



SUFISM, HUMAN SOLIDARITY, AND SOCIAL EMANCIPATION IN CASTE-BASED SOCIETIES IN SOUTH ASIA

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Abstract

This study critically examines how Sufism, as the esoteric dimension of Islam, functions—and is contested—as a form of emancipatory praxis fostering human solidarity within hierarchically structured societies in South Asia. Historically, Sufism has contributed to the formation of spiritual and social spaces that potentially transcend religious, ethnic, and caste boundaries. Within Hindu-influenced cultural contexts marked by inherited caste stratification, Sufi teachings articulate an alternative ethical paradigm grounded in *tawhid*, rearticulated as a theological critique of caste hierarchy, religious elitism, and social stratification, alongside principles of universal love (*mahabbah*). Drawing on Paulo Freire's theory of social emancipation and Asghar Ali Engineer's Islamic liberation theology, this study employs a qualitative critical approach To analyze both the emancipatory potential and structural limitations of Sufism as a humanistic practice. The analysis focuses on Sufi shrines, devotional practices, and inter-communal interactions as sites in which equality and solidarity are negotiated within everyday social life. The findings suggest that while Sufi praxis can generate inclusive spaces and foster critical awareness among marginalized communities, its emancipatory capacity remains contingent upon broader power relations, socio-economic inequalities, and the institutionalization of spiritual authority.

Keywords: Sufism, Humanity, Caste System

Abstrak

Studi ini secara kritis mengkaji bagaimana Sufisme, sebagai dimensi esoterik Islam, berfungsi—and sekaligus diperdebatkan—as sebagai suatu bentuk praksis emansipatoris yang menumbuhkan solidaritas kemanusiaan dalam masyarakat Asia Selatan yang terstruktur secara hierarkis. Secara historis, Sufisme telah berkontribusi pada pembentukan ruang-ruang spiritual dan sosial yang berpotensi melampaui batas-batas agama, etnis, dan kasta. Dalam konteks kebudayaan yang dipengaruhi oleh tradisi Hindu dan ditandai oleh stratifikasi kasta yang diwariskan, ajaran-ajaran Sufi merumuskan suatu paradigma etis alternatif yang berlandaskan pada *tawhid*, yang direinterpretasi sebagai kritik teologis terhadap sistem kasta, elitisme keagamaan, dan hierarki sosial, serta didukung oleh prinsip cinta universal (*mahabbah*). Dengan merujuk pada teori emansipasi sosial Paulo Freire dan teologi pembebasan Islam Asghar Ali Engineer, studi ini menggunakan pendekatan kualitatif-kritis untuk menganalisis baik potensi emansipatoris maupun keterbatasan struktural Sufisme sebagai praktik humanistik. Analisis difokuskan pada makam-makam suci Sufi, praktik-praktik devosional, dan interaksi antar-komunitas sebagai arena tempat nilai-nilai kesetaraan dan solidaritas dinegosiasi dalam kehidupan sosial sehari-hari. Temuan penelitian menunjukkan bahwa meskipun praksis Sufi mampu menciptakan ruang-ruang inklusif dan menumbuhkan kesadaran kritis di kalangan komunitas yang terpinggirkan, kapasitas emansipatorisnya tetap bergantung pada relasi kuasa yang lebih luas, ketimpangan sosial-ekonomi, serta proses institusionalisasi otoritas spiritual.

Kata Kunci: Tasawuf, Kemanusiaan, Sistem kasta

Background

The caste system has historically constituted one of the most pervasive¹ and enduring forms of social stratification in South Asia². Originating in the sacred *Rigveda*, this system categorizes society into four principal *varnas*: Brahmins (priests), Kshatriyas (warriors), Vaishyas (merchants), and Shudras (laborers)³. Originally conceived as a functional framework intended to organize society based on a division of labor, the concept of *varna* gradually transformed into a rigid and hierarchical social order. This transformation was institutionalized and legitimized through classical Hindu legal and religious texts, most notably the *Manusmriti*, which codified the duties, privileges, and restrictions associated with each social group.

Over time, the notion of *jati*—a caste designation determined by birth—emerged as the dominant mode of social organization. Unlike the more flexible theoretical model of *varna*, *jati* imposed a fixed social identity upon individuals from birth, prescribing occupation, social interactions, and spiritual possibilities. This birth-based stratification not only limited social mobility but also embedded structural inequality deeply within the cultural and religious fabric of South Asian societies.

