms of spatiality, Sufi shrines in Delhi were, for my informants, like extensions of the old city even though they were located in three different neighborhoods in New Delhi (specifically in South Delhi), often adjacent to middle and upper-middle class areas. In general when speaking about their experiences of travelling in New Delhi – often to visit government ministries, to participate in craft fairs or to buy raw material in the large markets – artisans would recount their feelings of unease and discomfort. But in visiting shrines, they knew the geography intimately. I was told the most reliable money transfer agents were located near the shrines, or that if I wanted to buy *ithar* (perfume) then the best place was from a specific shop near the shrine. When I was given directions from Old Delhi to New Delhi, often one of the shrines would be the main landmark that was mentioned. It was these everyday details

that made me think about how Sufism was very much a part of daily life for my informants.

I think it is important to point out just how relevant Sufism remains in the everyday lives of Muslim artisans in Delhi. In the course of my research at Re:Work I have tried to articulate another aspect of Sufism's sphere of influence: as a powerful discursive tradition, which has played an important role in developing a work ethic among artisans. However, prevailing scholarship on Sufism has viewed it as a mystical tradition in decline globally since the early modern period. Relatively more recently, Islamic reform movements, beginning in the nineteenth century, have gained momentum and power and they have played a prominent role in stigmatizing Sufi practices. It is to this scholarship and history, and a need to re-view it, that I now turn.

### **(Re)Viewing the Relevance of Sufism**

The commonplace interpretation of Sufism is that it is Islamic mysticism. However, this interpretation is misleading. It elides a historically dominant form of knowledge production regarding the constitution of the category of religious experience. It is argued that this construction of religious experience has a genealogy rooted in a culturally Protestant conception of mysticism that emphasizes "the solitary individual's direct, unmediated experience" with the divine as the ultimate expression of authentic religious experience across time and space (Green 2012:2). It was this understanding of mysticism that influenced nineteenth and twentieth century scholars of religion and Sufism in particular. In this scholarship, true Sufi mysticism was conceived as thriving only up to the medieval period, and by the early modern period, scholars conceptualized Sufism through the lens of decline (Trimingham 1971; see also Kugle 2006). Within this paradigm of decline, the earlier period of universal mysticism, when the true Sufi was characterized as an individual seeker of divine truth, was replaced with a conception of a corrupted form of Sufism that was "composed of miracles, rituals and filthy lucre" (Green 2008b:1048).

In nineteenth century colonial India, as in other colonial contexts, British administrators perceived this corrupted Sufism as a significant threat. Sufi brotherhoods, and the popularity they garnered among large swathes of the population via charismatic saints, were thought to be like subversive secret societies that could not easily be institutionalized or controlled by colonial governance. A further threatening aspect of the Sufis was their deeply embedded role and influence in the everyday lives of local communities; furthermore in the South Asian context Sufis also held a great deal of power over the governing elite from early medieval Sultanate rule to the later periods of Mughal and Bahmani rule (Aquil 2009, Eaton 1993, Nizami 2002). Confronted with this fear and the lack of

control over Sufi organizational structures, colonial officials made alliances with the so-called Islamic “orthodoxy”, mainly because it was perceived that the religious scholarly class engaged in more familiar and institutionalized religious practices, with their focus on law and scripture (see Menski 2006). As such, in India as elsewhere, Sufism came to be constructed as “either heterodox subset of Islam or as a separate movement, entirely detached from the roots of Islamic orthodoxy” (Christmann 2008:60). This remains the prevailing view of Sufism even today.

The increasing power of the Muslim scholarly class, and the coeval systematic discrediting of Sufi practices, was bolstered by an emergent colonial discourse that constructed the model of “World Religions”, which turned multiple forms of religious praxis into monolith objects of study such as Islam, Christianity, Hinduism, etc (Green and Chatterjee 2008). In the nineteenth century, Islamic reform movements in India gained power and prominence because they tended to collude with and legitimize the idea of a monolithic “Islam”. These various movements were primarily founded on purging deviant practices especially associated with Sufism as well as on the premise of reforming practices in line with strict interpretations of scripture.<sup>viii</sup> Although reform movements are not unique to the nineteenth century nor to South Asia (Terzioglu 1999; Kugle 2006), in this context, however, they gained momentum at a point when Mughal power had significantly diminished – there was a sense among the Muslim elite that their fortunes had taken a turn for the worse because they had deviated from the “true” path of Islam. This led to a flourishing of missionary activity whereby organizations such as the Tablighi Jamaat worked to reform the Muslim middle and lower classes (Gooptu 2001).

