Nourishing the body and food for soul

The role of animals in the South Asian Sufi environment

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This article investigates some aspects concerning the consumption of meat for food in Islam in general and in the South Asian cultural environment in particular. Starting out from a look at the primary sources of authority in Islam, i.e. the Koran and the prophetic Traditions (*hadith*), concerning legal prescriptions with regard to feeding on meat, the focus moves on to describe how muslims, especially Sufis, in the Indian subcontinent have adapted to the local culture and developed a particular attitude towards eating or refraining from eating meat in their daily diet and/or in the specific circumstances of their initiatory discipline. It argues in favor of a common stance among practitioners in different spiritual traditions, thereby creating a common understanding and attitude characteristic of the multi-cultural environment of India and Pakistan.

Key words: Islam, Sufism, meat, spiritual discipline.

1. Introduction[1]

Wandering around the market areas and *mahalla*s of South Asian cities, towns and villages, one becomes immediately aware of entering a muslim neighborhood by the presence of numerous butcher's (urdū: قصائی *qasā'ī*) lined up along its lanes and alleys. The consumption, and therefore the buying and selling, of meat is one of the most obvious signs of Muslim presence in the Subcontinent's public and social environment, even more so as it contrasts with similar human environs among Hindu and other communities in India, Pakistan and Bangladesh, whose food customs are often based on a meatless, i.e. vegetarian diet. In fact, it is a common perception to think of Muslims as heavy meat-eaters, something whoever has ever been invited for a meal in a muslim household anywhere in the Subcontinent (and elsewhere in the Islamic world) would easily agree with. As followers of a religion that owes its specifics to the nomadic-pastoral traditions of tribes relying on animals for food and sustenance in the barren

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landscape of the Arabian peninsula, muslims throughout space and time have considered meat as a natural food resource, the consumption of which has been explicitly sanctioned by Divine order. Allāh, the One and All-mighty Divine Sovereign who reveals Himself in the World through His 99 names (*asmā al-ḥusn*),[2] is known among others as *al-Muqīt* (the All-Nourisher) and *al-Razzāq* (the Provider of Sustenance), the Bestower of all means of nourishment and provision for His creatures. In the sixth Chapter of the Qur'ān, titled Chapter of the Cattle (Sūrat al-an'ām) and so called because it discusses different matters with regard to the role of livestock for humans, God decrees the general permissibility of consuming animal meat, except for a few limitations:

قُل لَّآ أَجِدُ فِى مَآ أُوحِىَ إِلَىَّ مُحَرَّمًا عَلَىٰ طَاعِمٍ يَطْعَمُهُۥٓ إِلَّآ أَن يَكُونَ مَيْتَةً أَوْ دَمًا مَّسْفُوحًا أَوْ لَحْمَ خِنزِيرٍ فَإِنَّهُۥ رِجْسٌ أَوْ فِسْقًا أُهِلَّ لِغَيْرِ ٱللَّهِ بِهِۦ ۚ فَمَنِ ٱضْطُرَّ غَيْرَ بَاغٍ وَلَا عَادٍ فَإِنَّ رَبَّكَ غَفُورٌ رَّحِيمٌ ١٤٥

> Say: 'In all that has been revealed unto me, I do not find anything forbidden to eat, if one wants to eat thereof, unless it be carrion, or blood poured forth, or the flesh of swine for that, behold, is loathsome or a sinful offering over which any name other than God's has been invoked. But if one is driven by necessity neither coveting it nor exceeding his immediate need, then, behold, thy Sustainer is much-forgiving, a dispenser of grace. (Cor.:VI:145)

In a similar perspective, in the Chapter of the Table Spread (Sūrat al-Mā'idah), Allāh explicitly allows for the consumption of animals for food, He nevertheless exhorts His believers to refrain from actively pursuing any act of violence implied by killing an animal for food while in the state of purity (*iḥrām*) upon crossing the boundaries of the sacred territories (*ḥaramain*) while on ritual pilgrimage (*ḥajj*):

يَـٰٓأَيُّهَا ٱلَّذِينَ ءَامَنُوٓا۟ أَوْفُوا۟ بِٱلْعُقُودِ أُحِلَّتْ لَكُم بَهِيمَةُ ٱلْأَنْعَـٰمِ إِلَّا مَا يُتْلَىٰ عَلَيْكُمْ غَيْرَ مُحِلِّى ٱلصَّيْدِ وَأَنتُمْ حُرُمٌ ۗ إِنَّ ٱللَّهَ يَحْكُمُ مَا يُرِيدُ