One of the key elements that reinforced the caste system was the religious doctrine of *karma* and *reincarnation*. Within this framework, an individual's social position was interpreted as the direct consequence of actions performed in previous lives. As a result, social inequality was not merely normalized but sacralized, framed as part of a divinely sanctioned moral order. The emphasis

on spiritual purity and pollution further legitimized systemic discrimination against lower castes, particularly the Dalits or *Avarna*, who were regarded as existing outside the *varna* system altogether. Consequently, access to education, land ownership, places of worship, and even clean water often became privileges reserved exclusively for the upper castes.⁴

It is within this context that forms of social and spiritual resistance to the rigid caste system began to emerge. One of the most significant expressions of such resistance manifested through the practice of Sufism, particularly from the twelfth century onward, coinciding with the arrival of Islam in South Asia through trade networks, missionary activities (*da'wah*), and mystical movements. However, this resistance was neither uniform nor uncontested, as Sufi practices were embedded within the same social milieu shaped by caste hierarchies, local power relations, and political interests.

In contrast to the hierarchical social order characteristic of Hindu society, Islam—especially as articulated through Sufi approaches—offered an egalitarian ethical vision that emphasized the fundamental equality of all human beings before God. The principle of *tawhid* (the oneness of God) underpinned the understanding that all human beings originate from the same Creator and therefore possess equal spiritual worth and dignity.⁵ Yet the translation of this egalitarian vision into social reality remained uneven, as inherited forms of social stratification often

¹ Anurag Kumar, "Unequal Spaces: An In-Depth Analysis of Caste Discrimination in Indian Universities," *Contemporary Education Dialogue* 22 (November 2024), <https://doi.org/10.1177/09731849241292863>.

² Khem Lal Bishwakarma and Saowalak Roongtawanreongsri, "Emerging Themes and Qualitative Evidence of the Role of the Caste System in Climate Change Vulnerability in South Asia," *Human Ecology* 52, no. 6 (2024): 1251–67, <https://doi.org/10.1007/s10745-024-00556-8>.

³ "Varna: A Historical Review," *RESEARCH REVIEW International Journal of Multidisciplinary*, n.d., accessed

October 3, 2025, <https://old.rrjournals.com/past-issue/varna-a-historical-review/>.

⁴ "The Promise of Memory: Politics of Memory and Caste Inequality in Collective Memory Consolidation Politics of Memory and Caste Inequality in Collective Memory Consolidation on JSTOR," accessed October 3, 2025, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48778674>.

⁵ Mohamed Faslan, "Egalitarianism and Social Stratification: An Overview of the Caste System Among the Muslims of Southern Sri Lanka," *Journal of Muslim Minority Affairs* 43, nos. 1–2 (2023): 53–59, <https://doi.org/10.1080/13602004.2025.2472598>.



persisted within Muslim communities, including those influenced by Sufi traditions.

Sufism, as the spiritual dimension of Islam, offers not only a personal mystical experience but also a medium for social transformation. Sufi figures such as Khwaja Moinuddin Chishti, Nizamuddin Auliya, and Bulleh Shah did not represent a complete rupture from caste-based social order; rather, they functioned as symbolic and ethical reference points through which alternative moral imaginaries were articulated and contested. Through inclusive, acculturative, and transformative approaches, Sufism facilitated intergroup relations, fostered solidarity across social identities, and created spiritual spaces that embraced marginalized communities.⁶

In the context of caste-based inequality, Islam emerged as both a theological and social force of liberation, advancing a message of human equality before God (*tawḥīd*) and rejecting hereditary privilege. Islamic teachings uphold universal values such as justice, brotherhood, and respect for human dignity, principles that directly challenge the discriminatory structure of the caste system. However, the liberatory mission of Islam in South Asia was not primarily advanced through textual proselytization or political dominance. Instead, it found its most powerful expression through the lived practice of Sufism. Through inclusive spirituality and egalitarian social praxis, Sufi mystics transformed Islamic teachings into a lived, transformative force that directly engaged with and uplifted marginalized communities.⁷

Sufism, as the esoteric dimension of Islam, emphasizes the inner relationship with God and the existential equality of all human beings as ‘*abd*

Allāh (servant of God). Through teachings of divine love (*mahabbah*), the annihilation of the ego (*fana’*), and selfless service to others (*khidmah*), Sufism dissolves the social boundaries constructed by the caste system. Sufi *tariqas* such as the Chishti, Suhrawardi, and Qadiri orders actively attracted followers across caste lines, including Dalits and Shudras, who found both spiritual refuge and social inclusion within Sufi communities. Figures such as Khwaja Moinuddin Chishti in Ajmer and Nizamuddin Auliya in Delhi thus emerged as enduring symbols of resistance to caste hegemony and pioneers of social inclusion grounded in the humanistic values of Islam.⁸

Beyond its role as a spiritual phenomenon, Sufism functions as a bridge of human solidarity, bringing together diverse ethnic, religious, and caste groups within a shared and ostensibly egalitarian religious experience. At the same time, these spaces have never been entirely free from social hierarchies, as distinctions of lineage, spiritual authority, and patronage have at times reproduced forms of exclusion within Sufi institutions themselves. Pilgrimage to Sufi shrines (*dargahs*), communal *dhikr* gatherings, and the social activities of Sufi orders serve as spaces of intercommunal interaction that reconstruct social relations along more horizontal and inclusive lines.⁹

