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Bhakti and Sufi Movements in India: Devotion, Syncretism, and Social Protest

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Abstract

This paper explores the Bhakti and Sufi movements in medieval India as dynamic religious and socio-cultural phenomena that transcended doctrinal boundaries and hierarchical structures. While traditionally viewed as expressions of devotional mysticism and religious syncretism, recent scholarship urges a more nuanced interpretation that considers their roles as vehicles of social critique and resistance. Spanning the 12th to 17th centuries, these movements provided accessible spiritual alternatives to the orthodoxy of Brahmanical Hinduism and Islamic clericalism. Through vernacular poetry, public rituals, and community-based worship, saints such as Kabir, Mirabai, Ravidas, Bulleh Shah, and Nizamuddin Auliya voiced egalitarian ideals and challenged caste, gender, and religious exclusivism.

The study draws on postcolonial, subaltern, and syncretic theoretical frameworks to analyze whether Bhakti and Sufi practices served as spiritual unifiers or socio-political dissenters—or both. It further engages with contemporary interpretations of these traditions, particularly in light of their appropriation by identity politics and their role in interfaith dialogue. By critically examining literary texts, hagiographies, and historical scholarship, this paper argues that syncretism and protest were not mutually exclusive but often coexisted as parallel strategies of resistance and inclusion. The enduring legacy of these movements lies in their continued influence on India's pluralistic ethos, cultural production, and ongoing struggles for social justice.

Keywords- Bhakti Movement, Sufism in India, Religious Syncretism, Subaltern Studies, Interfaith Harmony, Devotional Literature, Vernacular Spirituality.

1. Introduction and Historical Context

Between the 12th and 17th centuries, India was a vibrant landscape of political transformation and religious ferment. The subcontinent was shaped by the consolidation of Islamic Sultanates, the emergence of regional Hindu kingdoms, and complex negotiations between different

castes, communities, and traditions. Amid this turbulence arose two remarkable socio-religious movements—the Bhakti Movement within Hinduism and the Sufi Movement within Islam. Though originating in distinct theological frameworks, both movements introduced radical reimaginings of spirituality, devotion, and equality, and reshaped the religious and cultural consciousness of the Indian people.

The medieval Indian social order was deeply hierarchical. The Brahmanical orthodoxy dominated religious and ritual authority, reinforcing caste distinctions and scriptural exclusivity. Parallel to this, the Islamic clerical order emphasized legalistic interpretations (sharia), often marginalizing localized, mystical spiritual practices. In this landscape, Bhakti and Sufi traditions emerged as dynamic responses—at once spiritual alternatives and subtle critiques of institutionalized religiosity.

The Bhakti Movement, emerging first in the Tamil South before spreading northward, rejected priestly intermediation and Sanskritic textual monopoly, choosing instead devotion (bhakti) as the path to salvation. Saints like Kabir, Ravidas, and Mirabai preached in vernacular languages, criticized caste structures, and encouraged an intimate, emotional connection with the divine (Zala, 2024, p. 42). These voices rose from within and outside the Hindu fold, often aligning themselves with the oppressed and lower-caste communities. The Sufi Movement, similarly, emphasized the internal mystical path (tariqa) over formal Islamic law. Through saints like Khwaja Moinuddin Chishti and Nizamuddin Auliya, the Sufi orders cultivated accessible, emotional piety expressed through poetry, song (qawwali), and shared rituals, drawing both Muslim and non-Muslim followers (Zala, 2024, p. 42–43).

This paper investigates a fundamental question: Were these movements essentially manifestations of religious syncretism, drawing from diverse theological sources to construct a shared idiom of devotion? Or did they represent deeper forms of social protest—conscious rejections of hegemonic caste, gender, and religious hierarchies? In pursuing this, we attempt not only to contextualize the origins of the Bhakti and Sufi traditions but also to interrogate their intent and impact through a rigorous analytical lens.

