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From Quest to Annihilation: Representation of Attar's Seven Valleys in the Architecture of Iranian

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Abstract

This study adopts an interdisciplinary approach combining mystical literature and architecture to examine the relationship between the concepts of the Seven Valleys of Spiritual Journey in the thought of Attar of Nishapur and the spatial organization of Iranian (Sufi lodges) during the Islamic period. Employing a descriptive–analytical method alongside interpretive (hermeneutic) analysis, the research investigates how the fundamental concepts of the Seven Valleys, Quest, Love, Knowledge, Detachment, Unity, Bewilderment, and Annihilation, are reflected in the spatial hierarchy and architectural components of the Khanqah, including the entrance forecourt, portal, platform (Suffah), cells, domed chamber, courtyard, and retreat space. It further explores how this correspondence contributes to a deeper understanding of Attar's conception of the mystical path. The findings indicate that the architectural elements extend beyond their functional purposes to embody symbolic and spiritual meanings. A meaningful correspondence can be identified between the sequence of architectural spaces and the successive stages of the mystical journey described in Attar's Seven Valleys. This relationship suggests that the was designed not only to accommodate religious and social practices but also to facilitate the experiential progression of spiritual development. The study concludes that a comparative reading of mystical literature and architectural space offers new insights into the semantic dimensions of Iranian s, interpreting them not merely as physical structures but as spatial manifestations of mystical concepts and the spiritual journey of the seeker.

Keywords: Attar of nishapur, Seven valleys, Mystical journey, Architecture, Iranian architecture, Spatial semantics.

1 | Introduction

Iranian mystics and poets have long expressed the deepest experiences of the spiritual journey through symbolic and metaphorical language. Among them, Attar of Nishapur, particularly in *The Conference of the Birds* (Mantiq al-Tayr), presents a comprehensive map of the inner journey in the form of the Seven Valleys. These valleys represent successive stages through which the seeker progresses toward spiritual perfection.

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Conversely, the (Sufi lodge) functions as a contemplative architectural setting dedicated to spiritual purification, ascetic practice, and self-discipline. While providing an environment for solitude and communion with God, it also enables the seeker to remain socially engaged, reflecting the Sufi ideal of balancing inward contemplation with outward participation in society.

Despite extensive studies on Attar's mystical thought and the architectural characteristics of Iranian s, relatively little attention has been paid to the spatial embodiment of the abstract stages of the Seven Valleys within the architectural organization of the Khanqah. Rather than being merely a physical setting, the Khanqah may be understood as a space in which the seeker experiences the stages of the mystical path through both bodily movement and spiritual contemplation.

This study is founded on the hypothesis that the architecture of the Iranian Khanqah constitutes a spatial interpretation of Attar's mystical journey. The aim is not simply to classify architectural forms but to provide a hermeneutic reading of architectural space through the conceptual framework of the Seven Valleys, thereby revealing the silent dialogue between mystical poetry and architecture in the Iranian Sufi tradition.

2 | Literature Review

Previous studies may be classified into three main categories.

The first category consists of literary studies devoted to Attar's works, in which the Seven Valleys have been examined from the perspectives of Persian poetry, theoretical mysticism, and spiritual wayfaring. Scholars such as Mohammad-Reza Shafiei Kadkani and Abdolhossein Zarrinkoub have made significant contributions in this field. More recent studies have explored the symbolic, structural, and aesthetic dimensions of the Seven Valleys as a framework for mystical progression. Comparative research has also examined Attar's thought alongside other literary and mystical traditions, while several studies have focused on individual valleys such as Unity (Tawhid), Bewilderment (Hayrah), and Annihilation (Fana).

The second category concerns architectural studies on the concepts of space and place, particularly within the framework of architectural phenomenology, as well as historical investigations of Iranian s. These studies primarily address the architectural morphology, typology, and social functions of the s without examining their relationship to Attar's mystical system.

The third category includes interdisciplinary studies that explore the relationship between architecture and mystical concepts such as light, seclusion, centrality, and sacred space. However, only a limited number of studies have attempted to relate Attar's Seven Valleys directly to architectural forms. One notable example is Zakariyaei Kermani's [1] study, which compares the Seven Valleys with the sequential spatial organization of Iranian mosques. Another is the author's previous paper, *Passing Through the Seven Curtains: Allegory of Attar's Seven Valleys in the Spatial Structure of the Traditional Iranian Bathhouse*, which interprets the sequence of spaces in the Persian bath as an architectural metaphor for the mystical journey described by Attar.

Building upon these studies, the present research offers a systematic hermeneutic interpretation of the Seven Valleys in relation to a specific architectural typology, the Iranian, thereby contributing to the interdisciplinary dialogue between Persian mystical literature and architectural studies.

3 | Research Methodology

This study employs a hermeneutic interpretive approach within an interdisciplinary framework integrating Persian mystical literature and architectural studies. The research data were collected from two complementary domains and subsequently synthesized.

Mystical and Literary Sources: Key concepts associated with each of Attar's Seven Valleys were identified through qualitative content analysis of *The Conference of the Birds* (Mantiq al-Tayr) and other relevant mystical texts.

Architectural sources: The qualitative characteristics, spatial hierarchy, and sensory experience of the principal architectural components of the Iranian, including the forecourt, entrance vestibule, platform (Suffah), residential cells, domed chamber, courtyard, and retreat space, were extracted from architectural literature and supported by field observations.

The two sets of data were then integrated through a comparative hermeneutic analysis, establishing conceptual correspondences between each mystical stage and a specific architectural space. Within this interpretive framework, architecture is understood as a meaningful "text" whose symbolic layers can be decoded through hermeneutic inquiry.

4 | Research Background

The term Khanqah is the Arabicized form of the Persian Khanqah, derived from the combination of *khāneh* (house) and *gah* (place). Persian lexicographical sources define the term as a house or dwelling, while historical texts record numerous orthographic variants, including Khanqah, khanaqah, khangeh, and several other regional forms [2].