By placing humanity at the core of its ethical teachings, Sufism creates alternative social spaces in which individual identity is no longer defined by birth, but by intention (*niyyah*), righteous action (*‘amal*), and closeness to God. This dynamic represents the potentially liberating force of Islam as expressed through Sufism, a potential that does

⁶ Dr. Saeyd Rashed Hasan Chowdury, “Sufism, Modernisation, and Social Transformation: The Impact of Twelve Awliya in South Asia’s Coastal Region of Chittagong,” *Eskişehir Osmangazi Üniversitesi İlahiyat Fakültesi Dergisi* 12, no. 1 (2025): 285–306, <https://doi.org/10.51702/esogufd.1575615>.

⁷ Uttaran Dutta, “Sufi and Bhakti Performers and Followers at the Margins of the Global South: Communication Strategies to Negotiate Situated

Adversities,” *Religions* 10, no. 3 (2019): 206, <https://doi.org/10.3390/rel10030206>.

⁸ “Appropriation of Caste Spaces in Pakistan: The Theo-Politics of Short Stories in Sindhi Progressive Literature,” accessed October 3, 2025, <https://www.mdpi.com/2077-1444/10/11/627>.

⁹ Sarfraz Ahmad, “Socio-Economic and Cultural Impact of Sufi Shrines: A Case Study of Mithan Kot,” *Sukkur IBA Journal of Educational Sciences and Technologies* 2, no. 1 (2022): 35–47, <https://doi.org/10.30537/sjest.v2i1.1087>.



not arise automatically, but materializes through concrete practices of ethical engagement and social participation rather than as an inherent or guaranteed outcome. Understanding these tensions requires a critical analytical framework that treats Sufism as a form of social praxis situated between emancipation and accommodation.

This study focuses on Sufi practices in India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh as phenomena that are not only religious but also socio-political in nature, functioning to challenge and redress deeply rooted social inequalities. Utilizing a qualitative critical approach informed by Paulo Freire's theory of social emancipation and Asghar Ali Engineer's Islamic liberation theology, this paper aims to elucidate the role of Sufism as both a historical and contemporary force for addressing the social fractures produced by the caste system.

Existing studies on Sufism in the context of social liberation in South Asia have demonstrated that this spiritual tradition has played a significant role in resisting the caste-based hierarchies embedded within Hindu society. James Caron's study, "*Sufism and Liberation across the Indo-Afghan Border: 1880–1928*" (2016),¹⁰ illustrates how Sufism in the Indo-Afghan borderlands fostered egalitarian activism through Pashto poetic expression, emphasizing the rejection of social hierarchy and imperial authority. These findings suggest that Sufism operates not merely as a mystical practice but also as a political instrument capable of constructing alternative social identities that resist domination and injustice. However, Caron's analysis, anchored in a specific historical period and geographical context, does not fully address the role of Sufism as a bridge of human solidarity across religious and caste boundaries,

particularly in relation to contemporary Muslim–Hindu relations in modern South Asia.

A complementary perspective is offered by Saeyd Rashed Hasan Chowdury's study, titled "*Freedom of Religion, Faith and Religious Tolerance in Bangladesh: A Case Study on the Islamic Mysticism*" (2019),¹¹ which reinforces how Sufism in Bangladesh offers inclusive spiritual and social spaces for low-caste Hindu communities. In this context, Sufi *khanqahs* function not only as sites of worship but also as centers of social refuge, encouraging voluntary religious conversion and contributing to the erosion of caste-based stigma. This reflects the concrete liberatory dimension of Sufism, wherein mystical spirituality aligns with the lived social realities of marginalized populations. Nevertheless, the study remains largely limited to the Bangladeshi context and does not fully explore how Sufism, as a conceptual and transregional phenomenon, cultivates broader forms of interreligious dialogue and human solidarity.

Ghulam Hussain, in his article "*Understanding Hegemony of Caste in Political Islam and Sufism in Sindh, Pakistan*" (2019),¹² offers a critical analysis of the tension between the egalitarian theological ideals and the persistence of caste-based social stratification in Sindh, Pakistan. Hussain argues that Sufism holds transformative potential to counter caste hegemony through its emphasis on social inclusivity and egalitarian ethical practices. This study is particularly relevant in highlighting that, although Islam theologically rejects caste, entrenched socio-cultural realities frequently undermine this principle, thereby positioning Sufism as a corrective social force that seeks to reassert the Islamic ethos of equality. However, Hussain's study largely focuses on intra-Islamic dynamics and localized political contexts, and does

¹⁰ "South Asian History and Culture: Vol 7, No 2," accessed October 3, 2025, <https://www.tandfonline.com/toc/rsac20/7/2?nav=tocList>.