> Honour your bonds! All grazing beasts of the flock are permitted to you ..., but you are not allowed to hunt in the state of iḥrām. Indeed Allāh decrees as He wills. (Cor.:V:1)[3]

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[2] According to a well-known tradition (*ḥadīth*), the Prophet Muhammad is reported to have said: "Allāh has ninety-nine names, i.e. one-hundred minus one, and whoever knows them will go to Paradise." (*Ṣaḥīḥ Bukhārī* 54:23).

[3] The term *iḥrām* derives from the same Arabic verbal root as the word *ḥarām* (ح ر م *ḥā-rā-mīm*, i.e. "what is forbidden or deemed unlawful" by God), as opposed to *ḥalāl* (حَلَّ *ḥalla* "to be allowed or lawful"), i.e. what is lawful or permissible; it indicates the state of ritual purity and sacredness of a Muslim which is a requirement for approaching and entering the sacred territory of the *ḥaram* (lit.: inviolate, sacred space), in order to perform the *ḥajj* (major pilgrimage) or the *'umrah* (minor pilgrimage). It is forbidden for any person in the state of *iḥrām* to hunt, shoot, kill, sacrifice, capture, confine, destroy or abuse any animal. This prohibition applies to all land animals, birds, and insects other than marine animals. If a person accidentally steps on or kills small animals or insects, such as small black ants, grasshoppers, etc., he is not considered guilty, but he must pay a fine according to the value of the insects killed. It is, however, allowed to kill animals and insects that may harm them or other pilgrims, such as mosquitoes, snakes, scorpions, and spiders. However, driving away the insect or animal first is preferable if possible.

Further on in the same Chapter, there follow further specifications:

حُرِّمَتْ عَلَيْكُمُ الْمَيْتَةُ وَالدَّمُ وَلَحْمُ الْخِنْزِيْرِ وَمَا اُهِلَّ لِغَيْرِ اللّٰهِ بِهٖ وَالْمُنْخَنِقَةُ وَالْمَوْقُوْذَةُ وَالْمُتَرَدِّيَةُ وَالنَّطِيْحَةُ وَمَآ اَكَلَ السَّبُعُ اِلَّا مَا ذَكَّيْتُمْ وَمَا ذُبِحَ عَلَى النُّصُبِ وَاَنْ تَسْتَقْسِمُوْا بِالْاَزْلَامِ ۗ ذٰلِكُمْ فِسْقٌ ۗ اَلْيَوْمَ يَىِٕسَ الَّذِيْنَ كَفَرُوْا مِنْ دِيْنِكُمْ فَلَا تَخْشَوْهُمْ وَاخْشَوْنِ ۗ اَلْيَوْمَ اَكْمَلْتُ لَكُمْ دِيْنَكُمْ وَاَتْمَمْتُ عَلَيْكُمْ نِعْمَتِيْ وَرَضِيْتُ لَكُمُ الْاِسْلَامَ دِيْنًا ۗ فَمَنِ اضْطُرَّ فِيْ مَخْمَصَةٍ غَيْرَ مُتَجَانِفٍ لِّاِثْمٍ ۙ فَاِنَّ اللّٰهَ غَفُوْرٌ رَّحِيْمٌ

Forbidden to you are carrion, blood, and swine; what is slaughtered in the name of any other than Allāh; what is killed by strangling, beating, a fall, or by being gored to death; what is partly eaten by a predator unless you slaughter it;...but whoever is compelled by extreme hunger then surely Allāh is All-Forgiving, Most Merciful. (Cor.:V:3)

If with a few exceptions the Qur'ān grants the believers the license for consuming the meat of animals living on both Land and in the Sea, this license is nevertheless conditional on the premise that the slaughtering of an animal must be performed in the name and for the sake of Allāh alone. This becomes evident by the invitation to invoke the sacred formula known as *tasmiya* or *basmala* (i.e. *Bismillāh al-raḥmān al-raḥīm*, in the name of God, the Merciful, the Compassionate) and the *takbīr* (i.e. the formula *Allāhu akbar, i.e.* God is Greatest) at the time of killing an animal and again before consuming it as part of a meal, for by doing so implies the honoring of the Divine Nourisher in His essential quality of being Compassionate and Merciful.[4] The invoking of both formulas must be intended, hence, as acts of remembrance meant to enhance the awareness of the intimate relationship that subsists between the believer and the Divine (*dhikr*). Moreover, the slaughtering of an animal in order to be lawful requires specific conditions and techniques (*dhabīḥah*), so as to make its meat permissible for consumption (*ḥalāl*).[5]

