



SACRED WORLDS

AN ANALYSIS OF MYSTICAL MASTERY OF NORTH INDIAN *FAQIRS*

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ABSTRACT

This thesis examines the nature of the mystical complex of *faqirs* who live in North India. *Faqirs* are Muslim mystics who regularly engage in various mystical and ascetic practices. I argue that a *faqir's* mystical complex derives from his concern to express mystical mastery. My focus on *faqirs'* mystical mastery draws attention to their engagement with the spirit world which informs and shapes their worldview and practices. My ethnography of *faqirs'* mystical mastery is based on my fieldwork at the thirteenth century Muslim shrine of Nizamuddin Auliya.

I examine how *faqirs* incorporate various kinds of mystical mastery in their every day lives. I explore how *faqirs'* mystical practices are ways of expressing mystical mastery. A *faqir's* mystical practices are shown to underpin his concern with personal autonomy, power and existential control. A *faqir's* mystical practices also underscore his associations with various spirit beings. My analysis seeks to highlight the experiential dimension of *faqirs'* mystical mastery which is intrinsically linked to the spirit world. In so doing, I reveal the nexus between *faqirs'* religious imagination and experience. I also demonstrate that a *faqir's* relation with spirit beings is on going and plays a crucial part in shaping his mystical identity.

As I will show, *faqirs'* mystical practices are complemented by their various physical and intuitive perceptions which frame their experience of mystical mastery. My analysis steers away from more traditional accounts of Islamic mysticism which tend to focus on a mystic's attempt towards achieving mystical union with the Divine other, to an exploration of a *faqir's* existential struggle for power and personal autonomy. My investigations of the every day lives of *faqirs* at the Nizamuddin shrine provide insightful trajectories for exploring these themes and offering a different approach for examining Indian *faqirs*.