¹¹ Vahit Göktaş and Saeyd Rashed Hasan Chowdury, "Freedom of Religion, Faith and Religious Tolerance in

Bangladesh: A Case Study on the Islamic Mysticism," *Freedom of Religion*, 2019.

¹² "Understanding Hegemony of Caste in Political Islam and Sufism in Sindh, Pakistan - Ghulam Hussain, 2019," accessed October 4, 2025, <https://journals.sagepub.com/doi/abs/10.1177/0021909619839430>.



not sufficiently address the broader role of Sufism as a medium for interreligious and intercultural connection.

Furthermore, Layli Uddin, in her research *“Casteist Demons and Working-Class Prophets: Subaltern Islam in Bengal, circa 1872–1928”* (2023),¹³ demonstrates how low-caste Muslim communities in Bengal developed a form of subaltern Islam that actively resisted caste-based domination and asserted social equality through the lived experiences and collective agency of the working class. This historical approach emphasizes that opposition to social stratification was not merely discursive but manifested through organized reformist movements. Nevertheless, the study primarily focuses on intra-Muslim dynamics and does not sufficiently explore how Sufism functions as an interreligious practice capable of bridging Hindu and Muslim communities historically divided by caste and religious identity.

Building upon the preceding review of the literature, this research formulates its central question as follows: How does the practice of Sufism function as a bridge for human solidarity and social emancipation within hierarchically structured societies in South Asia?

Accordingly, the aim of this study is to address this question by examining how Sufism, as an esoteric dimension of Islam, serves as a mediating force between humanitarian values and processes of social emancipation in contexts shaped by deeply entrenched social hierarchies. This inquiry is pursued through the application of relevant theoretical and qualitative methodological approaches.

Table 1. Updated research perspective

Researcher -Year	Location	Research Gap
James Caron 2016	Indo-Afghan border	Focuses on poetic resistance; lacks interreligious and caste-bridging analysis.
Saeyd R. H. Chowdury 2019	Bangladesh	Emphasizes Sufi inclusion of low-caste Hindus; limited to national context.
Ghulam Hussain 2019	Sindh, Pakistan	Highlights intra-Muslim caste critique; lacks interfaith perspective.
Layli Uddin 2023	Bengal	Explores subaltern Muslim resistance; does not address Sufism's interreligious role.
This Study 2025	South Asia	Investigates Sufism as a humanistic bridge across caste and religion in South Asia.

Source: Author's elaboration

To address the gap identified in previous research, this study adopts Paulo Freire's theory of social emancipation (2014),¹⁴ which emphasizes liberation as the reconstruction of humanity by means of solidarity, critical consciousness, and collective action. In addition, this study draws on Asghar Ali Engineer's Islamic liberation theology (2001), grounded in an egalitarian ethical vision that challenges dogmatism¹⁵ and systematically rejects all forms of social and structural oppression. The Sufi understanding of *tawhid* further reinforces this argument by affirming absolute human equality as a direct theological reflection of the oneness of God. By integrating these perspectives, this study moves beyond prevailing interpretations of Sufism as either a purely mystical tradition or a localized socio-political phenomenon. Instead, it conceptualizes Sufism as a transformative humanistic bridge that facilitates solidarity between

¹³ Layli Uddin, “Casteist Demons and Working-Class Prophets: Subaltern Islam in Bengal, circa 1872–1928,” *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 33 (October 2023): 1–25, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1356186323000366>.

¹⁴ Paulo Freire and Donald P. Macedo, *Pedagogy of the Oppressed: 30th Anniversary Edition*, 30th anniversary edition, trans. Myra Bergman Ramos (Bloomsbury Publishing, 2014).

¹⁵ Misbachol Munir and Nida’ul Munafiah, “The Liberation Theology Of Asghar Ali Engineer And Its Relevance To Islamic Education Objectives,” *Sunan Kalijaga International Journal on Islamic Educational Research* 2, no. 1 (2019): 1–18, <https://doi.org/10.14421/skijier.2018.2018.21.01>.



low-caste Hindu and Muslim communities within the hierarchical societies of South Asia.

Spirituality and Social Awareness in South Asia

Paulo Freire (1921-1997) was a Brazilian philosopher whose intellectual legacy centers on education as a primary instrument of social emancipation. In his influential work *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* (1970), Freire articulated the principles of dialogical and critical pedagogy aimed at dismantling social structures of domination¹⁶. Central to his approach is the cultivation of critical consciousness (conscientization), through which as a means to interrogate social injustices and oppressive power relations¹⁷.