Etymologically, the element *khan* has been associated with meanings such as caravanserai, dwelling, temple, or place of worship, whereas *khwan* may denote a dining table, tray, portico, or hall. The suffix *gah* signifies a place, location, or seat. Together, the term denotes a place specifically designated for spiritual residence and practice.

Historically, the Khanqah emerged during the fourth century AH (tenth century CE) as an institutional center for Sufis, dervishes, and spiritual masters. It functioned as both a residential and educational environment where disciples pursued religious instruction, spiritual discipline, ascetic practice, purification of the soul, and mystical realization under the guidance of a shaykh. Emphasis was placed on direct spiritual experience (*Kashf*), inner illumination, and moral refinement as essential stages on the path toward divine truth [3].

Throughout Islamic history, the Khanqah has also been referred to by other names, including *Sawma'ah* (monastery), *ribat*, *Takiyyah*, *Zawiyah*, *langar*, *Duwayrah*, and *Jama at-khaneh*, depending on regional and historical contexts.

The functions of the extended from public religious and social activities, such as preaching, collective *dhikr*, *sama* (spiritual music and audition), and communal meals, to private devotional practices, including retreat (*Khalwah*), the forty-day spiritual seclusion (*Chillah*), repentance, and ritual acts of initiation. These practices were conducted under the supervision of the resident spiritual master and constituted an integral part of the Sufi path.

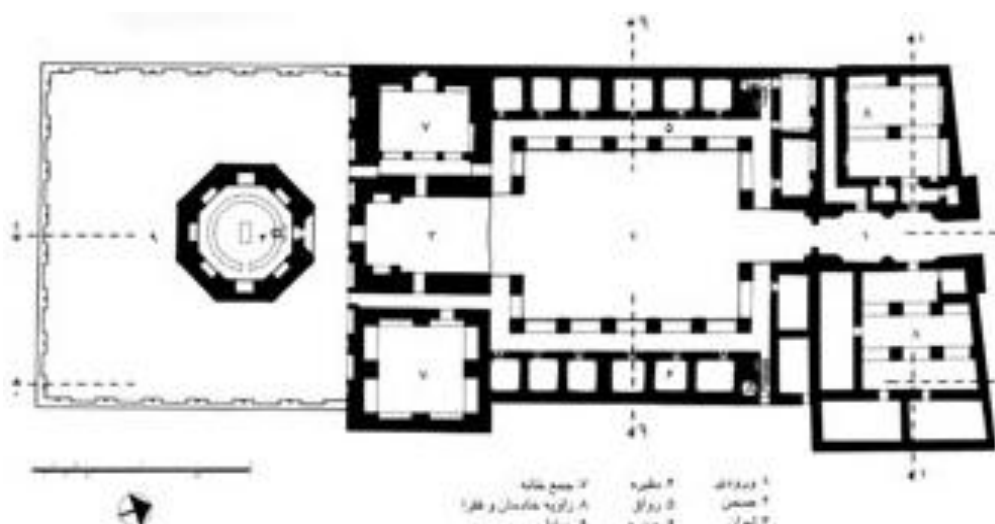


Fig. 1. Plan of the Chelebi Oghlu Khanqah complex. Source: Iranian and Islamic research center.

The architectural form and spatial organization of the building also reflect its social, devotional, and educational functions. These complexes typically comprise a range of public and private spaces designed to accommodate both permanent residents and temporary visitors.

The process of attaining spiritual seclusion (Khalwah) within the Khanqah can be understood as unfolding through four successive stages, expressed through a hierarchical organization of open, semi-open, and enclosed spaces (see Nassiri [4]). The entrance sequence and its numerous architectural components, representing the most articulated part of the complex, correspond to the initial stage of introducing the experience of seclusion. The central spaces of the Khanqah, together with the hierarchical distribution of circulation routes, constitute the second stage, in which seclusion is spatially differentiated and organized. More private areas, such as the residential cells, represent the final stage, where seclusion is fully realized. This spatial hierarchy suggests that physical privacy and bodily solitude were progressively achieved as one advanced toward the innermost spaces of the Khanqah.

5 | Correspondence Between Attar's Seven Valleys and the Architecture of the Iranian Khanqah

Throughout different periods of Iranian history, they served as spaces for spiritual retreat and contemplation, playing a significant role in shaping religious, cultural, and intellectual life. They became important centers for Sufi practice and were closely associated with the development of Persian mystical literature and thought.

The architecture of the Khanqah should therefore be understood as more than a functional enclosure; it embodies a spatial representation of the mystical path itself. As the seeker moves physically through its successive spaces, the architectural sequence symbolically parallels the inward progression through Attar's Seven Valleys. The spatial hierarchy of the Khanqah, from the entrance forecourt to the innermost retreat, is thus not merely a response to functional requirements but may be interpreted as the architectural manifestation of a well-established model of spiritual wayfaring. This correspondence suggests that traditional Iranian architects were not only builders of physical environments but also interpreters of mystical concepts, translating abstract spiritual teachings into experiential architectural space.

5.1 | The Valley of Quest (Talab)

In Attar's mystical discourse, the first stage of the journey is the Valley of Quest (Talab), which signifies the search for truth and the pursuit of divine knowledge. In Sufi terminology, the Talib (seeker) must become absorbed within the self while simultaneously detaching from the external world; he must renounce all attachments and purify the heart from worldly concerns [5]. This stage involves transcending physical desires

and ego-driven pleasures in order to unveil the veils of illusion concealing reality [6]. The Valley of Quest is therefore inherently accompanied by hardship and suffering; in other words, it is the acceptance of the pain of the path itself.

As Attar expresses:

“When you enter the Valley of Quest,
A hundred trials will confront you at every moment.
A hundred afflictions arise with every breath in this realm;
Even the royal falcon becomes a mere fly here (Attar [7]).”

In this valley, the seeker is aware that he must distance himself from ordinary life and its distractions, yet he does not yet know his destination. The quest is a state of conscious restlessness that separates the seeker from the world of multiplicity and heedlessness, propelling him onto the path without knowledge of its end. This journey toward Unity is not without cost; it is inherently accompanied by suffering. However, the longing for the Beloved transforms this suffering into meaning. As stated in mystical sources, when the light of truth illuminates the seeker, he becomes like a moth drawn to the flame, sacrificing both worlds in pursuit of the Beloved [8].