There is more to it: the concept of slaughtering an animal culminates in the Sacrifice performed on the occasion of 'Īd al-aẓḥā (عيد الأضحى', lit.: feast of sacrifice'), one of the two great religious festivals of Islam, known in South Asia as Baqar 'Īd (the festival of [the slaughtering of] the cow), which as in other Semitic religions, re-enacts the willingness of the prophet Ibrāhīm (=Abraham) to offer God what

[4]" *Eat not, oh believers, of that (meat) on which Allāh's name has not been pronounced* (at the time of the slaughtering of the animal)" (Cor.: 6:121) However, according to some legal schools (*madhhab*), the pronouncing of the *tasmiya* and the *takbīr* are not obligatory (*farḍ*), but *mustaḥabb* (recommended and laudable actions).

[5] The person slaughtering the animal should be a muslim who is mentally sound and knowledgeable of the correct procedure; the animal to be slaughtered should be lawful according to Islamic law, it should be alive at the time of slaughtering, the formula *Bismillāh* (In the Name of God) should be invoked immediately before the slaughter of each animal, the device used for slaughtering should be sharp and should not be lifted off the animal during the act of slaughter; in the latter, the trachea, oesophagus and main arteries and veins of the neck region should be severed, so that all blood can naturally drain from the carcass; the animal must face the *qibla* when being slaughtered, it must be slaughtered with something made of iron and a normal amount of blood must drain out of the animal's body

he holds most dear, i.e. his son, as a token of loyalty and obedience to His command. Significantly, it is in response to his total surrender to the will of Allāh that Hadrat Ibrāhīm achieves perfection and thereby transcends the condition of Muslim (lit.: 'he who submits to the will of God thereby attaining to the state of inner peace") that leads Allāh to reverse His compassion (*raḥīm*) and mercy (*raḥmān*) upon those who show Him to be His true servants.[6] The act of offering this sacrifice further enforced by the invocation of the sacred formula by a human thus leads to an instant reaction of mercy and compassion from the Transcendent whereby the living creature on the altar is transformed into an animal, thus sparing the life of Hadrat Ismā'īl, Abraham's son.

In imitation of this ancient pledge of alliance, this sacrifice is reiterated by muslims every year as the highlight of the month of pilgrimage (*Dhū'l-ḥijja*) to the sacred sites of Mecca and surroundings, offered to seek the pleasure of and to gain closeness to Allāh. This latter meaning is conveyed by the term *qurbān* (قربان) used for this sacrifice. Derived from the Semitic verbal root (q-r-b ق ر ب) meaning 'to become close', it intends any act of fostering the state of closeness to God (*qurbiyat*); interestingly, this same word is used in Sufi terminology to indicate the stage of spiritual perfection when the soul has reached the state of utmost intimacy with the Divine Beholder of Truth (*al-Ḥaqq*).

It is evident that the normative framework provided by the *sharī'a*, derived in the first place from the Holy Book, not only allows, but actively promotes the use of meat not only as a resource for the nourishment of the body, but also as means to enhance the mutual relationship between the Creator and the most perfect among His creatures, Man, instilling and nourishing the faith in his soul and mind.

Complementing the statements made in the Qur'ān concerning the legislation for the community of believers at large (*umma*), there are additional specifications with regard to the issue of meat for food found in numerous sayings attributed to Muḥammad, the prophet of Islām, which lend themselves to more nuanced interpretations. These sayings, known as (*aḥādīth*, pl. of *ḥadīth*), constitute the second important source of legal authority in Islām; they are often quoted by Sufis, for they integrate the Qur'ānic message with indications concerning an inner attitude and discipline, addressed to a more restricted circle of followers (*al-khawāṣṣ*):

[6] In some Sufi doctrines, such as that formulated by the renowned Indian Sufi master Shaikh Aḥmad Sirhindī (1564-1624) known as *waḥdat al-shuhūd* (unicity of witnessing), this state of Supreme obedience ('*ubūdiyat* corresponds to the highest degree of spiritual realization, hence it arises out of the awareness of the total identity between the intention of the individual creature and the Divine will (*irāda*).