Drawing on Mortaza Mandegar Hassani's comparative analysis of Paulo Freire's critical pedagogy and the Sufi intellectual tradition, particularly through the thought of Jalāl al-Dīn Rūmī, Freire's theoretical contributions offer a compelling framework for analyzing how Sufi teachings may cultivate critical consciousness (conscientization) as an ethical and spiritual praxis that challenges unjust social structures.¹⁸

The Sufi doctrine, grounded in the principle of *tawhīd* (the oneness of God), affirms the ontological equality of all human beings and implicitly repudiates socially constructed hierarchies. As such, it can be interpreted as an emancipatory approach that advocates for liberation not only at the spiritual plane but also within the social sphere.¹⁹

¹⁶ Freire, Paulo. *Pedagogy of Hope: Reliving Pedagogy of the Oppressed*. Continuum, 2000.

¹⁷ Darder, A., Hernandez, K., Lam, K.D., & Baltodano, M. (Eds.). (2023). The Critical Pedagogy Reader (4th ed.). Routledge. <https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003286080>

¹⁸ Hassani, Mortaza Mandegar. "Critical Pedagogy and Sufi Tradition: A Comparative Study of Freire's and Rumi's Pedagogical Approaches." *Journal of Educational Thought / Revue de la Pensée Éducative*, vol. 53, no. 2, 2020, <https://doi.org/10.55016/ojs/jet.v53i2.71720>

¹⁹ Abubakar, Abubakar. "The Values of Sufism as Foundation of Tolerance and Brotherhood in Multicultural Society." *International Journal on Advanced Science, Education, and Religion (IJoASER)*, vol. 8, no. 2, 2025, <https://doi.org/10.33648/ijasher.v8i2.906>

The emancipatory potential of Sufi teachings is further reinforced by Asghar Ali Engineer's formulation of Islamic liberation theology, which conceptualizes Islam as an ethical and transformative force committed to confronting structures of domination, including caste-based hierarchies, class oppression, and authoritarian religious interpretations.²⁰

By advocating a contextual and human-centered interpretation of Islamic texts, Engineer foregrounds equality, justice, and human dignity as foundational principles of Islam. This perspective closely aligns with Paulo Freire's emphasis on critical consciousness and dialogical praxis. In this sense, Islamic liberation theology complements Freire's pedagogical vision by situating the process of conscientization within a religious-ethical horizon, wherein spiritual discourse functions as a medium for social critique and collective emancipation.

The introduction of Islam and Sufism into South Asia, particularly in the regions that now comprise India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, was a gradual historical process unfolding between the twelfth and sixteenth centuries CE.²¹ Islam initially spread through multiple channels, including transregional trade networks, the missionary activities of Sufi saints, and, to a lesser extent, military expansion under Muslim dynasties such as the Ghaznavids and the Delhi Sultanate.²² However, the consolidation of Islam in this region cannot be understood primarily through political

²⁰ Afwan, Fajar et al. "Rethinking Liberation Theology in Islam: Asghar Ali Engineer on Justice, Critical Consciousness, and Education." *Jurnal Ilmiah Mabasiswa Rausban Fikr* (2025): n. pag.

²¹ Wormser, Paul. "The Spread of Islam in Asia through Trade and Sufism (Ninth–Nineteenth Centuries) (2014)." *Handbook of Religions in Asia*, Edited by Bryan Turner & Oscar Salemink, Abingdon, Routledge, 2014, pp. 110–122.

²² Mohamad Zulfazdlee Abul Hassan Ashari et al., "[A Retrospective Analysis of The Arrival of Islam to India and Its Impact on Regional Geopolitics] Analisis Retrospektif Kemasukan Islam Ke India Dan Impaknya Terhadap Geopolitik Serantau," *Jurnal Islam Dan Masyarakat Kontemporer* 22, no. 1 (2021): 140–50, <https://doi.org/10.37231/jimk.2021.22.1.552>.



or military trajectories. Rather, it was spiritual and ethical teachings of Sufism, characterized by inclusivity, adaptability, and moral persuasion, that played a decisive role in embedding Islam within local cultural contexts.

Sufi figures such as Khwaja Moinuddin Chishti exemplified this approach through their emphasis on compassion, simplicity, and tolerance, attracting followers from various social strata, including those marginalized by the Hindu caste system.²³ In the Indian subcontinent, the Chishti order emerged as one of the main channels through which Sufism spread. Prominent Chisti saints, including Nizamuddin Auliya, employed Sufi teachings as both a social and spiritual medium to build bridges between Hindu and Muslim communities. Their non-dogmatic approach and openness to local traditions—including vernacular language, poetry, and *qawwali* music—facilitated the widespread acceptance of Sufism among Hindu communities alienated by caste hierarchies. The enduring influence of the Chisti order across northern India thus provided a critical social foundation for religious conversion and social integration.²⁴

In the region that is now Pakistan, Sufism similarly flourished through influential figures such as Data Ganj Bakhsh in Lahore and Shahbaz Qalandar in Sindh. These figures were revered not only as spiritual leaders but also as protectors of the poor and socially marginalized. Their shrines evolved into significant centers of ritual practice and social gathering that transcended class and religious boundaries. In this context, Sufism

functioned as an egalitarian social force that subtly challenged conservative and hierarchical structures, including discriminatory practices and the dominance of religious authority by elite groups.²⁵