Attar characterizes this valley through the breaking of habitual patterns, the acceptance of unknown suffering, and the unification of intention toward a single ultimate goal. It is as if the seeker must first cast the seed of worldly certainty into the soil of uncertainty so that the root of longing may begin to grow.

From an architectural perspective, how is this spiritual movement manifested within a fixed spatial order? The answer can be found in the first architectural space of the Khanqah: the forecourt (Jolokhan) (see *Fig. 1*).

The Jolokhan is a large open space located in front of the Khanqah. In urban spaces, this space is particularly prominent [3], [9]. This transitional and open space represents the material embodiment of the threshold of Talab as described by Attar. It marks the first spatial separation of the seeker from the external world and symbolizes the initial stage of detachment from worldly noise and ego-driven multiplicity. Although not yet the Khanqah, the seeker is no longer part of the outside world; he stands in an intermediate realm.

From Attar’s perspective, the quest means abandoning stagnation. The Jolokhan gives spatial form to this abandonment at its very first stage. The seeker separates from the chaos of worldly existence and stands within this void-like space. This act of standing itself becomes the first form of spiritual discipline: a discipline of suspension between two forms of restlessness.



Fig. 2. The forecourt (Jolokhan) of the Shah Nematollah Vali Mausoleum complex. Source: Wikipedia.

From Attar's perspective, the Valley of Quest (Talab) signifies the acceptance of the hardships of the path in exchange for the promise of truth. The Jolokhan embodies the weight of this acceptance in its spatial stillness. Within this space, the seeker has not yet attained inner comfort, yet has already left behind external security. The experience of displacement and in-betweenness becomes a prelude to the pleasures of subsequent stages.

From another angle, quest also entails the unification of intention. The Jolokhan gathers dispersed trajectories into a single focal point, the elevated threshold of the Khanqah entrance. Here, the multiplicity of streets is transformed into the Unity of a single gaze. Architecture, in this sense, appears to require the seeker, before entry, to purify intentions within the emptiness of this transitional space.

The architecture of the Khanqah may thus be read as an open book, in which each chapter offers a spatial interpretation of a verse from Attar's mystical thought. The Jolokhan, in this sense, functions as the "Bismillah" of this architectural text: an invitation to movement, separation, and a quest whose outcome is already concealed within the act of seeking itself.

5.2 | The Valley of Love (Ishq)

If the seeker perseveres through the Valley of Quest and endures its hardships, he enters the Valley of Love, the most intense and transformative stage of the journey. In this valley, the lover neither recognizes faith nor disbelief; he is entirely absorbed in an irresistible attraction drawing him toward union with the Beloved.

Attar describes this stage as a condition in which the seeker must be consumed by fire in order to be purified from all impurities and stripped of his ego, so that the veils of selfhood may be removed and he may progress to higher stages:

"After this comes the Valley of Love;
Whoever reaches it is drowned in fire.
The lover is like fire.
Warm in spirit, burning, and restless (Attar [7])."

In Attar's mystical vision, love is not a rational construct but a transformative force that dissolves the calculations of reason and turns the suffering of the path into the sweetness of nearness to the Divine. The lover surrenders all possessions unconditionally and finds pride in annihilation through union.

Love, in this framework, is not a force employed by the seeker; rather, it is an overwhelming attraction that seizes him, shatters the scales of gain and loss, and transforms the pain of the journey into the sweetness of intimacy with the Beloved.

How, then, does this fiery and dynamic concept manifest itself within the stillness of architectural space?

The answer can be found in the second spatial threshold of the Khanqah: the vestibule (Hashti or entrance portal). The Hashti is a covered, semi-open transitional space located immediately after the entrance. It mediates between exterior passageways and interior spaces, often designed to regulate movement, create pauses, and redirect circulation [9].

This semi-open space is neither fully exterior nor interior; rather, it represents a liminal condition of transition and transformation. It is a threshold between two forms of fire: the fire of separation in the Valley of Quest and the fire of union in the Valley of Love. Here, the seeker symbolically abandons worldly attachments, as divine love replaces earthly desire.

From Attar's perspective, love is the dissolution of rational calculation. The Hashti gives spatial form to this dissolution. While conventional entrances are typically direct and functional, this space, through its semi-enclosed form and often ornamental articulation, interrupts linear movement and utility. It compels the visitor to pause, reflect, and become exposed to the spatial "attraction" of the architecture itself. This enforced moment of suspension overturns the logic of instrumental reason and prepares the seeker for transformation.

From Attar's perspective, love is the attraction of the Beloved. The Hashti or entrance vestibule functions as an architectural mechanism of attraction. Its elevated arch draws the gaze upward, while its relative dimness—contrasted with the brightness of the inner courtyard—invites the visitor forward. In this space, one does not feel that one is walking; rather, one feels as if one is being drawn inward. This experience corresponds to the very notion of divine attraction described in Attar's mystical thought.

From another perspective, love represents the fusion of suffering and joy. The Hashti embodies this dual condition. Its spatial atmosphere is simultaneously protective and unsettling: it shelters the visitor from external forces while also exposing him to the pull of an unseen interior light. This coexistence of security and restlessness reflects the paradoxical sweetness of mystical suffering.

The Hashti or entrance vestibule is therefore not merely a passageway. Rather, it functions as a conduit that transforms external calculation into interior surrender. In this sense, the architecture of the Khanqah reads the text of mysticism not through words but through spatial experience.

If the Jolokhan represents the “Bismillah” of separation, then the Hashti constitutes the first verse of the chapter of Love, a verse in which architectural form becomes an expression of divine attraction, carrying the seeker forward not by his own steps, but by an invisible force of spiritual pull toward the next stage.