And yet in light of, or perhaps in spite of over a century of Islamic reform in South Asia, I suggest that – at least gauging from my fieldwork observations among Muslim artisans in Old Delhi – the language and idioms of Sufism, as well as some of its associated practices, remain resilient and important for subaltern groups.

Since the tenth century, when the expansion of Sufism began into Khurasan, India and Anatolia, a process of “grafting” occurred whereby the linguistic and conceptual “superstructure” of Sufism was grafted “onto the deeper social structures of life in different environments” (Green 2012:60). In light of recent historical scholarship on the global history of Sufism and its influence in different regions, the once prevailing understanding of Sufism through the lens of “mysticism in decline” has begun to be challenged. More attention is being paid to the historical contingencies and wider relations of power that have shaped its conceptual formation as a particular kind of religious experience – one that was seen as limited to the individual and wholly an interior matter. Indeed,

recent scholarship has begun to re-conceptualize Sufism as a powerful tradition.

### **Sufism as Powerful Discursive Tradition**

In my view, one of the most useful reconfigurations of Sufism is the shift of emphasis from mysticism to tradition (Green 2012; see also Aquil 2011). This shift imbues Sufi practices, including their adaptations to a range of different cultural contexts, with a degree of power and transformative potential that is difficult to account for under the “mysticism in decline” model. As with any kind of tradition, one of its main features is that knowledge of the past is passed down through the generations. Sufi traditions in particular rely on chains of authority that have been organized into brotherhoods; specifically Sufism employs conceptions of precedent and lineage to gain legitimacy among elite rulers and ordinary people alike. Furthermore, Sufi shrines, where prominent saints are buried, work to sacralize space by bridging distant geographies through the body of the saint (Green 2003). For example, one of the most well-known and revered Sufi saints in South Asia is Moinuddin Chishti, whose shrine located in Ajmer in the state of Rajasthan. The space that is made sacred by his shrine is connected to the distant homelands of Islam by virtue of the saint’s family genealogy that connects him, and the local community, to the Prophet’s family and therefore to the Arab heartland of early Islam. In this way, Sufism, which migrated far and wide from its early formations in the Tigris-Euphrates region, relied less on the work of individual mystics and more on collective organization for transmitting knowledge. As a tradition it had the power of bringing distant geographies and temporalities under an encompassing and universalizing Islamic fold.

Reconceiving Sufism as a powerful tradition is, therefore, critical for gauging how it was able to bring so many different cultural practices and geographies into a common and widely intelligible sphere of influence. There are three main forms of power that Sufism was able to wield in order to establish its legitimacy: discursive, miraculous and economic powers (Green 2012). While all three forms of power are intertwined and mutually enabling, since space is limited in this paper, I will only focus on the discursive power of Sufi traditions. Sufism as a tradition with discursive power “refers to the authority acquired by Sufism as a discourse comprising a legitimate vocabulary of words and concepts, influential models of society and cosmos, and exemplary paradigms of behavior and morals” (Green 2012:6). Sufi discourse became part and parcel of a powerful tradition because it was able to graft an authoritative language of Islamic tradition onto a diversity of practices and customs.