To engage with this question, we rely on a multi-disciplinary methodology. First, we examine historical records and vernacular literary texts attributed to key saints (e.g., Kabir's dohas, Bulleh Shah's kafis) to trace theological motifs and socio-political critiques embedded within devotional expressions. We also engage contemporary historiography that frames these traditions as either accommodating or antagonistic to dominant religious-political structures. For instance, Niharranjan Ray (1975) presents the movements as “socio-religious protests,” reacting to the rigidity of Brahmanical and Islamic systems (Ray, 1975, p. LXIV). In contrast, T. N. Madan (1989) argues that their impact lay more in the realm of religious inclusivity and mutual accommodation, positioning them within India's long tradition of spiritual pluralism.

Further, the study incorporates postcolonial and subaltern theoretical approaches. Drawing from scholars like Gail Omvedt and Ranajit Guha,

we consider how lower-caste and marginalized voices appropriated the Bhakti-Sufi discourse to articulate non-Brahmanical visions of spirituality and egalitarianism (Zala, 2024, p. 43). Similarly, subaltern historiography helps decode the silence or erasure of these radical spiritual actors from mainstream historical narratives.

The theoretical lens also includes syncretic studies, especially relevant in examining shared rituals, aesthetics, and symbolism across Bhakti and Sufi practices. For example, the symbol of “the beloved” (prem, ishq) becomes a theological bridge that dissolves the dichotomy between Hindu and Islamic metaphysics, enabling a syncretic space for devotional creativity (Burman, 1996, p. 1213; Dasgupta, 1994, p. 73).

Ultimately, this paper does not seek to present the Bhakti and Sufi movements as monolithic phenomena. Instead, it aims to map a nuanced terrain where devotional mysticism served both as a mode of inter-religious dialogue and a subtle but potent form of socio-political resistance. The following sections explore these dual dimensions by tracing the trajectories of key saints, analyzing their poetic output, and placing their thought in conversation with the broader structures of power and culture in medieval India. While some scholars interpret Sufism as a pluralistic spiritual movement, others critique it as a soft extension of Islamic hegemony — a perspective this paper engages critically

2. The Bhakti Movement

The Bhakti Movement emerged as a powerful spiritual and social current within medieval India between the 7th and 17th centuries, fundamentally challenging the entrenched caste system and theological orthodoxy of Brahmanical Hinduism. At its core, the movement was characterized by an intimate, emotional, and often iconoclastic devotion to a personal deity—usually conceptualized either as Saguna (with attributes, like Rama or Krishna) or Nirguna (formless, as in the case of Kabir or Guru Nanak). Although rooted in the devotional traditions of earlier Vaishnavism and Shaivism, the Bhakti saints reinterpreted spirituality through a radically egalitarian and socially engaged lens.

The Bhakti saints articulated a personal, direct relationship with the divine that bypassed priestly intercession and scriptural mediation. This devotional framework challenged ritual formalism and the rigidities of caste hierarchy, promoting devotion (bhakti) as a universal path open to all, regardless of gender, caste, or creed. As T. N. Madan observes, the Bhakti tradition helped create “a vernacularized spirituality”, which enabled marginalized communities to find religious expression in their own languages and idioms (Madan, 1989, pp. 120–121).

Figures such as Ramanuja, Basava, Kabir, Namdev, Ravidas, Tulsidas, and Mirabai gave shape to diverse and regionally specific Bhakti movements, yet their core message remained rooted in love, equality, and liberation through devotion. Particularly in northern India, the nirguna saints like Kabir rejected not only Vedic ritualism but also idol worship, caste, and even religious identity itself. In his poetry, Kabir writes: “If you say you’re a Brahmin, born of a mother, then why not be born a different way?”—a direct rebuke to caste-based pride and hierarchy.

The Bhakti Movement was not merely a religious reform; it was a profound form of social protest. Saints such as Ravidas, a leatherworker by caste, openly rejected caste divisions and reimagined spiritual community as one of equality and brotherhood. As Niharranjan Ray highlights, the movement “originated as a reaction against both Brahmanical dominance and Islamic legalism, seeking a more human-centered religious ethos” (Ray, 1975, p. LXIV). Bhakti poetry, especially that of Dalit saints, became a vehicle for critique of caste oppression and patriarchal norms.