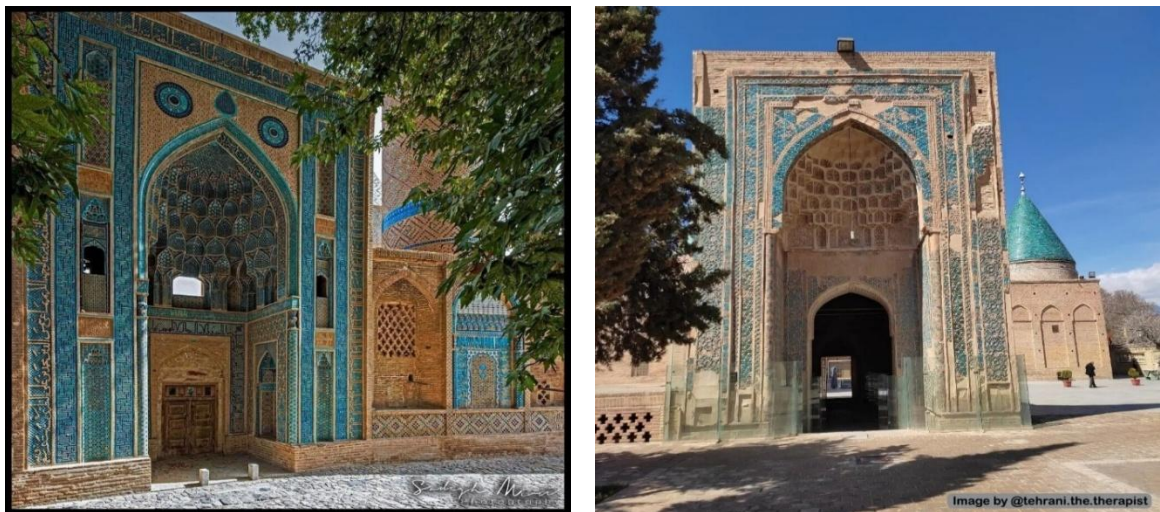


Fig. 3. (Right) Bayazid Bastami Mausoleum complex; (Left) Sheikh Abd al-Samad Khanqah.

5.3 | The Valley of Knowledge (Ma' refat)

In linguistic terms, ma' refat refers to knowledge or recognition. In Attar's mystical thought, the knowledge of God and the ways of attaining it are manifold; no path is identical to another, yet none is ultimately in contradiction with the others, as all lead to a single truth:

“No one has reached this station
Who has not traversed different paths?
No path within it is like another;
The traveler of body differs from the traveler of soul (Attar [7]).”

This valley has neither beginning nor end. According to Attar, no seeker can traverse its vastness and complexity without experiencing doubt, contradiction, and uncertainty (Eghtedari, 2002, p. 368). In the Valley of Knowledge, the seeker becomes aware of both his knowledge and ignorance, yet remains committed to learning. He attains a state of direct presence before the Beloved, perceiving Unity within multiplicity.

At this stage, the seeker comes to recognize the Divine Names and Attributes in proportion to his own level of understanding. As he enters this valley, he discovers multiple and diverse paths; thus, each individual perceives a different route according to the extent of his own knowledge. For this reason, one may arrive at faith while another may arrive at disbelief, one at the mihrab and another at the idol. However, when the light

of knowledge illuminates the path of the believer, the secrets of existence are revealed to him, and the inner realities of all things become manifest. This unfolding of truth intensifies his longing and spiritual passion, leading to continuous renewal of insight and desire [7].

In this regard, Ostad Elahi Qomsha'i states that the sun of knowledge is a light emanating from the fire of love; therefore, without love, true knowledge cannot be attained, for one who is not in love remains self-centered, and a self-centered being cannot perceive the other [10].

But where does this unmediated vision manifest itself within the ordered system of architectural elements composed of stone and brick?

The answer can be found in the spatial core of the relationship between interior and exterior in the Khanqah: the Suffah (veranda or platform). The Suffah is a semi-open, roofed space situated between the courtyard and enclosed interior spaces such as cells or the communal hall (Jama'at-khaneh). It often functioned as a transitional zone between the open courtyard and the enclosed gathering space. In many s, it also served as a principal seating area for the master, where teachings and sermons were delivered to disciples seated in the courtyard [11].

The Suffah is neither fully interior nor exterior; rather, it represents a threshold of encounter and a focal point for the transmission of knowledge.

From Attar's perspective, knowledge (ma' refat) signifies immediate and unmediated presence. The Suffah (veranda) embodies this presence within its spatial configuration. In this space, the seeker is simultaneously sheltered under a roof, symbolizing regulation, order, and knowledge, and exposed to the openness of the courtyard, symbolizing the unrestricted and manifest realm of existence. This coexistence of protection and openness corresponds to the essence of intuitive spiritual perception. Through the "veil" of columns (conceptual structures), one witnesses the unified presence of the courtyard (Unity).

From another viewpoint, knowledge in Attar's thought is the perception of Unity within multiplicity. The Suffah provides an optimal vantage point for such a unifying vision. From this threshold, the entire courtyard, the surrounding chambers, and the sky above can be perceived as an interconnected totality. Each element, cells, trees, and sky, remains distinct, yet simultaneously part of a coherent and meaningful whole. In this sense, architecture presents a spatial diagram of Unity within diversity directly before the observer's gaze.

In a further dimension, knowledge involves the gradual dissolution of fixed determinations and an increasing attention to meaning rather than form. The architectural structure of the Suffah conveys a sense of lightness; its roof is supported by columns that articulate space without enclosing it. This visual lightness symbolizes liberation from attachment to appearances and superficial forms. Within this intermediate space, attention is directed toward relationships: between light and shadow, interior and exterior, stillness and movement.

Thus, the Suffah is not merely a seating area. It is the spatial embodiment of the "observer of unity" in Attar's mystical poetry. In this place, stone and space themselves become instruments of vision, teaching the seeker how to stand at a sacred threshold: neither confined within conceptual shelter nor lost in multiplicity, but capable of perceiving the totality of existence in a single gaze.