> A good deed done to an animal is as meritorious as a good deed done to a human being, while an act of cruelty to an animal is as bad as an act of cruelty to a human being.
>
> Imām al-Tabrīzī: *Mishkāt al-maṣābīḥ*; Book 6; chapter 7, 8:178.

This statement invites humans to extend mercy and compassion to animals, as they too are integral part of Allāh's creation. Even more specifically, as with regard to the use of meat for food, the Prophet cautions his followers against the unrestricted use of meat as part of the daily diet:

> Beware of meat, for meat can be as addictive as wine...
>
> Imām Malik ibn Anas, *al-Muwaṭṭā'* 1742.

And with even stronger connotations, he appears to have expressed genuine concerns with regard to the use of meat as an integral part of a daily diet. As what sounds almost an anticipation of slogans which much later would be pronounced by animal rightists or healthy food partisans, he exhorts his followers:

> O sons of wisdom, do not turn your stomachs into graveyards for animals!
>
> (Daif Hadith, *Fayd al-Qadīr Sharḥ al-Jami' al-Ṣaghīr* 2:52)

Notwithstanding these commendations that can be traced back to the primary sources of muslim identity, ethical or medical concerns with regard to the use of animals as a food resource have never found much attention in the legal literature of classical Islām. Even among contemporary Muslims, any serious discourse on the viability or desirability of vegetarianism is rarely discussed. Nevertheless, throughout history, some Muslims have been abstaining from eating meat, in many cases for reasons of piety, in others as part of a more articulate spiritual discipline.[7] It is in this perspective that renouncing the use of meat assumes a different significance that aligns Islam and those who follow and practice it, and more precisely its esoteric aspect (*al-bāṭin*), with other religious and spiritual Traditions, in South Asia and elsewhere.

The choice of renouncing (or at least strongly reducing) the use of meat by those focusing on an interiorized vision of life and the world was dictated by a combined attitude of mercy and compassion (*raḥmān* and *rahīm*) for living creatures at large and the requirement of purifying the inner states of the soul (*taḏhkiya al-nafs*) as an integral part of the Sufi discipline (*ṭarīqa*). Both are intimately interconnected: whereas the former reflects on a human plane one of the most essential attributes

[7] For an overview of dietary customs among Sufis of the early Islamic period, see: Qudsi, Arin Salamah (2019).

through which God relates Himself to the world (*ṣifāt-i ilāhī*), the latter implies the reverse process of a human being gradually transforming or rather, sublimating, their individual attributes into those of Allāh. This process of spiritual refinement naturally results in the practitioner's soul and mind being pervaded by an attitude of compassion towards his fellow creatures, something contemplated also in other spiritual traditions, such as Mahāyana Buddhism which personifies the notion of compassion (*karuṇā*) in the figure of the bodhisattva. Although Muḥammad, considered by Sufis the fountainhead of the God's spiritual presence in the realm of creation (*al-khalq*), did not recommend total abstention from the consumption of meat, he repeatedly emphasized that it should be considered a rare delicacy rather than a staple in an individual's diet. He himself would abstain from meat for extended periods, opting instead for a meal consisting of dates, water, fruits and vegetables, thereby illustrating through his example (Sunna) that meat was not an essential component for his daily sustenance.[8] Thus, we may argue, the nuanced attitude towards the consumption of meat from the very outset reflects the particular nature of Islam as a Tradition that distinguishes between an outer, exoteric aspect projected towards the world and all deeds intended for it, resumed by God's name (and function) as al-Ẓāhir (the Apparent), and an inner, esoteric dimension contemplating the domain of the transcendent, subsumed in the Divine name al-Bāṭin (the Hidden).

Reports about muslim spiritual practitioners can be found from early times. In his hagiographic account of 96 saints titled *Tadhkirat al-awliyā* ('Memories of the intimate friends of God'), the Sufi poet Farīd al-Dīn al-'Aṭṭār (1145-1221) reports that Rābī'a al-'Adawiya, an 8th century woman saint from Basra, in Iraq, who was renowned for her strict ascetic practices (*zuhd*), abstained from eating meat as dictated by her attitude of love (*'ishq*) for all animals. She rebuked her contemporary Sufi companion Ḥasan al-Baṣrī that he should not wonder if animals were shunning him after he had eaten a meal prepared with animal fat (Farīd al-Dīn al-'Aṭṭār 2011: 64).

