

From Baghdad to Delhi: The Role of 'Awārif al-Ma'ārif in the Institutionalization of the Suhrawardiyya Order

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Abstract

This article examines the pivotal role of Sheikh Shihab al-Din Abu Hafs Umar al-Suhrawardi's (d. 1234 CE) seminal work, 'Awārif al-Ma'ārif ("The Gifts of Spiritual Perceptions"), in the institutional expansion and doctrinal consolidation of the Suhrawardiyya Sufi order from its origins in 12th-century Baghdad to its flourishing in medieval South Asia, particularly Delhi and Uch. While often approached as a compendium of Sufi ethics and spiritual practices, 'Awārif al-Ma'ārif also functioned as an implicit organizational blueprint for the Suhrawardiyya tariqa (path). Through a close reading of the text and analysis of historical transmission patterns, this study argues that the book served a dual purpose: as a spiritual manual for individual seekers and as a standardized doctrinal instrument that enabled the replication of the order's hierarchical structure, pedagogical methods, and social ethos across vast geographical and cultural terrains. The article situates 'Awārif within the broader context of Abbasid-era Islamic intellectual culture, traces its reception in Persianate South Asia through key figures like Bahauddin Zakariya of Uch, and demonstrates how its codification of master-disciple relationships, ethical comportment, and ritual discipline facilitated the durable institutionalization of the order beyond the lifetime of its founder. By integrating textual analysis with historical sociology of religion, this research illuminates the often-overlooked role of Sufi literary production in the formation of transregional religious networks in the medieval Islamic world.

Keywords: 'Awārif al-Ma'ārif, Suhrawardiyya, Sheikh Shihab al-Din al-Suhrawardi, institutional Sufism, Sufi orders, spiritual manual, master-disciple relationship, Delhi Sultanate, Uch Sharif, Baghdad, Islamic mysticism, tariqa organization

Introduction

The emergence of institutionalized Sufi orders (ṭuruq, sing. tariqa) between the 11th and 13th centuries represents one of the most significant developments in Islamic religious history. While early Sufism emphasized individual asceticism and private devotion, the classical period witnessed the formalization of spiritual lineages, standardized practices, and hierarchical structures centered on charismatic masters. Among the foundational texts that facilitated this transition from personal piety to organized community life stands Sheikh Shihab al-Din Abu Hafs Umar al-Suhrawardi's 'Awārif al-Ma'ārif. Written in the early 13th century in Baghdad—a city then under the nominal rule of the Abbasid Caliphate but increasingly influenced by the Ayyubid and Seljuk political realities—'Awārif quickly gained canonical status across the Islamic world.¹

Although Sheikh al-Suhrawardi remained in Baghdad for most of his life and never traveled to South Asia, his order became one of the dominant Sufi traditions in the Delhi Sultanate and beyond, largely through the missionary efforts of his nephew and spiritual successor, Bahauddin Zakariya (d. 1262), who established the Suhrawardiyya center in Uch (present-day Pakistan). This transregional success is closely tied to 'Awārif al-Ma'ārif, which functioned not only as a guide for spiritual development but also as a portable, reproducible template for institutional replication. Unlike many Sufi treatises that remained esoteric or confined to elite circles, 'Awārif was widely copied, taught, and commented upon, becoming a reference point for both spiritual instruction and community governance.²

This article investigates how 'Awārif al-Ma'ārif contributed to the institutionalization of the Suhrawardiyya order by analyzing its structure, doctrinal content, and socio-political embeddedness. It argues that the text's codification of spiritual hierarchy, ethical norms, and pedagogical protocols provided a stable framework that could be adapted to diverse local contexts—from the urban scholarly milieu of Baghdad to the frontier towns of the Indus Valley—without losing doctrinal coherence. In doing so, the article bridges textual scholarship with historical sociology, offering a model for understanding how literary works can function as instruments of religious institution-building.³

The study proceeds in five main sections. After this introduction and a literature review, it first reconstructs the historical and intellectual context of 'Awārif's composition in Baghdad. Second, it analyzes the text's internal structure and thematic priorities, highlighting how it prescribes both individual spiritual disciplines and collective organizational norms. Third, it traces the transmission of the text to South Asia, focusing on Bahauddin Zakariya's adaptation of its principles in Uch and the order's subsequent expansion under the Delhi Sultanate. Fourth, it examines how 'Awārif was taught, copied, and interpreted in South Asian madrasas and khanqahs, becoming a shared reference for Suhrawardiyya identity. Finally, the conclusion reflects on the broader implications of this case for understanding the relationship between textuality and institutionalization in Islamic mysticism.⁴