It is important at this point to discuss some of the discursive aspects of Sufism by focusing, in particular, on the Sufi idiom. According to Nile Green, from the earliest formulations of Muslim sainthood in the early ninth and tenth centuries, “the terminology [has] laid the basis for what we may term as a Sufi idiom” (2008:205). This terminology, which has become near universal in its application and usage, draws primarily from Arabic, and rather than subsuming divergent practices into a homogenized “Sufi praxis”, the idioms provide a common language through which multiple social facts become intelligible and legitimized. What is more, the success of the Sufi idiom was not “its metaphysical abstraction, but instead its identification with living persons”— Sufism was not the orientalist’s vision of mysticism, but rather “an embodied Islam that was firmly rooted in its variant social worlds” (Green 2008:205; see also Werbner and Basu 1998). In its capacity for expressing particularities in the language of universality, I argue that Sufi vocabularies enabled an intimate convergence of work and ethics. Through the grafting of idioms onto a multiplicity of practices, these practices were re-conceptualized within the language of ethics.

So far I have attempted to situate Sufism apart from the prevailing understanding of it as mysticism – a characterization of religious experience founded on the individual seeker’s path to God. I have argued that viewing Sufism through the lens of idealized mysticism, and then accepting its fate as a corrupted form of Islam, misses the ways in which Sufism has been, and continues to be, a powerful tradition that remains relevant, and even empowering, in the everyday lives of people around the world.

But what I want to stress is that Sufism’s power is not only manifest in the huge numbers of people that visit Sufi shrines, or attend the yearly festivals that celebrate the death of a saint – these often anthropological examples of “lived” Sufism tend to remain entrenched in assumptions that it is a heterodox subject, or even a cult, loosely or even not at all associated with Islam. Instead, I want to situate Sufism within the realm of everyday action, by focusing on how its discursive power has shaped forms of ethical (subaltern) agency. Furthermore, Sufism provides subaltern and minority groups with a “lexicon of empowerment”, which enables a diversity of practices to gain legitimacy *because* the lexicon renders them within an Islamic fold. As one historian of India has written, Sufism becomes “entrenched in the dominant culture of the time and place even while being mindful of the terms of reference of Islam as derived from the Quran and the hadis, the Traditions of the Prophet” (Aquil 2011:24).

### **On Ethics (1): Ordinary Ethics, the Everyday, and Immanence**

A part of my research project has been to examine the ways in which a historically constituted language of work, as I observed among artisans in Old Delhi, could engender forms of ethical agency. In other words, I wanted to better understand Sufi notions of ethics and in particular how the concept of immanence was articulated by early Sufi writers, who subsequently had tremendous influence on Sufis in South Asia. I think that early Sufi elaborations explicitly incorporated everyday experience into articulations of ethical agency. For example, Richard Eaton provides an example of how a Sufi conceptualization of ethical practice is rooted in the notion of immanence. He discusses a fundamental missing link in studies of Sufism and its expansion in South Asia: How did the Sufis, who were highly literate in the religious texts, engage with and also convert Hindus who were mostly illiterate rural workers from the lower castes? (Eaton 1978, 2000) Eaton's answer is, through the adaptation of local oral traditions. He gives the example of poems from the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries that were sung by women who worked for hours at the grindstone. It was local Sufis that turned these poems into devotional songs. The woman's hand that moves the grindstone was reconceived as having hidden power; the hand became '*arif al-wujud*, 'knower of existence', or in other words, God. Thus by doing the work at the grindstone, the women become witness to God and thereby closer to God. This was work as devotion; one became both an ethical person and a good Muslim through one's engagement in work.

Before discussing some of my preliminary research on Sufi ethics, I would like to briefly make some conceptual and theoretical points regarding ethics and the everyday. I especially explore how ordinary ethics hinges on the notion of immanence.

When ethics comes to be enveloped in everyday practices, and indeed when it constitutes practices of craftsmanship and making things with one's hands, I argue that this enables a kind of agency that is aspirational, but not necessarily dis-embedded from the everyday. I want to argue that ethics and ethical agency is not always oriented toward the realms of the extra-ordinary, toward heroic acts of courage or creativity that defy the constraints of the everyday (Das 2012).