More to the East, the renowned Persian poet Mawlānā Jamāl al-Dīn Rūmī (1207-1273), whose spiritual poetry is still very popular also among South Asian Sufis, is accredited with renouncing the pleasure of eating meat during his spiritual exercises. That such abstention from meat was part of his spiritual discipline described by him becomes evident from a quatrain in his Mathnawī, frequently quoted in the Sufi hospices of Northern India:

[8] Sufis practicing a meatless diet often quote the following verse from the Qur'ān to explain their attitude: *There is not an animal on earth or a two-winged flying creature, but they are communities like you…* (Cor.:6:38). The importance of being compassionate towards other creatures such as animals also finds expression in the prophetic Tradition: "He who takes pity [even] on a sparrow and spares its life, Allāh will be merciful on him on the Day of Judgement."(*ḥadīth* narrated by Abū Umāmah, a companion of the Prophet, transmitted by al-Ṭabarānī in his work *Al-mu'jam al-kabīr*).

پاکت پلید شود معده در چونکی
کلید و پنهان کن نه بر حلق قفل
لقمه شد نور جلال هرکه دروی
هر چه خواهد تا خورد او را حلال

Chūnki dar ma'da shūd pākat palīd,
qafal na bar halaq o panhān kun kalīd,
har ki dar wī laqmā shūd nūr-i jalāl,
harchi khwāhid tā khwūrd-i ū rā ḥalāl.

Since pure food turns foul in your stomach,
lock your throat and hide the key;
for him in whom that morsel is transformed into the light of God,
whatever he likes to eat, all is lawful to him.
(*Mathnawī-i ma'nawī* Vol. II, 105)

The subtle word-play used in these verses reverts around the transformation of what is *ḥarām* or unlawful from an outward perspective into something *ḥalāl* or permissible, achieved through the alchemy of sublimation of the soul. The double sense of intending food for nourishing the body and food for soul is here contemplated as well as providing a subtle hint at the possibility for those endowed by spiritual insight to be capable of discriminating the underlying sense of the dual categories of *ḥarām* and *ḥalāl* pertaining to the immanent world of creation synthesized in the unitary vision of the Transcendent (*tawḥīd*).

In fact, all around the muslim world one comes across Sufi orders prohibiting or discouraging the consumption of meat during the periods of spiritual retreats *(khalwa*). In Istanbul's Fatih district there is a neighborhood known as Etyemez ('Non-meat-eater') which derives its name from the vegetarian practices of the Sünbüli Sufis, a local branch of the Central-Asian Khalwatī Sufi order residing in a tekke in that area (Foltz 2001). And the renowned 14th century Qādiri shaikh 'Abd al Karīm al-Jīlī (1365-1424), commenting on his master Ibn 'Arabī's advice to avoid meat and animal fat during retreats, stressed that "meat and animal fat strengthen animality and its principles will dominate the spiritual principles."