If the Hashti represented the force of loving attraction, the Suffah embodies the stillness of the knower who, in the midst of the turbulence of love, attains the station of contemplation. Here, architecture articulates through silent geometry the very truth expressed in Attar's poetic language:

"When the sun of knowledge rises,
 From the heavens of this exalted path,
 Each becomes aware according to his capacity,
 And returns to his true station.
 One sees the essence, not the outward shell;
 And perceives nothing but the Beloved within all (Attar [7])."

5.4 | The Valley of Detachment (Istighna)

“Then comes the Valley of Detachment;
In it, there is neither claim nor meaning (Attar [7]).”

Linguistically, Istighna refers to the desire for and attainment of self-sufficiency. In Sufi terminology, it denotes liberation from attachment to worldly possessions, status, and material gains [12]. Detachment in this sense does not imply arrogance or self-sufficiency in an absolute sense, but rather liberation from dependencies that bind the self. As Goharin notes, it is a state of transcendental independence in which both worlds appear insignificant in comparison [13].

Thus, Istighna represents inner freedom rather than outward poverty. At this stage, the principle of Rida (contentment or acceptance) becomes dominant, and the seeker entrusts his heart to the flow of divine will, attaining inner tranquility. Contentment here means the alignment of the heart with destiny: the seeker performs his actions without anxiety over outcomes, which transforms suffering into lightness and joy into depth. In Attar’s thought, Istighna can be understood as a calm shore within the turbulent ocean of love—neither concerned with separation nor union, but grounded in a dynamic stillness that arises from self-sufficiency.

This detachment is not arrogant indifference, but an existential sufficiency that frees the seeker from dependence on the attention of others. He becomes connected to a source that renders worldly concerns insignificant. He is not free from possessions, but free from the need for them; not dependent on people, but liberated from the desire for their approval.

However, how is this inner liberation translated into the spatial constraints of walls and rooms? The answer can be found in the most interior and private domain of the Khanqah: the cell (Hujrah or Zawiyah).

The Hujrah consists of small rooms arranged around the courtyard, serving as spaces for retreat and seclusion for the shaykh, resident dervishes, traveling seekers, and attendants. It is a space dedicated to individual discipline, ascetic practice, and voluntary simplicity [11]. Within this confined spatial setting, the seeker learns detachment from multiplicity and ornamentation, practicing simplicity and restraint.

From Attar’s perspective, Istighna is liberation from dependence on others, and the Hujrah spatializes this condition. Its small scale reflects minimal desire; its enclosure signifies independence from external validation. Within this deliberately “self-contained cell,” the seeker is removed from communal noise and distraction. This spatial austerity becomes the material expression of spiritual sufficiency.

Again, from Attar’s viewpoint, detachment is the renunciation of acquired attachments. The Hujrah is deliberately devoid of architectural ornamentation or grandeur. Unlike domed halls that symbolize collective achievement and architectural display, the cell is intentionally simple and functional. This space of seclusion teaches the renunciation not only of material excess but even of spiritual achievements that might become sources of ego and pride. Here, the seeker is reduced to essential being, stripped of all but the purified self.

From Attar’s perspective, Istighna is closely associated with Rida (contentment or acceptance). The Hujrah is a space that has submitted itself to the predetermined architectural order of the building: its location is fixed, its dimensions are limited, and its light is indirect. The seeker cannot significantly transform this space; he can only inhabit it. This form of passive dwelling within a predetermined spatial condition becomes a profound exercise in accepting divine will and attaining serenity within an already defined framework.

Thus, the Hujrah is not merely a simple dormitory. It represents the hardened spatial embodiment of detachment. Like a silkworm within its cocoon, the seeker resides in a self-constructed enclosure of simplicity, isolated from others, engaged in silent inner nourishment, and prepared for transformation. Here, architecture shifts its language from grandeur and monumentality to simplicity and separation, suggesting that true self-sufficiency lies not in the possession of expansive spaces but in filling minimal spaces with spiritual presence.

If the Suffah functioned as a reflective surface for witnessing Unity, the Hujrah becomes the sanctuary of solitary detachment. Within its physical constraints, the seeker attains an inner infinitude, experiencing ultimate liberation from the “other” in the intimacy of seclusion. This argument constitutes a form of architectural freedom, freedom achieved not through expansion, but through release from attachment.

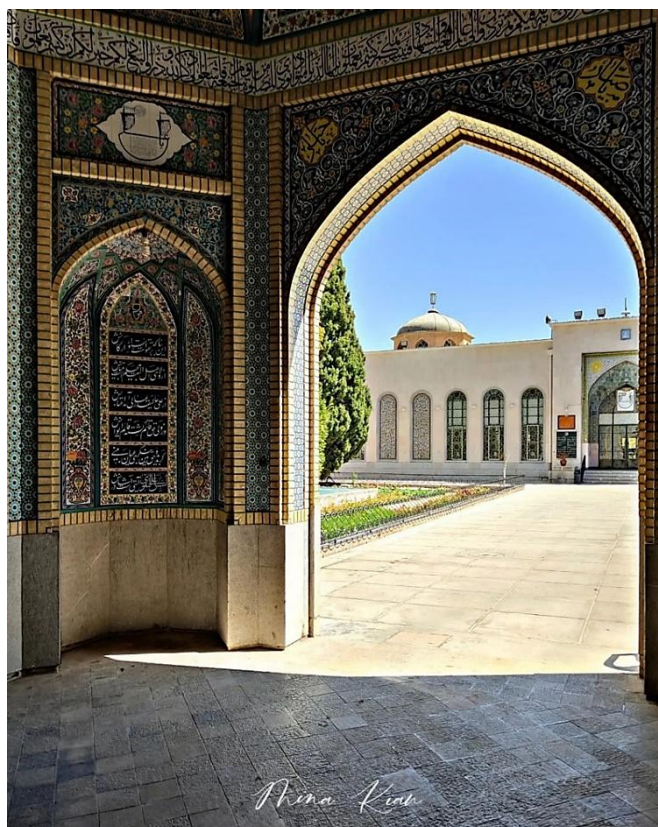


Fig. 4. Ahmadi Khanqah, Shiraz. Source: 724 Tourism Website.