The wider implications of viewing ethical agency as extra-ordinary is that in this formulation becoming ethical or having ethical agency is ultimately about striving for freedom (Agrama 2010). Indeed philosophical works on ethics are founded on the premise that ethical agency is not fully achieved or realized unless its objective is freedom. Western discourses on the cultivation of the authentic self – of the creative self – are very much about realizing ethical agency by finding one's true self. This is a conception of the self that must be distinguished from a prior self, defined by its repression due to the increasing constraints that society enforces – constraints that have increasingly

suppressed the freedom of the true self especially in the age of industry and capitalism. Heidegger wrote in *Being and Time* that the real true self, the ethical self, is only realized in death, which is conceived as the ultimate freedom. Suicide is, of course, the most extreme and extra-ordinary articulation of ethical agency.

Foucault's work on ethics, especially in his later work in *Technologies of the Self* (1989) maintains that ethics derives largely from the self's work on the self; that is, ethical agency is derived from the cultivation of the self, rather than from tradition or reason (cf. Mahmood 2005). In this formulation, ethics must be separate from and not constrained by the external authority inherent in both epistemes, tradition and reason. Foucault writes "The individual who has finally succeeded in gaining access to himself is, for himself, an object of pleasure" (Davidson 2005:120). Becoming the self's object of pleasure is to move beyond the constraints where one is still in the position of a subject, or subjectivation; it is to no longer view the self as subject, but rather as object – in other words to transcend the self. Indeed, in Foucault's study of the history of ethics, the notion of "care for the self" was envisioned to move beyond the self and towards a transcendental consciousness, thus surpassing the self. This notion of ethics, according to Foucault, has been lost in modern times, and instead "knowledge of the self" has come to dominate forms of agency. This implies the primacy of firstly acquiring knowledge *about* one's self and then holding such knowledge to be true. Therefore, it entails the concept of *a priori* whereby the "progressive consideration of self, or mastery over oneself, [is] obtained not through the renunciation of reality but through the acquisition and assimilation of truth" (Foucault 1989:35). In the ancient conception of "care for the self" agency is generative and ultimately oriented to a transcendent good; in modernity's "knowledge of the self" agency becomes an a struggle against a corrupted self that has been shaped by the constraints of the social. Yet in both of Foucault's models, ethical agency seems to be oriented towards an escape from the ordinary – that realm burdened with so many un-freedoms. As Faubion writes in his *An Anthropology of Ethics*, ethical action is engendered when actors make themselves into "subjects of esteemed qualities or kinds" (2011:3).

Against this notion of ethical agency as extra-ordinary, Veena Das argues for a conceptual shift in perspective in our thinking about ethics. This shift, she writes, is from "thinking of ethics as made up of judgments we arrive at when we stand away from our ordinary practices to that of thinking of the ethical as a dimension of everyday life in which we are not aspiring to escape the ordinary but rather descend into it as a way of becoming moral subjects" (Das 2012:134). This becoming of moral subjects through the cultivation of ethics in the realm of the everyday is, according to Das, "the labor of bringing about an eventual everyday from within the actual everyday" (ibid). In other

words, ordinary ethics is not cultivated with an orientation towards a transcendent “good” – be that the cultivation of a self apart from tradition or the knowledge of the self as an ultimate truth, which I think are both based on realizing freedom that transcends the everyday. Rather, ordinary ethics – the work of bringing about an eventual everyday from the actual everyday – cultivates moral subjects through its relation to that which is immanent, to the eventual everyday.

The realization of ethical agency in relation to immanence, as opposed to transcendence, is also an argument made by Charles Taylor in *Ethics of Authenticity* (1994). In what he calls the “malaise of modernity”, Taylor argues that modernity’s increased emphasis on the individual has led to a sense of equivalence between ethics and becoming free from traditional forms of restriction such as hierarchy, economic arrangements, and family life. However, in contrast to this ideal of freedom that is dis-attached from the social, Taylor argues that the authentic or ethical self is always oriented toward “horizons of significance” that are determined in conditions of collective sociality. The self is always cultivated in relation to “significant others” and to aspects of society and culture that are deemed meaningful. Thus I read Taylor’s notion of “horizons” as strongly supporting the idea that the cultivation of ethical agency is oriented to that which is immanent, or to that which is generated within the ordinary and everyday. The temporality of ethics remains future-oriented or aspirational as I have suggested earlier; but it is a grounded future, a future that emerges from the living of one’s everyday life.