In Bangladesh, formerly part of Bengal, Sufism developed through distinctive traditions such as the Baul movement and figures like Lalon Fakir, who embodied a syncretic spirituality that rejected orthodoxy and caste-based distinctions. The influence of Sufism in the Bengali context was particularly significant among marginalized groups, including minorities and women. By emphasizing direct experiential engagement with the Divine, minimizing the role of intermediaries, and employing universal symbolic language, Sufi traditions in Bengal enabled the emergence of a transformative form of spirituality that addressed social inequality while fostering broad-based social solidarity.²⁶

Beyond these regional developments, several institutional centers played a decisive role in consolidating the presence of Sufism across South Asia. In Rajasthan, Ajmer—home to the dargah of Khwaja Mu'inuddin Chishti—represents one of the earliest and most significant Sufi centers of Sufism in South Asia. The shrine functioned as a major pilgrimage site that attracted Hindus, Muslims, and marginalized communities alike. In Delhi, the *khānqāh* tradition evolved into a central institutional framework for religious instruction, literary production, and musical performance, particularly *qawwali*, thereby consolidating the city as a principal locus of Sufi cultural and intellectual

²³ “(PDF) Khawaja and Sufism: Representing Islam in the Time of Disruptions,” accessed October 6, 2025, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/383693398_Khwaja_and_Sufism_Representing_Islam_in_the_Time_of_Disruptions?utm_source=chatgpt.com.

²⁴ “(PDF) An Evaluation of Muinüddin Chishti's Sufi Influences in the Indian Subcontinent: The Case of Chishti Tariqa (Muinüddin Çisti'nin Hint Yarimadası'ndaki Tasavvufi Etkilerine Dair Bir Değerlerndirme: Çistiyye Tarikati Örneği),” accessed October 4, 2025, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/371112445_An_Evaluation_of_Muinuddin_Chishti's_Sufi_Influences_in_the_Indian_Subcontinent_The_Case_of_Chishti_Tariqa_Mui

nuddin_Cisti'nin_Hint_Yarimadası'ndaki_Tasavvufi_Etkilerine_Dair_Bir_Degerlerndirme_Cistiy.

²⁵ “Rethinking Efficacy: People's Perception of Ritual Healing and Trance Religious Practices at Shrines in Pakistan - ScienceDirect,” accessed October 4, 2025, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/S1876201820301313>.

²⁶ “The Baul Philosophy - In Search of Self-Esteem and Self-Sufficiency for a Society | RESEARCH REVIEW International Journal of Multidisciplinary,” accessed October 6, 2025, <https://rrjournals.com/index.php/rrijm/article/view/402>.



life. Similarly, in Bengal (present-day Bangladesh), *khānqāhs* frequently functioned as social sanctuaries for lower-caste populations. The socio-religious networks associated with these institutions facilitated processes of religious conversion and contributed to significant demographic and cultural transformations within the region.²⁷

The differentiated modes of resistance articulated by Sufi actors across Pakistan, Bengal, and India are grounded in the specific configurations of social stratification that characterize Muslim societies in South Asia. Empirical studies on Muslim social hierarchy in the region demonstrate that, despite Islam's normative commitment to egalitarianism, Muslim communities have historically been structured around racial, ethnic, and hereditary distinctions. Central among these is the hierarchical division between *ashraf* (social elites) and *ajlāf* (subordinate groups), a structure that continues to shape access to social integration, authority, and representation.

In Pakistan, where identity politics, religious authority, and state power are closely intertwined, these stratified structures significantly condition the forms of resistance articulated within Sufi traditions. Sufi actors in this context often emphasize processes of conscientization that enable marginalized communities to critically recognize the religious and political domination embedded within *ashraf*-centered hierarchies.²⁸ By contrast, in the context of Bengal, shaped by colonial legacies, class-based inequalities, and nationalist movements, resistance to caste within Sufi-inspired practices is more closely aligned with

collective pedagogical processes. These processes foster a shared critical consciousness that challenges hierarchical social relations through communal learning, cultural expression, and ethical reorientation, rather than through direct confrontation with institutional religious authority.²⁹

Meanwhile, in India's highly pluralistic socio-religious landscape—resistance to caste within Sufi traditions emerges through dialogical interactions with diverse religious communities and social groups. Here, Sufi praxis facilitates more inclusive and multicultural forms of emancipatory.³⁰ Consequently, resistance to the caste system is not homogeneous; rather, it is shaped by context-specific modes of critical awareness and dialogical engagement, reflecting the distinct historical, political, and social conditions of each region.