Besides such tendencies among Sufis all around the muslim world from early times, in South Asia ordinary muslims as well as Sufis came into contact with peoples and traditions that had since long been practicing and cultivating the abstinence from meat. In the process of assimilating the cultural, social and spiritual environment in which they decided to spread their call for Islam (*da'wat*), many of them adopted the way of life of their homeland of choice identifying and refining elements conducive to their way of life and spiritual practice. From the historical sources we learn that since the period of the Delhi Sultanate (1206-1526), many Sufis in India have in fact been vegetarian relying exclusively on very simple, vegetarian food. Commonly they adopted dishes that since long had been the diet of Indian ascetics and spiritual practitioners, such as *khichṛī*, a mash of boiled rice and pulses enriched with a little amount of clarified butter (*ghī*). Throughout their century-long presence on the Subcontinent, many authorities of the Chishtiyya, the most Indian of all Sufi orders, kept emphasizing the importance of maintaining a diet void of meat. Prominent among these was Ḥamīd al-Dīn Nāgaurī (1192-1274 AD), a disciple of Khwāja Mu'īn al-Dīn Chishtī, who led a very ascetic life based on self-sustained agriculture in a remote place of Rajasthan's Marwār region, adopting a meatless diet and exhorting his disciples to keep in line with his example (Maksud 1991). His refusal to consider animals as a resource for food result not only from the advocated ascetic lifestyle typical for affiliates to the Chishtiyya that requires detachments from all kinds of sophistication and luxury, but appears to be influenced by the local environment in which Jaina and Vaishnava attitudes prevailed among local ascetics and spiritual practitioners as well as the common folk. Amīr Khusrau, accredited for being the first true Indo-Persian poet and disciple of Shaikh Niẓām al-Din Awliyā, praises in his Persian poem titled *Nuh-Sipihr* ('The Nine Planetary Spheres') the taste of South Asian fruits and vegetables, stressing that they make for a perfect diet suitable for enhancing spiritual progress. According to the Moroccan traveller Ibn Baṭṭūṭa (1304-1377) who visited India during the reign of Muḥammad ibn Tughlaq (r. 1325-1351), the renowned Sufi shaikh and patron saint of Delhi, Niẓām al-Din Awliyā (1238-1325) used to offer his disciples simple flat bread (*roṭī*) with cooked beans (*rājmā dāl*). A communal kitchen (*langar*) offered simple vegetarian dishes to everyone who visited his hospice (*khānaqāh*) twice a day. (Ibn Battuta 653-4) Besides, Sufis diets included *pukhta* (simply cooked rice), *shīr viranj* (milk rice), *yugast* (curd), *nān* bread, *ḥalwa* and dry fruits. In the *Khair al-majālis* ('Virtues of spiritual meetings'), the recorded oral teachings (*malfūẓāt*) of Shaikh Naṣīr al-Dīn 'Chirāgh-i Dihlawī' (d.1356), one of the main successors (*khulafā*) of Sh. Niẓām al-Dīn Awliyā (d. 1325), the shaikh is described as usually breaking his daily fasts after sunset with nothing but a piece of *qurs* (round stuffed bread).

Similar to Hindu ascetics (*sādhu*), the wandering Sufis (*malang*) affiliated to the Qalandariyya commonly encountered in the Indus Valley in Pakistan's southernmost Sindh region, rely exclusively

on a diet consisting of bread, pulses and raw vegetables. They carry small bags of flour (*āṭā*) with them, which they use to mix with water, milk, or oil, turning it into a frugal, meatless meal. Occasionally accompanied by dates and raisins these simple ingredients are in line with the performance of their devotional exercises based on detachment from worldly ties and the subjugation of the human soul's lower, animal instincts. From what they told me during my stays in Sindh and Southern Panjāb, they refrain from the use of meat except for special occasions, such as the festival of the annual death anniversary (*'urs*) of their patron saint Kh. Lāl Shahbāz Qalandar at Sehwan and when part of unsolicited offerings (*futūḥāt*) received in their begging bowl (*kashkul*).

Muḥammad ibn Mubārak aka Mīr Khūrd Kirmānī (d. 770/1368–9), author of the *Siyar al-awliyā* ('The virtuous conduct of the friends of God,' ca. 1351-1368), a well-known mid-14th century biographical work (*tadhkira*) describing the lives of the saints of the Chishti order during the Sultanate period, quotes numerous Sufi masters teaching that the consumption of meat is a hindrance in the process of transmuting the uncultivated soul subject to lower, animal instincts (*nafs-i ammāra*) into the pacified soul (*nafs al-mutma'inna*) of an intimate friend of God (*walī Allāh*). As Ibn Baṭṭūṭa, he mentions *khichṛī* as the principal diet among spiritual practitioners. Likewise, Sh. Jamālī Kamboh al-Dihlawī (d.1536), the author of the *Siyar al-'ārifīn* ('The path of those endowed with spiritual knowledge'), an account of the sufis of the Chishti and Suhrawardi orders during the early Mughal period, also mentions *khichṛī* as a staple diet in Sufi khānaqāhs, which sometimes was prepared as a sweet dish cooked with milk and sugar, while the consumption of meat was limited to special occasions, such as the end of the holy month of Ramadhān or the *'Īd al-adhḥā* festival. Dārā Shikoh (1615-1659), the spiritually inclined Mughal crown-prince and son of emperor Shāh Jahān, was reportedly a staunch vegetarian. Influenced by the Upanishadic dictum *Pratyekam anshatah virajit devottam* 'every living and non-living being has the essence of the cosmos and divinity,' Dārā Shikoh reportedly became vegetarian at the age of 16 and completely gave up on meat, fish and even eggs; he never even touched the *gosht-i qurbānī*, sacrificial meat (Dara Shikoh 2022).