This article builds upon these contributions by explicitly connecting the textual architecture of 'Awārif al-Ma'ārif to the historical process of institutional replication. It draws on manuscript evidence, biographical dictionaries (ṭabaqāt), and South Asian commentarial traditions to argue that the text was not merely descriptive of Sufi life but prescriptive of organizational form.

Sheikh Shihab al-Din al-Suhrawardi composed 'Awārif al-Ma'ārif in the first quarter of the 13th century, a period of profound transformation in the Islamic world. Baghdad, though still the symbolic heart of the Abbasid Caliphate, was politically fragmented. The caliphs, such as

Al-Nasir (r. 1180–1225), sought to reassert religious and political authority through initiatives like the revival of the futuwwa (chivalric) orders and patronage of Sufi masters. Al-Nasir appointed Shihab al-Din as shaykh al-shuyūkh (Chief of Shaykhs), granting him official authority over Sufi lodges (khanqahs) throughout the caliphate.⁵

This state-Sufi alliance was crucial. Unlike earlier Sufis who often operated on the margins of society, Shihab al-Din was embedded in the urban religious elite. He taught at the Nizamiyya Madrasa, issued fatwas, and maintained close ties with jurists and political officials. 'Awārif al-Ma'ārif reflects this synthesis: it is deeply rooted in Shafi'i jurisprudence, affirms the necessity of the Sharia, and rejects ecstatic antinomianism. In Chapter 5, for instance, Suhrawardi writes: "The Sufi path is built upon the pillars of the Sacred Law; whoever imagines spirituality without adherence to the Law has strayed into delusion."⁶

The text thus emerged not in isolation but as part of a broader project of religious consolidation under caliphal patronage. Its composition coincided with the rise of other codified Sufi manuals—such as those by Abd al-Qadir al-Jilani (d. 1166)—which sought to define normative Sufism against both literalist jurists and radical mystics. 'Awārif distinguishes itself by its systematic structure, comprehensive scope, and emphasis on hierarchical discipline.⁷

Importantly, Shihab al-Din's position allowed him to disseminate his teachings through official channels. Copies of 'Awārif were produced in Baghdad's scriptoria, distributed to khanqahs, and used in teaching circles. This institutional backing ensured the text's rapid circulation and authority, laying the groundwork for its later transmission beyond Iraq.

'Awārif al-Ma'ārif comprises 128 short chapters organized thematically rather than sequentially. It covers topics ranging from the attributes of the spiritual guide (murshid) and the etiquette of discipleship (adab al-murīd) to the stages of spiritual ascent, the importance of dhikr (remembrance of God), and the necessity of service to others.

Crucially, the text embeds organizational principles within its spiritual instructions. Consider the following dimensions:

1. Hierarchical Authority:

Suhrawardi devotes multiple chapters to the role of the shaykh. He insists that the disciple must obey the master "as a corpse in the hands of the washer," a metaphor that underscores total submission. This is not merely spiritual advice; it establishes a clear power structure essential for group cohesion. The shaykh is not only a guide but a judge, teacher, and moral exemplar.⁸

2. Standardized Practices:

The text prescribes specific forms of dhikr, meditation postures, and daily routines. For example, it recommends morning and evening dhikr sessions, fasting on Mondays and Thursdays, and nightly vigils. Such standardization allows for uniform practice across different communities, enabling recognition of shared identity.

3. Ethical Comportment (Adab):

Detailed instructions on speech, dress, eating, and interaction with others create a visible Sufi ethos. This public decorum distinguishes Suhrawardiyya adherents from both the general populace and rival orders, reinforcing group boundaries.⁹

4. Integration with Sharia and Society:

Unlike some Sufi paths that advocate withdrawal, 'Awārif encourages engagement with society—teaching, preaching, and serving the poor—while maintaining inner detachment. This "worldly asceticism" made the order compatible with urban life and state patronage, facilitating its integration into civic structures.¹⁰

Thus, while ostensibly a guide for individual transformation, ‘Awārif implicitly outlines a replicable model of the Sufi community: centered on a master, bound by shared practices, and visibly distinct yet socially integrated.