From Ontology to Praxis: Sufism, *Tawhīd*, and the Critique of Hierarchical Power in South Asia

When read through the lens of Paulo Freire's theory of liberation, Sufism's critique of the caste system emerges not merely as a form of spiritual dissent, but as an emancipatory praxis in which critical reflection and transformative action are intrinsically intertwined. Rather than confining resistance to the level of belief, Sufi traditions actively challenge caste-based exclusion through ritual, communal life, and devotional practices that reconfigure social relations in everyday contexts.³¹ By disrupting hierarchical distinctions within these spaces, Sufi traditions foster processes of conscientization in the Freirean sense, enabling

²⁷ Wahyuddin Halim, "The Sufi Sheikhs and Their Socio-Cultural Roles in the Islamization of Bengal during the Mughal Period (1526-1858)," *JICSA (Journal of Islamic Civilization in Southeast Asia)* 7, no. 2 (2018): 175–94, <https://doi.org/10.24252/jicsa.v7i2.7045>.

²⁸ Anjum, Tanvir. "Be Hell for Those Who Call Me Saiyid": Social Stratification among the South Asian Muslims and the Sufi Worldview (Pakistan Journal of History & Culture, NIHCR, Islamabad, Vol. XXXII, No. 2, July-December 2011, Pp. 45-68).

²⁹ Mostofa, Mamun Al. "An Enquiry into How Political Sufi-Regimes Evolve in Contemporary Bangladesh." *Journal*

of the Asiatic Society of Bangladesh (Humanities), vol. 68, no. 1, 2023, pp. 1–32, <https://doi.org/10.3329/jasbh.v68i1.67135>.

³⁰Zavalsız, Mesut. "Sufi Orders and the Social Transformation of the Indian Subcontinent: A Theoretical Assessment." *Trabzon İlahiyat Dergisi*, vol. 12, special issue, Nov. 2025, pp. 281–304. DOI: 10.33718/tid.1764321.

³¹ Rohmawati, Hanung Sito, and Zulkifli Zulkifli. "The Role of Sufi Orders in Social Change in Indonesia: A Systematic Literature Review". *Teosofia: Indonesian Journal of Islamic Mysticism*, vol. 13, no. 2, Dec. 2024, pp. 187-12, doi:10.21580/tos.v13i2.22567.

marginalized groups to recognize social hierarchy as a historically constructed system of domination rather than a divinely ordained order. This shift in consciousness is not abstract or purely cognitive; it is enacted through participation in alternative social formations that translate ethical reflection into lived practices grounded in equality and human dignity.³²

From the perspective of Islamic liberation theology, this praxis is rooted in the lived articulation of *tawhid*. Within Sufi traditions, the affirmation of divine oneness operates simultaneously as a theological principle and as ethical critique of caste-based stratification, religious elitism, and inherited social hierarchies, structures that stand in direct contradiction to the moral implications of God's oneness. By translating *tawhid* into inclusive spiritual praxis, Sufism aligns religious experience with projects of social liberation. Spirituality, in this framework, does not signify withdrawal from worldly injustice; instead, it operates as an active moral force that confronts structures of oppression embedded in everyday social life.

These diverse manifestations of Sufi practice should therefore be understood not as uniform expressions of spiritual egalitarianism, but as contextually situated forms of emancipatory praxis shaped by distinct configurations of power, identity politics, and historical experience across South Asia. Historical and anthropological studies demonstrate that Sufi *khanqâhs*—as spiritual-social institutions—have long attracted seekers from multiple social strata without formal caste discrimination, thereby creating counter-hegemonic social spaces that challenged the rigid

hierarchies of highly stratified societies. In Bengal and Bangladesh, the Baul tradition, deeply influenced by Sufi spirituality, offers empirical evidence of how spiritual practice function as social praxis: its lyrical, musical, and communal expressions explicitly reject caste and class stratification while cultivating critical awareness of social domination.³³

Upon closer examination, Sufism in South Asia consistently affirms the ontological equality of all human beings before God (*tawhid*) while articulating distinct modes of resistance to discriminatory social structures. Within India's plural socio-religious landscape, the Chishti order exemplifies a dialogical form of emancipatory praxis.³⁴ Rather than limiting itself to abstract proclamations of spiritual equality, Chishti Sufis translated ideals of universal love and human unity under one God into everyday social practices that disrupted both the Hindu caste system and internal forms of Muslim stratification. Read through a Freirean perspective, this dialogical engagement enabled marginalized communities to reimagine social relations beyond inherited status, positioning the Chishti order not only as a spiritual movement but also as a socially transformative force that actively challenged entrenched systems of domination³⁵.

In Pakistan, where religious authority is deeply entangled with identity politics and state power, Sufi praxis takes on a different critical orientation. In this context, Sufi actors challenge conservative religious elites by exposing how doctrinal exclusivism and moral rigidity function to preserve social hierarchies and reinforce political domination. By emphasizing humanistic values,

³² “(PDF) An Evaluation of Muînûddîn Chishti's Sufi Influences in the Indian Subcontinent: The Case of Chishti Tariqa (Muînûddîn Çîşî'nîn Hint Yarimadasî'ndaki Tasavvufî Etkilerine Dair Bir Değerlendirme: Çîşîyye Tarikatı Örneği).”