In particular, Dasgupta (1994) connects the Bauls of Bengal, who blended Bhakti mysticism with folk traditions, to a heretic lineage that rejected both caste and gender binaries. The Bauls’ emphasis on the body as sacred, and their non-institutional spirituality, represents an extension of Bhakti’s socially disruptive theology. Dasgupta notes that Bauls “challenge social orthodoxy much like the nirguna Bhakti poets” (Dasgupta, 1994, pp. 75–76). One of the most radical aspects of the Bhakti Movement was its deliberate use of vernacular languages—Hindi, Marathi, Tamil, Kannada, Bengali—instead of Sanskrit, which was the language of the elite. This linguistic democratization enabled the masses to access spiritual texts and teachings. As J. J. Roy Burman argues, Bhakti saints “employed the language of the people... dissolving the barriers that had been created by Sanskritic orthodoxy” (Burman, 1996, p. 1212).

Mirabai, a Rajput princess who renounced royal life, composed emotionally charged poems in Rajasthani, praising Krishna while rejecting the duties of wifehood and patriarchal norms. Her poetry simultaneously affirms the intensity of divine love and critiques the societal roles imposed on women. Mirabai’s spiritual resistance served as both personal liberation and gendered protest.

The Warkari tradition in Maharashtra, centered around Tukaram and Dnyaneshwar, is another illustration of Bhakti’s vernacular foundation. N. B. Zala emphasizes that these traditions were “carriers of radical messages of social equality,” whose oral poetry and pilgrimages broke caste lines and created a shared spiritual space (Zala, 2024, p. 42). While Bhakti began as a radical rupture from institutional religion, over time many Bhakti traditions were absorbed into mainstream Hinduism. Saints like Tulsidas, while embracing the Bhakti ethos, also reinforced Brahmanical ideals in retellings such as the *Ramcharitmanas*. This points to a tension within Bhakti: while some saints remained critical and subaltern, others were institutionalized and sanitized by later religious authorities.

Still, the legacy of Bhakti as a people’s movement persists in cultural rituals, festivals, music, and local traditions across India. Its influence is visible in Dalit activism, feminist spiritual discourse, and even interfaith community-building in contemporary India.

3. The Sufi Movement in India

The Sufi Movement in India emerged as a vibrant, spiritually resonant, and culturally transformative force between the 12th and 17th centuries. Rooted in Islamic mysticism, Indian Sufism evolved through deep interaction with the social, religious, and linguistic pluralism of

the subcontinent. While its followers emphasized love, humility, and devotion as paths to divine union, historians and scholars continue to debate whether Indian Sufism primarily promoted religious syncretism, served as a platform for social protest, or subtly functioned as a spiritual conduit for conversion to Islam — a form of “soft Islam.”

Sufism entered India alongside Islamic conquest but gained popular traction not through state imposition, but through charismatic saints and local adaptation. The Chishti order, led by Khwaja Moinuddin Chishti, and later Nizamuddin Auliya, became deeply embedded in Indian society through vernacular preaching, inclusive rituals, and non-sectarian ethics (Zala, 2024, p. 42). These saints established *khanqahs* (lodges) and *dargahs* (shrines) where food, music (*qawwali*), and spiritual fellowship attracted people across caste and religious divides. Their messages were often anti-ritualistic and anti-authoritarian, challenging both Brahmanical orthodoxy and Islamic jurisprudence.

The mystical core of Sufism centers around concepts like *tawheed* (oneness of God), *mahabbah* (divine love), and *fana* (ego annihilation). These ideas mirrored similar themes in *Bhakti* traditions and appealed to those seeking direct, emotional communion with the divine, bypassing institutional structures. Niharranjan Ray (1975) recognized this egalitarianism, noting how Sufis “stood outside the fold of formal Islam,” resisting the legalistic prescriptions of orthodox *ulema* (Ray, 1975, p. LXV). This withdrawal from orthodoxy, and engagement with local cultural expressions, allowed Sufi practice to evolve into a parallel spiritual ecosystem.