Further north, in the Kashmir Valley, inhabited by a largely muslim population but with ancient roots steeped in the spiritual culture of pre-Islamic India, thousands of Kashmiri Muslims abstain from eating meat as they are devotees of the so-called Rishi Sufi masters claiming descent from Nūr al-Dīn Walī, also known as Nund Rishi (1377-1438) and revered all over Kashmir as *Sheikh al-'ālam* ('Master of the world'). Legends claim that he grew up breastfed by the 14th century Shaiva poet-saint Lal Ded also known as *Laleshvarī* and that since then he nourished himself exclusively on milk and water, claiming that *Ann poshī telī yelī van poshī*, which roughly translates as: 'Food will thrive only as long as the woods survive' (Hilal 2021). Faithful to the ascetic discipline of this unique devotional tradition, which brings

together the spiritual ancestry of Lal Ded and authorities affiliated to the already mentioned Khalwatiyya, a Central-Asian Sufi order whose ascetic traditions prescribe abstinence from meat as integral part of their initiatory method, the purpose is that of extirpating arrogance, haste and anger through the elimination of meat from the practitioner's diet. It reiterates the restrictions on meat in the context of the process of sublimating the initiates' inner states with the intention of subduing the lower instincts rooted in the uncultivated soul of the profane. Even lay affiliates or simple devotees of the Rishi Sufi order rely predominantly on eggs, lentils and dried turnips for their daily diet, excluding meat and avoiding the related killing of animals from their life routine. In this case too, it is an integral part of the order's teachings that consumption of meat promotes the development of animalistic qualities, whereas consumption of plant and dairy products promotes peaceful qualities.

In a reverse but important complimentary perspective, the act of *serving food* to fellow creatures is connected to generosity, a virtue that is central in Islamic spiritual traditions, since it is considered a quality of the soul which Allāh bestows on those He loves, those who are not attached to material wealth and instead use what they are given to please God and, in the process, show mercy and compassion to fellow creatures. The institution of *langar*, the practice of serving food to all those who are needy, has been a long-established custom in South Asia's Sufi shrines, where (mostly meat-free) food is prepared in huge cauldrons, called *degh*, and subsequently served to those who visit the grave of the defunct Sufi master, as part of his spiritual endowment. This implies that it is not the generous person itself that possesses the attribute of generosity, but its God who, because of His love for that person, causes them to be generous thereby turning him into His agent. Further extending this concept, complimentary to the act of feeding on animals (or the avoidance of it) described so far, is the act of feeding animals, especially those living inside or near the precincts of a sanctuary. It bears great importance in the South Asian Sufi tradition, both on the popular and on a more elitist level, since the feeding of animals is considered an act of mercy and compassion, even more so when the animals are considered as living vehicles of the *baraka*, the spiritual influence attached to and transmitted by a Sufi saint. The *baraka*, which nourishes the inner states of spiritual adepts, constitutes the essential element for spiritual initiation (urdū: *bai'at*) by which a Sufi master establishes the insoluble bond between himself, the neophyte and the spiritual chain consisting of all preceding generations of saints of the order (*silsila*) back to the prophet Muhammad and from there to the transcendent realm of the Divine. The animal, as a living being, becomes then the vehicle of the defunct shaikh's spiritual influence and the feeding of it enacts a reciprocal relationship of mercy and compassion, if only passively perpetuated by the animal.

Animals associated with Sufi saints are found in a number of shrines all over the Subcontinent. One of the most important *dargāh*s in Bengal is that of the 14th-century Sufi saint Shāh Jalāl Mujarrad al-Yamanī, presumably of Central-Asian origin, who on his way from Delhi eastwards is said to have carried with him a pair of wild blue rock pigeons (*Columba livia*) which he had received as a gift from Sh. Nizām al-Dīn Awliyāʾ (d. 725/1325) during his visit to Delhi. Shāh Jalāl brought the pigeons to Sylhet, a town in modern Bangladesh, where he eventually settled down. The descendants of these pigeons, known as Jalālī *kabutār*, are still to be found today in his *mazār*, one of the country's most important pilgrimage sites. As part of the ritual pilgrimage (*ziyārat*) to Shāh Jalāl's *mazār* devotees offer food to the sacred pigeons, as these birds are said to carry the spiritual influence of the Sufi saint which, as long as they thrive, spread and bestow the spiritual power inherited from the shaikh (animal *silsila*; Kuehn 2023).