5.5 | The Valley of Unity (Tawhid)

In linguistic terms, Tawhid refers to affirming oneness and establishing the belief in Unity within the heart. In Sufi terminology, it denotes the purification of the heart and its detachment from all that is other than the Divine Truth (Haqq subhanahu).

At the beginning of The Conference of the Birds, before describing the stations of the birds, Attar emphasizes the concept of Unity, stating that all phenomena of existence ultimately return to a single origin and move toward the One. In this vision, all things disappear before the seeker, leaving only the beauty of the Divine Presence. As Attar expresses, all created beings are like “ones multiplied by one, the result of which can only be One [7].”

When he later enters the narrative of the birds, he refers to this stage as the station of individuation and abstraction (Tafriid and Tajrid), meaning the complete severance of both external and internal attachments:

“After this comes the Valley of Unity,
The station of abstraction and detachment.

When faces depart from this desert,
All heads emerge from a single collar (Attar [7]).”

In this valley, the seeker recognizes God as absolutely One and admits no form of multiplicity or duality. This monistic worldview transforms perception, dissolving dichotomous thinking. The seeker perceives every phenomenon as related to the One, and the world becomes a field of divine manifestation. Each event becomes a source of spiritual insight, guiding the seeker toward contemplation and unveiling.

At this stage, silence becomes dominant—not due to a lack of expression, but due to the abundance of perception. Language becomes insufficient and turns toward metaphor and symbolism. In the Valley of Unity, language points rather than explains, and meaning becomes experiential rather than discursive.

In Attar's elevated discourse, Unity represents a summit at which language collapses into meaningful silence. Here, belief transforms into lived experience: a mode of existence in which dualities dissolve—subject and object, seeker and sought, self and other—all are unified within a single truth. Multiplicity is no longer a veil but a manifestation of the One.

Where, then, does this profound silence of Unity resonate within the spatial order of architecture?

The answer lies in the central and most significant space of the Khanqah: the domed hall (Gumbadkhaneh or Jama'atkhaneh). This argument is the principal space of the Khanqah, used for communal gatherings, rituals, collective remembrance (dhikr), and congregational prayer. Architecturally, it is characterized by a domed structure [14].

The domed hall, through its spatial centrality, symbolizes Unity. Beneath the dome, individual boundaries dissolve within collective acts of worship, audition (sama'), and prayer. It enables the highest form of experiential and collective Unity.

From Attar's perspective, Unity is the dissolution of dualities into oneness. The Gumbadkhaneh materializes this dissolution in architectural form. Under the dome, all elements converge toward a single center—the apex of the dome. The four surrounding walls, symbolizing multiplicity and spatial directionality, are unified under a single overarching form. Architectural difference is thus absorbed into a coherent whole, demonstrating that all diversity ultimately serves a unified cosmic order.

From another perspective, Unity is the silence of language and the fullness of presence. The domed hall, with its height and acoustics, creates a space in which silence becomes resonant. A single utterance of remembrance (dhikr) reverberates throughout the space, transforming multiple voices into a unified sonic presence. This argument reflects the very condition of Unity described by Attar: a silence saturated with meaning, where collective voice becomes one.

Finally, Unity is the perception of all things as manifestations of a single truth. The geometric and arabesque decorations beneath the dome, with their continuous, center-oriented patterns, visually express this metaphysical principle. These designs, without beginning or end, symbolize a unified cosmic order in which all multiplicity originates from and returns to a single source.

Thus, the domed hall is not merely a space for prayer or ritual. It is the monumental mihrab of architectural monotheism, a space in which stone, plaster, and tile collectively affirm their submission to a single divine design. If the *Hujrah* represented individual detachment (Istighna), the domed hall represents collective realization of Unity, where individuality is not erased but integrated into a higher totality.

Here, architecture silently conveys through concentration, gathering, and spatial integration precisely the experience described by Attar in the Valley of Unity: the realization that existence is not fragmented but fundamentally unified. In this space, the seeker learns in practice that Unity means breathing beneath the dome of oneness.

“When all this multiplicity is nothing but nothing,
How can anything exist in essence except a single twist within it (Attar [7])?”

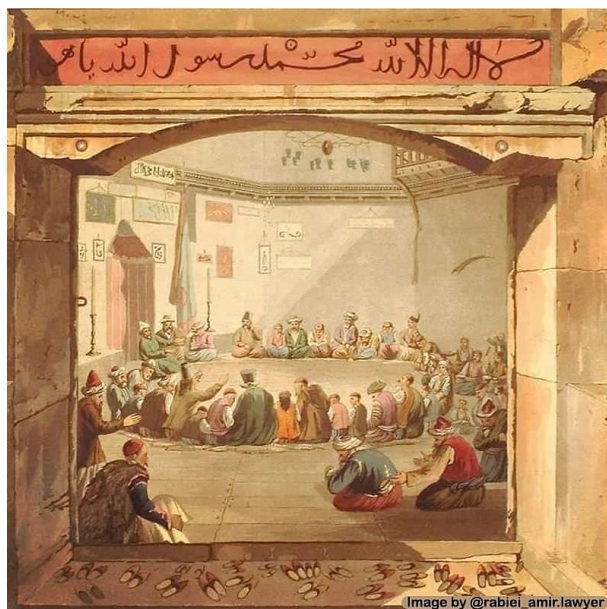


Fig. 5. Example of a preaching session (majles-e va'z) in a Khanqah. Source: 724 Tourism Website.

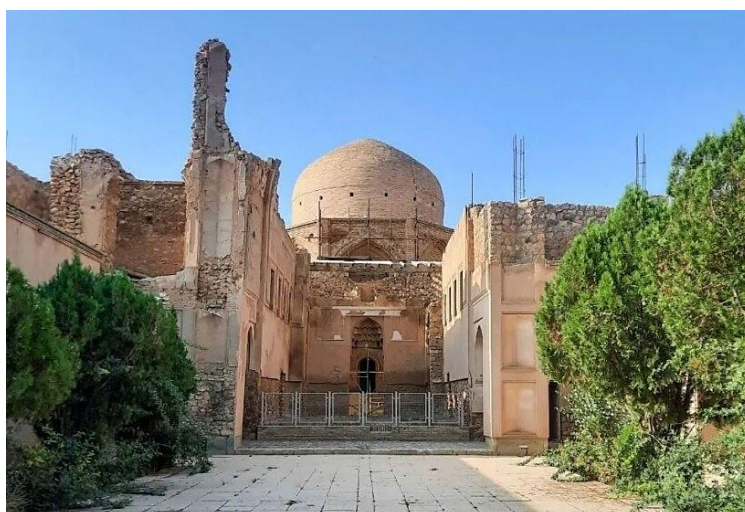


Fig. 6. Chelebi Oghlu Mausoleum and Khanqah in Soltaniyeh, Zanjan Province, Iran [2].