However, Indian Sufism was not a monolith. Some scholars and critics argue that the syncretism of the Sufis masked an underlying missionary agenda. This critique, advanced by both Hindu revivalist thinkers and Islamic reformers, holds that Sufi saints promoted an ideological softening of Islam to make it more palatable to non-Muslims — a “velvet-glove” form of *da‘wah* (invitation to Islam). In this view, shared rituals, saint veneration, and use of local languages were strategic, not pluralistic. The hagiographies of some Sufi saints include miracle stories that led to mass conversions, feeding the perception that inclusivity was instrumental rather than intrinsic (Madan, 1989, pp. 125–130).

While this critical view cannot be dismissed outright, it does not align with the broad patterns of historical practice. In his sociological study, J. J. Roy Burman (1996) provides numerous examples of Hindu-Muslim shared shrines that never required formal conversion. These sacred spaces — such as Ajmer Sharif and Nizamuddin Dargah — became zones of interfaith interaction, not dogmatic propagation (Burman, 1996, pp. 1212–1213). Furthermore, these shrines often rejected patronage from state or clergy, preserving their autonomy from political Islam. The Baul tradition of Bengal offers an example of grassroots syncretism that incorporated Sufi elements. Baul singers, influenced by both Islamic Sufi metaphysics and Hindu *Bhakti*, emphasized the divine within, eschewed temple and mosque, and critiqued both caste and clergy. Amiya Dasgupta (1994) explores how the Bauls drew from Sufi notions of divine union and used erotic-spiritual symbolism to subvert religious authority (Dasgupta, 1994, pp. 72–74). In such traditions, Sufism’s cultural

contribution transcended theological identity.

Despite the doctrinal origins of Sufism in Islam, many Indian Sufis adopted Indian philosophical motifs and regional languages, facilitating a cultural synthesis. Sufi saints like Baba Farid, Bulleh Shah, and Shah Hussain composed their poetry in Punjabi and Hindavi, accessible to peasants, women, and artisans. Bulleh Shah's verses openly mocked orthodoxy and celebrated divine madness and inner purity over rituals, blurring religious boundaries. These teachings were not merely spiritual but subversive, contesting class, caste, and sectarian divisions.

Nevertheless, it would be inaccurate to claim that Sufi movements were explicitly political in the sense of revolutionary change. As T. N. Madan (1989) notes, the Sufis offered spiritual relief rather than political resistance, promoting individual transformation over collective action (Madan, 1989, p. 127). Yet, in rejecting the status quo, welcoming the marginalized, and forging alternative sacred spaces, they enacted a form of quiet social rebellion.

Moreover, not all Sufi orders remained egalitarian. The Naqshbandis, for instance, aligned closely with state power and orthodoxy in later centuries. As such, Indian Sufism cannot be reduced to either a pure syncretic ideal or a covert conversion project; it encompassed contradictions, complexities, and context-dependent roles.

In conclusion, the Sufi Movement in India embodied a mystical and inclusive Islamic spirituality, but its interpretation varies widely depending on the lens through which it is viewed. While it did foster communal harmony and cultural hybridity, and often resisted orthodoxy and hierarchy, the argument that it also served as a subtle extension of Islamic influence warrants cautious consideration. Acknowledging both these dimensions allows for a balanced understanding of Sufism's legacy in the Indian religious landscape.

4. Syncretism vs. Social Protest

The Bhakti and Sufi movements, though emerging from distinct religious traditions, converged in their emphases on devotion, mysticism, and the rejection of orthodoxy. Yet the question remains: Were these movements expressions of genuine religious syncretism, or were they subtle (and sometimes overt) forms of social resistance? A comparative examination reveals that they often operated at the intersection of both— weaving together spiritual inclusivity and political subversion. Both traditions emerged in contexts marked by hierarchy and exclusion. The Bhakti movement arose in response to the ritual rigidity and caste-based stratification of Brahmanical Hinduism. Meanwhile, Sufi orders such as the Chishti and Qadiri developed partly as a reaction to the dogmatic and legalistic tendencies of orthodox Islam, especially among ulema aligned with state power. In their vernacular expressions, both movements reached the common people — peasants, artisans, women, and those excluded from elite religious discourse.