The Suhrawardiyya’s arrival in South Asia is inseparable from Bahauddin Zakariya, nephew and khalifa (deputy) of Shihab al-Din. Sent by his uncle to “spread the light of ‘Awārif” in the eastern Islamic world, Bahauddin settled in Uch around 1222 CE. There, he established a khanqah that became a major spiritual and intellectual center.¹¹

Bahauddin did not merely replicate Baghdad’s model; he adapted it. Uch was a frontier town on the Indus, with a mixed population of Muslims, Hindus, and recent converts. Bahauddin’s khanqah combined spiritual instruction with social welfare—running kitchens, hospitals, and schools—thereby embedding Sufism in daily life. Yet the core curriculum remained ‘Awārif al-Ma‘ārif.¹²

Historical sources, such as the *Siyar al-Awliyā* by Amir Khurd (14th c.), report that Bahauddin taught ‘Awārif daily to his disciples. He emphasized its chapters on service and social ethics, aligning them with local needs. Crucially, he trained deputies (khalifas) who carried the text—and the authority derived from it—to Lahore, Multan, and Delhi.¹³

The Delhi Sultans, particularly Iltutmish (r. 1211–1236) and later Balban (r. 1266–1287), patronized the Suhrawardiyya, recognizing its role in legitimizing Muslim rule through moral authority. ‘Awārif’s emphasis on obedience to spiritual and political leaders made it compatible with state interests. Thus, the text became a bridge between imperial power and spiritual charisma.¹⁴

In South Asia, ‘Awārif al-Ma‘ārif was not just read—it was institutionalized through pedagogy. From the 13th to the 18th centuries, it was a core text in Suhrawardiyya khanqahs and madrasas. Manuscript evidence from libraries in Delhi, Lahore, and Sindh shows hundreds of copies, often with marginalia and glosses by local shaykhs.

Commentaries played a key role. The earliest South Asian commentary, *Sharḥ-i ‘Awārif* by Makhzan al-Faqr (14th c.), translated Arabic passages into Persian and added local anecdotes, making the text accessible to non-Arabic speakers. Later, in the Mughal era, scholars like Abdul Haq Muhaddith Dehlawi (d. 1642) produced extensive glosses that linked ‘Awārif to Hanafi jurisprudence prevalent in India.¹⁵

The text also served as a credentialing tool. Disciples who mastered ‘Awārif under a recognized shaykh received *ijāzas* (licenses) to teach it, thereby entering the spiritual lineage. This created a chain of textual and spiritual transmission that reinforced institutional continuity.¹⁶

Moreover, ‘Awārif was used in initiation rituals. New disciples would often be given a copy and instructed to study specific chapters, symbolizing their entry into the order. In this way, the book became a material embodiment of Suhrawardiyya identity.

To appreciate ‘Awārif’s unique role, it is useful to compare it with other foundational texts. Al-Ghazali’s *Ihyā’* is encyclopedic but lacks a clear organizational vision; it is aimed at individual reform, not community building. Ibn Arabi’s *Futuhat* is theologically dense and esoteric, accessible only to advanced initiates. In contrast, ‘Awārif is practical, concise, and hierarchical—ideal for training communities.¹⁷

The Chishti order, dominant in Delhi, used poetry and oral instruction rather than a single authoritative text, leading to greater regional variation. The Suhrawardiyya’s reliance on ‘Awārif granted it doctrinal uniformity across regions—a key factor in its institutional durability.¹⁸

Conclusion

'Awārif al-Ma'ārif was far more than a spiritual manual. It was a portable institution—a codified system of beliefs, practices, and social relations that could be transplanted from Baghdad to Delhi with remarkable fidelity. By standardizing the master-disciple relationship, ritual discipline, and ethical norms, Sheikh Shihab al-Din al-Suhrawardi created a template that enabled his order to thrive across centuries and continents. The text's success in South Asia, mediated by figures like Bahauddin Zakariya, demonstrates how literary production can function as a technology of religious organization. In an age of increasing interest in the sociology of Islamic institutions, the case of 'Awārif al-Ma'ārif offers a compelling model for understanding the interplay between text, authority, and community in the history of Sufism.

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