5.6 | The Valley of Bewilderment (Hayrat)

After passing through the Valley of Unity, the station of **Hayrat** (bewilderment) becomes of central importance, despite its state of confusion and instability, as it ultimately leads the seeker toward the path of felicity and divine union. As described in mystical texts, when veils are lifted and divine lights are manifested, the seeker is overwhelmed by the beauty and majesty of the moment of union, becoming spiritually intoxicated and absorbed. This state of mystical intoxication represents the culmination of bewilderment, arising from successive divine manifestations that open the gates of nearness to the seeker [15].

In this valley, the seeker experiences sorrow and longing as his dominant condition. He loses himself and even becomes lost in his own loss, finding nothing but bewilderment. He stands beyond affirmation and negation, such that no trace or definitive attribute can be ascribed to him [16].

“After this comes the Valley of Bewilderment;
A constant state of sorrow and longing awaits you.

Here, every breath is like a sword,
And every moment brings regret (Attar [7]).”

A mystic immersed in the wine of bewilderment has, in truth, drunk from the cup of knowledge and surrendered himself to the ocean of union and annihilation, illuminating the inner chamber of the heart with the light of truth. Bewilderment born of love and knowledge constitutes an eternal form of spiritual joy whose sweetness cannot be described [15].

In Attar’s profound vision, bewilderment is neither ignorance nor loss, but rather the confusion of the knower confronted with infinite transcendence. At this stage, prior certainties appear insufficient and fragmentary in the face of an overwhelming reality. Bewilderment burns away rigid doctrines, not to replace them with a new certainty, but to open an infinite field of questioning. It is not weakness but the highest form of vision, the capacity to perceive a reality so vast that conceptual language fails to contain it. The seeker reaches a humble yet profound “I do not know,” which itself becomes the deepest form of knowledge.

But how is this state of still yet dynamic cognitive suspension manifested within the fixed framework of architectural space?

The answer lies in the space that functions as the point of intersection of all boundaries while itself remaining without boundary: the courtyard (*sahn*) of the Khanqah.

The *sahn* is an open-air central space within the Khanqah where much of daily life unfolds. Within this open setting, the seeker simultaneously observes multiple activities—sitting, conversation, and movement—all occurring within a unified spatial order [17].

This simple yet meaningful coexistence evokes a sense of wonder in the seeker, as it reveals a seemingly dispersed yet inherently ordered system. The courtyard thus becomes a spatial manifestation of multiplicity within Unity.

This central, open, and sky-bound space is precisely where architecture limits itself in order to reveal boundlessness. There is no roof to constrain thought and no walls to restrict vision; only a framing structure that holds the sky within its boundaries.

From Attar’s perspective, bewilderment is the transcendence of conceptual limits. The *sahn* embodies this transcendence spatially. While enclosed spaces such as the *Hujrah* and domed hall are defined and bounded, the courtyard—with its openness toward the sky—symbolizes liberation from all fixed frameworks. Here, the seeker is not confined within architecture but stands at a threshold connecting him to the infinite expanse above. This architectural openness reflects the cognitive openness of the Valley of Bewilderment.

Moreover, bewilderment entails the perception of an overwhelming magnitude that renders prior knowledge insufficient. From within the courtyard, one simultaneously perceives the monumental presence of human-made architecture and the boundless expanse of the divine sky. This juxtaposition of finite and infinite produces a profound sense of humility, as the seeker recognizes the smallness of his own constructs in relation to cosmic vastness.

Finally, bewilderment involves the suspension of any sense of finality. The courtyard offers no definitive endpoint; movement within it is not linear but circular, allowing for wandering, pausing, contemplation of the sky, or engagement with surrounding elements. This sense of open-ended circulation evokes the endlessness of the mystical path itself. The seeker does not arrive; rather, he remains in a state of continuous wandering.

Thus, the *sahn* is not merely a courtyard but a space where architectural language reaches its limit and yields to the silence of the sky. Architecture here admits that its highest achievement is to frame the unbeginning and unending.

If the domed hall represented concentration and Unity, the courtyard embodies openness and bewilderment. It teaches the seeker that the culmination of knowledge is not definitive answers, but the ability to remain at the threshold of infinite questioning.



Fig. 7. Safi 'Ali Shah Khanqah, Iran. Source: 724 Tourism Website.

5.7 | The Valley of Poverty and Annihilation (Faqr wa Fana')

In Attar's Conference of the Birds, poverty (Faqr) and annihilation (Fana') are essentially the same: both signify the effacement of the self and dissolution within the Divine essence. As Attar writes, all of creation in this valley is like "images upon water that vanish, or shadows lost within a single sun" (Attar [7], p. 247). In this realm, distinctions such as pure and impure, or essence and appearance, are dissolved, and even the intellect becomes bewildered before it.

Poverty, in this spiritual sense, is the emptying of the separated ego, and this emptiness enables connection with the whole. It is a form of existential poverty, meaning the relinquishment of ownership over the self. Such poverty opens the path toward Tawakkul (trust in God) and Taslīm (submission), preparing the heart for annihilation.

At this level, seekers reach a state of maturity and purity that may be considered spiritual completion. As noted in mystical thought, poverty implies independence from creation and thus becomes a source of dignity and elevation. The human being, if he seeks liberation from the prison of the world, must realize his essential poverty before God and understand that both he and all that he possesses belong to Him. Poets such as Rumi describe poverty as "the garment of non-possession," signifying detachment from worldly attachments and liberation from the ego [18].