On the other end of the Subcontinent, marsh crocodiles (*Crocodylus palustris*) are the chief attraction at the *dargāh* of the 13th-century Sufi saint Ḥājī Sakhī Sulṭān, aka Mangho Pīr, in the north-western part of Karachi, in Pakistan. According to the *sajjāda-nishīn* at the shrine, Khalīfa Sajjād, these animals are thought to have been carried as lice in the hair of the saint and miraculously transformed by the *baraka* of the saint into crocodiles after being dropped into the waters of the pond. Pilgrims who pay their respects there offer sacrificial food to these animals revered as disciples (*murīdīn*) of Pīr Mangho himself. As such, they embody the spiritual power of the saint and play a vital role in dispensing his compassion and mercy to those seeking aid and assistance in both worldly and spiritual matters. Being the former birds, they are fed on plant seeds, whereas the latter, being reptiles, are naturally fed on meat! (reptile = *magar*).

In conclusion, notwithstanding the widespread abstinence from meat recommended either during specific moments of the spiritual discipline and as a token of modesty and detachment among Sufis, there are numerous references to meat associated with food in South Asian Sufi literature, where it is used as an allegory describing the sublimation of the heart (*taṣfiya al-qalb*) considered the spiritual organ in the human organism through the all-pervading power of love. It is common in the vernacular literature, for instance, to refer to the burning heart of the lover as a *kabāb*, where the burning heat caused by love transforms the heart into a tasteful delicacy enchanting mind and palate. ʻAbd al-Raḥmān Bābā Momand (1042/1632-1118/1706), a famous 17th century Sufi poet from Peshawar who composed verses in the language of the Pakhtunkhwa, describes himself as suffering from a long-lasting heartburn cultivated in intimacy and therefore ignored by the outside world, in the following terms:

زمانئ د رحمان زړه دئ کباب کړئ
له احوال ءئ څوک نه دئ خبر دار

Zamānī da Raḥmān zarah dī kabāb karī
la aḥwāl'ī khawk na dī khabardār.

Time has turned Raḥmān's heart into a kabāb,
nobody has any awareness of its innermost states.

The image of the heart metaphorically transformed into food finds also expression in the verses of the renowned urdu poet Mīr Taqī Mīr (1722-1803), the acclaimed master of love poetry (*ghazal*), who exclaims:

دیکھا کباب کو دل دیکھا کو جی بتاب
دیکھا عذاب ہم جو یہ کیوں تھے رہے جیتے

Be-tāb jī ko dekhā, dil ko kabāb dekhā,
jīte rahe the kyoñ ham jo yeh 'adhāb dekhā.

Restless have I witnessed my soul,
roasted like a kebab appears to me my heart,
why have we been kept alive,
only to witness this chastisement.

The image of the burning heart turned into a piece of roasted meat or *kabāb* is used once and again as a metaphor for describing the burning feeling of sorrow born out of unrequited love and the pain caused by any worldly attachment, as in this *shi'r*:

آتش غم میں دل بھنا شاید
دیر سے بو کباب کی سی ہے

Ātish-i gham men dil bhunā shāyad,
der se bū kabāb kī sī hai.[9]

In the fire of sorrow the heart has perhaps been roasted,
since long the smell of kabāb has been pervading the air.

[9] Mir Taqi Mir 204.

And finally, stressing the vital importance of that piece of flesh which through the heat generated by unconditional love and surrender becomes the receptacle of Divine compassion and mercy, thereby being turned into a delicious food item:

> Ever since the dawn of eternity, hearts have been roasted like kebabs
> it's not just today that love's fire has been burning, my friends.[10]

Or, to put it through the words of the Panjabi Sufi poet Bullhe Shāh (1758-1680) in this double verse (*dohrā* or *qāfī*):

Pī shar āb te khākabāb, heth bāl haddān d īag,
Bullehābhan ghar rab dā, ais thuggān de thag nu thag.

Drink wine and enjoy the taste of roasted meat,
cooking in a fire nourished by bones;
oh Bulleha, break into the house of God
and swindle the robber of all robbers11.

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[10] Mir Taqi Mir 153.

[11] Bullhe Shah 67.

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