At the heart of their teachings was a deeply emotional, non-sectarian spirituality. Bhakti saints such as Kabir and Ravidas refused to align themselves with Hindu or Muslim orthodoxy. Similarly, Sufi poets like Bulleh Shah and Shah Hussain dismissed legalism in favor of personal experience and love for the divine. Their poems, songs, and aphorisms

emphasized internal transformation over ritual performance, often mocking clergy, caste markers, and empty piety. As Kumar (2019) notes, the Baul performers of Bengal — influenced by both Bhakti and Sufi currents — resisted “anti-syncretic” forces by performing songs that dissolved religious boundaries and critiqued sectarian dogma. One Baul verse asks provocatively:

“If you circumcise the boy, he becomes a Muslim- what’s the rule for women then?” (Kumar, 2019).

While these expressions certainly blurred the boundaries between Hinduism and Islam, it is essential to interrogate whether they were deliberately syncretic, or whether syncretism was the byproduct of lived coexistence and shared oppression. According to Ahmad (2005), the syncretic tone of Bhakti and Sufi traditions was not merely theological but strategically shaped by social context:

“Both movements drew their mass support from lower castes and marginalized groups... Syncretism was a necessity of survival and mutual legitimacy” (Ahmad, 2005).

This implies that devotional unity was not a passive blending but an active form of negotiation, forged in the crucible of social exclusion and resistance. The figure of Kabir embodies this dual dynamic most clearly. While he is widely celebrated as a symbol of Hindu-Muslim unity, scholars such as Vaudeville (1980) highlight that Kabir’s real force lay in his critique of both traditions, calling out the hypocrisy and narrow-mindedness of pundits and maulvis alike (Vaudeville, 1980, p. 103). His dohas do not merely promote unity; they disrupt religious privilege and spiritual monopolies. This suggests that syncretism itself can be subversive, when it exposes the constructed nature of sectarian identities.

Importantly, not all scholars view these movements as radical. Some argue that the posthumous canonization of Bhakti and Sufi saints by dominant religious groups neutralized their protest character. Saints like Tulsidas or Guru Nanak, who began as challengers of orthodoxy, were later appropriated into mainstream Hindu or Sikh traditions. Deshmukh (2020) traces this shift in South Indian Bhakti, showing how philosophical devotion gave way to ritualized bhakti, often absorbed by temple-centered institutions (Deshmukh, 2020). Similarly, many Sufi shrines that once challenged orthodoxy were later patronized by rulers and gradually folded into popular Islam — diluting their initial radicalism. This leads to a critical tension: Was syncretism the message or the medium? Some scholars, like N. K. Das (2006), argue that in India, religious boundaries have always been porous, and syncretism is less a doctrine and more a social fact. He emphasizes that ritual coexistence and linguistic blending were long-standing in India’s tribal, pastoral, and artisan communities — and Bhakti-Sufi convergence simply expressed this “cultural ecology” (Das, 2006, not paginated).

Yet, cultural blending alone cannot explain the explicit critique found in the poetry and actions of saints like Kabir, Bulleh Shah, and Lal Ded. These figures engaged in verbal iconoclasm, rejected caste and gender hierarchies, and modeled alternative spiritual economies based on love and equality- making them agents of spiritual protest as much

as unity.

A comparative framework, therefore, must recognize that syncretism and social protest were not mutually exclusive. In fact, syncretism could be a form of protest, challenging theological, social, and political boundaries. The blending of sacred metaphors, languages, and rituals disrupted exclusive claims to truth and holiness. As Kumar (2019) notes, devotional performance — whether through bhajan or qawwali — allowed marginalized voices to enter the sacred domain, asserting legitimacy outside institutional religion.

Furthermore, these movements played a pivotal role in constructing vernacular public spheres, where cultural production (songs, proverbs, parables) became vehicles for social thought. The use of local languages — Marathi, Punjabi, Awadhi, Tamil, and Bengali — democratized access to the divine and subverted the Sanskrit-Arabic hegemony that governed elite theology. These shifts empowered new communities to interpret religion for themselves, setting the groundwork for later anti-caste and reform movements.