Fana' represents the prelude to Jam' al-jam (the ultimate Unity of unities): the dissolution of multiplicity within Unity, and Unity within multiplicity. The subsequent state, Baqa ba'd al-Fana' (subsistence after annihilation), reflects a form of divine existence that is not an end, but the beginning of a sustained ontological transformation. Here, the self is effaced in its apparent form, and a new spiritual mode emerges. The seeker returns to the origin and becomes connected to the source of existence. Annihilation removes limitations, and the seeker's being is now imbued with divine qualities. This new beginning entails a renewed responsibility: to function as a mirror of divine attributes and to serve creation as a realized human being.

At the final shore of Attar's oceanic discourse, poverty and annihilation are not merely a station but an overwhelming immersion in non-being that is paradoxically full of being. Poverty is not material lack, but the eradication of the self-centered ego; annihilation is not destruction, but the dissolution of the drop of existence into the ocean of divine reality. The seeker dies to the self in order to live in the Divine. This argument is the culmination of the spiritual path: a return to the origin after the complete burning away of the former self, leaving only the ashes of the ego dispersed into nothingness. Baqa' bi Llah (subsistence through God) is thus a renewed life born from this annihilation.

But how is this ultimate liberation from selfhood and spatial limitation manifested within the architectural framework of the Khanqah—an environment itself structured through spatial constraints?

The answer lies in the final negation of architecture, embodied in its simplest and most concealed element: the retreat chamber (Khalwatgah or Hazirah).

The Khalwatgah is a small chamber within the Khanqah dedicated to individual worship. It is typically designed for a single person and serves as the exclusive space for the shaykh's retreat and devotion [11], [14]. This final spatial unit is the most inward, private, and minimal element of the Khanqah. Here, even communal religious life is left behind, and spatial reduction reaches its absolute minimum in order to maximize interior solitude.

From Attar's perspective, poverty is the emptying of the separated ego, and the Khalwatgah materializes this emptiness architecturally. In this space, neither the grandeur of the domed hall nor the openness of the courtyard is present. It is a deliberately minimal and unadorned space, as though architecture itself has become impoverished. This argument imposed simplicity directs the seeker inward, encouraging the abandonment of egoic possession and self-centeredness. Architecture, at this point, becomes a lesson in spiritual homelessness.

From another perspective, annihilation is the dissolution of the self within the Divine. The Khalwatgah, with its relative darkness and absolute seclusion, symbolizes disappearance into invisibility. Within this protective obscurity, the seeker becomes unseen by others, a preparation for ultimate effacement—even from oneself. It is a symbolic grave of the ego prior to its real death, where architecture teaches that the highest nearness to God is achieved through absence from even one's own self-perception.

Finally, *Baqā' bi Llah* represents the mirror of divine will. The Hazirah, when used as the shaykh's retreat, becomes a place where he no longer exists as an individual personality but as a transparent mirror reflecting divine manifestation. The absolute simplicity of this space eliminates any residual self-image and renders it capable only of reflecting divine light.

Thus, the Hazirah marks the final point of the architectural trajectory of the Khanqah. Here, all architectural elements gradually dissolve, leaving only a dense silence filled with meaning. If the courtyard framed the infinity of bewilderment, the Hazirah becomes an emptiness prepared to be filled with absolute being.

At this stage, architecture reaches its ultimate reduction in order to teach the seeker that the highest station is annihilation within eternal presence. The Khanqah thus traces the seeker's journey from the threshold of *ṭalab* (seeking) to the ultimate station of *Fana'*, where every stone becomes a step in the ladder of non-being. This argument is the very message that Attar expresses in verse, and that architecture preserves in the silent permanence of stone.

6 | Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that the Khanqah was not merely a residential space for Sufis, but a complex system designed for the embodied experience of spiritual training. Through a consciously structured spatial hierarchy, ranging from public to private, and from multiplicity to Unity, its architecture guides the seeker step by step through the seven valleys of Attar in a fully sensory and existential manner.

This interrelation between poetry and stone reflects a cultural maturity in which different artistic domains are harmonized in the service of expressing a transcendent truth. Reading the Khanqah as a “mystical text” not only contributes to a redefinition of Iranian architectural heritage but also opens new horizons for a deeper understanding of mystical literary texts. It further demonstrates that mystical journeying in Iranian civilization was not merely a mental or abstract process, but encompassed a complete lived world (lifeworld).

Finally, this research offers a methodological framework for similar interdisciplinary studies connecting other literary–mystical concepts with traditional Iranian arts and architecture.

Table 1. Comparative table of Attar's seven valleys and corresponding Khanqah spaces.

Valley in The Conference of the Birds (Spiritual Stage)	Corresponding Khanqah Space	Conceptual Justification and Link
1. Seeking (Talab)	Forecourt / Entrance space	The initial separation of the seeker from the "city of the ego" and entry into the path of truth is a preparatory space for spiritual journeying.
2. Love ('Ishq)	Portico / Vestibule (Hashti)	The threshold of entering the domain of love, a liminal pause between outside and inside, and a gradual abandonment of attachments.
3. Knowledge (Ma'rifah)	Veranda / Terrace (Suffah)	A place of presence before the spiritual guide (shaykh) and the reception of direct and experiential knowledge.
4. Detachment (Istighna)	Cell / Retreat chamber (Hujrah)	A space of seclusion, ascetic practice, and liberation from worldly dependencies.
5. Unity (Tawhid)	Congregational hall, domed hall (Jama'atkhaneh / Gumbadkhaneh)	The experience of Unity within multiplicity; realization of the "One" within communal gathering and the symbolic centrality of the dome.
6. Bewilderment (Hayrah)	Courtyard (Sahn)	Encounter with infinity; ordered multiplicity under the open sky and the existential experience of "unknowing."
7. Poverty and Annihilation (Faqr wa Fana')	Retreat chamber / Hazirah	Ultimate separation; dissolution of the ego and attainment of existential poverty and subsistence in God (Baqā' bi Llah).

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