I am belaboring the point of differentiating ordinary ethics from the conventional conception of ethics, because only viewing ethical agency as aspiring or striving toward freedom is limiting and elides other ways in which people act ethically, perhaps within tradition or in relation to structures of authority (Agrama 2010; Hirschkind 2006; Mahmood 2005). With Sufism’s long history of settling globally and establishing links to communities that are often beyond the purview of official, elite forms of incorporation, I think we are well served to engage with their conception of ethics and how it was translated into subaltern forms of agency. In particular, I think that shifting the conceptual emphasis regarding ethics from the self’s relationship to transcendence towards the self’s relationship to immanence, and therefore by extension to the everyday – or eventual everyday – is productive for gauging the intimate relationship between work and ethics. The case of one Sufi order in India will serve as an example to illustrate this point.

I mentioned the early Sufi saint, Moinudding Chishti who migrated to India in the twelfth century and whose shrine is in the city of Ajmer. He was the founder of the Chishti brotherhood, which is one of the most prominent, wide spread and popular orders in South Asia (Aquil 2011; Digby 2003;

Nizami 2002). Three of Moinuddin Chishti's disciples are buried in Delhi and their shrine complexes remain an important part of the daily lives of many of the city's residents, including the artisans with whom I worked with in Old Delhi. The historian Simon Digby writes that the Chishtis, through their "legends, tombs, and shrines" exercised a "great influence on the historical imagination of South Asian Muslims for several centuries down to the present" (2003:251). In addition to being classically trained Islamic scholars, the Sufis of the Chishti order were greatly influenced by the writings of Ibn Arabi, the twelfth century theologian. In particular, they adopted and in some ways instrumentalized one of Ibn Arabi's theories, which was later formulated in the well-known doctrine of *wahadat al-wujud*, which literally translates to the unity of being. This doctrine incorporated a monist perspective within Islam, which, in addition to articulating a path to achieve oneness with God, also worked to articulate a pedagogical style based on the notion that the divine is everywhere, that there is a unity in multiplicity.

## **On Ethics (2): Sufi Ethics and the Protestant Ethic**

Coming back to my ethnographic material that I discussed at the beginning of the paper, I think that by focusing on both language and practice among artisans we can access a work ethic that emerges from Sufi discursive traditions. For my informants, I gathered that work is both a source of livelihood – or in other words, there is an economic necessity for doing work – but work is also an ethical commitment that draws on useful idioms that remain operative in today's work practices. This suggests that work is imbued with meaning beyond its materiality.

I will conclude this paper with a preliminary discussion that compares and contrasts Sufi ethics with Weber's Protestant Ethics. I think at first these two ethical traditions seem to make similar interventions with regard to work; however, I argue that they conceptualize a work ethics quite differently, and the main difference lies in the centrality of the calling in Weber's discussion. Weber states: "When asceticism was carried out of monastic cells into everyday life, and began to dominate worldly morality, it did its part in building the tremendous cosmos of the modern economic order . . . the idea of duty in one's calling prowls about in our lives like the ghost of dead religious beliefs" (2005:123-4).

The calling, in its Calvinist formulation, was based on the idea that there are worldly, as opposed to ascetic, tasks that are nonetheless divinely ordained. It is in the service of fulfilling one's calling that one can please God. And it is through the calling that disciplined, systematic and methodical work can be accomplished beyond the scrupulous discipline of ascetic life. Within the framework of

the calling, according to Weber's argument, a Protestant ethics emerged that made the accumulation of wealth for its own sake an ethical ideal, as opposed to accumulating wealth for the sake of satisfying worldly pleasures. This was the unique aspect of capitalism that differentiated it from earlier forms of wealth accumulation. But in the calling, God remains a transcendent figure. With the later development of capitalism, the duty to God as set forth in the calling becomes the ghost of capitalism's power, as Weber writes, but is not entirely purged.