5. Conclusion

The Bhakti and Sufi movements of medieval India represent more than just spiritual traditions; they embody complex responses to the religious, social, and political structures of their time. As this paper has explored, these movements were at once mystical and material, inclusive and resistant, devotional and disruptive. In reflecting on their legacies today, it becomes clear that Bhakti and Sufi traditions are not simply relics of a syncretic past but continue to shape religious pluralism, cultural expression, and social reform in India.

One of the most striking outcomes of both movements is their persistence across centuries, not only in practice but in interpretation. Their hymns, poetry, music, and saint cults remain alive in vernacular literature, popular devotional performance, and sacred geographies. The shrines of saints like Kabir, Mirabai, Bulleh Shah, and Moinuddin Chishti remain pilgrimage sites not only for the devout but also for scholars and seekers of pluralism. These figures are often invoked in political discourse, artistic movements, and educational curricula as symbols of India's tolerant, multi-religious heritage.

Yet, this celebration of Bhakti and Sufi syncretism coexists with a paradox. As Keune (2021) observes, the modern scholarly framing of Bhakti has shifted from portraying it as a purely spiritual movement to recognizing it as “politically potent and contested terrain.” Modern Bhakti studies emphasize that these saints were not merely lovers of the divine but also critics of hierarchy, and their verses continue to be weaponized in contemporary caste and communal debates (Keune, 2021, pp. 770–772). For example, figures like Ravidas and Kabir have become icons in Dalit assertion politics, often in direct challenge to Hindu nationalist appropriations of Bhakti.

Similarly, the Sufi tradition is undergoing a contested legacy. On one hand, Sufi shrines and music remain symbols of interreligious harmony, particularly in conflict-prone regions. On the other hand, Sufism has been criticized—both by Islamic reformists and secular critics—for its alleged dilution of religious doctrine and for being co-opted into political

agendas. Despite this, Sufi poetry and ritual remain deeply embedded in Indian culture, offering what Pauwels (2021) calls a “shared metaphysical grammar” that binds communities beyond doctrinal boundaries (Pauwels, 2021, p. 739).

From an educational and pedagogical perspective, Bhakti and Sufi literature continues to function as a moral and spiritual archive, used in textbooks, spiritual retreats, and interfaith dialogues. As Shukla-Bhatt (2023) notes, Bhakti songs today serve as gateways to religious harmony, offering emotionally resonant narratives that soften sectarian tensions and promote empathy across lines of faith. In public education and civic initiatives, these narratives offer alternative models of unity, rooted not in state-sponsored secularism but in spiritual emotionality and shared aesthetics.

Furthermore, both movements have found renewed expression through digital and popular media. Online platforms now host thousands of performances of Kabir bhajans, qawwalis, and poetry recitations, extending their reach to global diasporas. Artists reinterpret these traditions in film, hip-hop, and fusion music, often highlighting themes of resistance, love, and divine equality. This cultural resurgence signals a living tradition, not just an academic subject.

Nevertheless, this legacy is not free from appropriation or distortion. As Keune and others caution, attempts to flatten Bhakti into “Hindu devotion” or Sufism into “folk Islam” risk erasing their radical roots and socio-political nuances. These movements must be remembered not only for their spiritual contributions but for their subversive voices against oppression—against casteism, patriarchy, and authoritarian religiosity. The Bhakti and Sufi movements remind us that devotion and dissent are not mutually exclusive. Their saints embodied a paradox: they transcended religions while being rooted in them, and they spoke from within tradition while simultaneously challenging it. This paradox is their enduring power.

In the broader discourse of religious pluralism, these movements offer an indigenous model of shared spirituality, radically different from Western notions of secularism. As Sikder (2025) emphasizes, their literature has become a medium of awakening, not only spiritual but also social — one that continues to inspire alternative imaginaries of community, justice, and love.

In conclusion, Bhakti and Sufi movements remain culturally relevant and politically resonant in contemporary India. They survive not merely as memories of harmony but as living forces in India’s ongoing struggles over identity, inclusivity, and social justice. Whether in a temple courtyard or at a Sufi shrine, in a Dalit protest song or a qawwali concert, the voices of these saints still echo — calling for a more just, more compassionate, and more plural India.

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