What I've discussed as Sufi ethics in relation to work does not have the concept of the calling in its ethical framework. Instead it is based on the immanence of God – God being present in every motion of the hand and in the surrounding environment. By doing work one can experience, remember and witness God. Work, therefore, is the path, the *tariqa*, to become close to God. As I understand it, within Sufi ethics there is no ethical formulation that accounts for the accumulation of wealth as being a service to God. And perhaps there was no imperative for it – work in itself was conceived as the highest devotional act one could perform. A verse from a poem written in the fourteenth century by a Chishti Sufi in India captures this ethic of work:

“Eat from your own labor, and from the toil of your hand;  
Do not beg anything from anyone, and you will become like sugar and honey.  
Work immediately, for laziness is like unbelief;  
Consider a man who is idle like an ox or an ass.” (Digby 1984:115)

Thinking about Sufi ethics, and how work is conceptualized within this domain, enables us to reconsider the practice of work in different contexts and to consider the genealogy of a particular approach to work, with all its global history entanglements. It also enables us to step out of the hegemony of a seemingly normative global capitalist economic order – it allows us to view ethics and its influence in all aspects of work as historically contingent. We can challenge the supposedly homogenizing effects of one prevailing economic order by foregrounding the existence of other ideologies of work, ones that continue an engagement with the past, as in Sufi ethics, in constituting how work is carried out in the present. In such an exercise we can critically question Weber's contention that the notion of the calling prowls about in our everyday lives like the ghost of dead religious beliefs. Because for many, work and religious ethics are mutually constitutive, without one there cannot be the other.

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<sup>i</sup> During the long period of Muslim expansion into India – from the thirteenth century Sultanate period to Mughal rule – zardozi was commonly associated with the ruling elites and nobility, because of the heavy use of gold and silver wires.

<sup>ii</sup> At the time of my fieldwork, the main exports markets included Europe (especially Germany and Italy), North America, Australia and the United Arab Emirates. In the 1970s and 1980s, while most production was done for the local markets, the primary export market for zardozi was Central Asia, namely Uzbekistan.

<sup>iii</sup> Alpa Shah and Barbara Harriss-White discuss micro capital as a defining characteristic of petty commodity producers. These types of producers, which I argue can also account for artisans, “embody micro capital as well as labour and do not lose entire control of the means of production but are compulsively incorporated through circuits of exchange” (2011:17).

<sup>iv</sup> The majority of newcomers are migrants who come to Delhi as unskilled labor and take up short apprenticeships in predominantly export-oriented workshops. Many informants also considered women who do piece-work from home as new kinds of workers. In general, both kinds of workers – migrants and women – were considered fake (*naqli*) or crude (*chalu*) artisans.

<sup>v</sup> I find Ian Hacking’s discussion of the sites of concept formation helpful in clarifying my own use of the notion of “site”. Hacking writes that there are numerous types of sites, which he defines as “the sentences in which the word is actually (not potentially) used, those who speak those sentences, with what authority, in what institutional settings, in order to influence whom, with what consequences for the speakers” (2002:17).

<sup>vi</sup> With regard to the argument that Sufi “saint worship” in India has essentially arisen due to Hindu influences, Francis Robinson is critical: “[Imtiaz] Ahmad and some of his fellow scholars make much of Muslim attendance at saints’ shrines. Although the possibility of injecting old forms with new content is acknowledged...it is always referred to as ‘saint worship’ and regarded, despite attendance at shrines in every other Muslim society, as an *essentially* Hindu institution absorbed within Indian Islam.” (1983:188)

<sup>vii</sup> In Delhi my informants would regularly visit the shrine complex of Qutbuddin Bakhtiyar Kaki, a thirteenth century saint who was a disciple of Moinuddin Chishti who established the Chishti Sufi order in South Asia. The shrine of the latter is located in the city of Ajmer in Rajasthan.

<sup>viii</sup> Many Sufi orders in India also had their own orthodoxy that called for reform at various periods of Muslim rule in India. My main concern with nineteenth century reform movements is to focus on the growing institutional power of the Muslim scholarly class (many of whom also followed certain Sufi orders) in light of colonial discourses regarding the category of religion.