³³ Javid Ahmad Reshi. “Transcending the Sacred Boundaries: Invoking Fakir Lalon Shah and the Baul Movement”. *The SPL Journal of Literary Hermeneutics: A Biannual International Journal of Independent Critical Thinking*, vol. 3, no. 1, Jan. 2023, pp. 259-71, <https://literaryherm.org/index.php/ojs/article/view/167>.

³⁴ Zavalsız, Mesut. “Sufi Orders and the Social Transformation of the Indian Subcontinent: A Theoretical Assessment.” *Trabzon İlahiyat Dergisi*, vol. 12, special issue, Nov. 2025, pp. 281–304. DOI: 10.33718/tid.1764321.

³⁵ Nusrat Mustafa and Dr Sibghatullah Bhutto, “بندوستان میں سلسلہ چشت کا تعارف اور ارتقاء“ THE INTRODUCTION AND EVOLUTION OF CHISHTIYA SUFI ORDER IN INDIA,” *AL MISBAH RESEARCH JOURNAL* 4, no. 03 (2024): 75–85, <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.14455346>.



ethical openness, and experiential religiosity, Sufi practitioners foster processes of conscientization that contest the legitimacy of elite-controlled religious interpretations and open space for marginalized voices within Islamic discourse.³⁶

In contrast, the Baul tradition, particularly as articulated through central figures such as Lalon Fakir, represents a distinctive manifestation of syncretic spirituality in Bengal and present-day Bangladesh. Drawing simultaneously on Islamic Sufism, Hindu philosophical traditions, and local vernacular practices, Bauls spirituality explicitly rejects all forms of rigid hierarchy, religious orthodoxy, and caste-based social exclusion.³⁷ Operating as a collective pedagogical praxis, Baul practice cultivates a shared critical consciousness that challenges caste domination, class inequality, and the lingering effects of colonial legacies embedded in social life. In this sense, Baul practice embodies a communal mode of emancipation in which spiritual freedom and social critique are inseparable intertwined.³⁸

Taken together, these cases demonstrate that Sufism in South Asia functions as a form of emancipatory praxis through which *tawhid* is translated into sustained and situated social critique. By bringing Freirean conscientization into dialogue with the ethical commitments of Islamic liberation theology, Sufi traditions across Pakistan, India, and Bengal articulate context-specific yet interconnected challenges to caste, class, and hierarchical power, affirming human equality as both a theological principle and a lived social practice.

Table 2. Sufism in South Asia: Affirming Equality and Resisting Hierarchical Structures

Region / Tradition	Core Teachings	Challenge to Hierarchy
Chishti (India)	Universal love and <i>tawhid</i>	Dialogically disrupts caste, gender, and class hierarchy
Pakistan Sufism	Humanism and religious freedom	Critiques conservative religious elites and identity-based domination
Baul (Bangladesh)	Syncretic spirituality and spiritual freedom	Collective pedagogical praxis against caste, orthodoxy, and social discrimination

Source: Author's elaboration

The table highlights how Sufi traditions in South Asia integrate spirituality with social critique through distinct modes of emancipatory praxis. While differing in form and context, these traditions collectively affirm ontological equality and function as transformative forces against hierarchical power structures.

Sufi Spaces and Rituals as Inclusive Arenas

Pilgrimage rituals and musical arts serve as socially inclusive venues for encounters across religious, ethnic, and social boundaries. One of the most deeply rooted cultural elements of the Sufi tradition in Pakistan is *qawwali*, a form of devotional music imbued with profound spiritual and emotional content. *Qawwali* serves not only as a spiritual expression conveying core Sufi values such as divine love and servitude to God, but also as a unifying that brings together individuals across social classes and ethnic backgrounds. Through its evocative rhythms and meaningful lyrics, *qawwali*

³⁶ Shozab Raza, "The Sufi and the Sickle: Theorizing Mystical Marxism in Rural Pakistan," *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 64, no. 2 (2022): 300–334, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S0010417522000068>.

³⁷ M Shahinoor Rahman et al., "The Creation of Tradition and the Alteration of Social Structure by the Mystic Baul Fakir Lalon Shah," *Praxis International Journal of Social*

Science and Literature 6 (May 2023): 47–54, <https://doi.org/10.51879/PIJSSL/060506>.

³⁸ Rahman et al., "The Creation of Tradition and the Alteration of Social Structure by the Mystic Baul Fakir Lalon Shah."



creates a collective religious experience that fosters inclusivity and communal solidarity.³⁹

The Baul tradition in Bangladesh also fosters collective spiritual experiences that transcend ethnic and caste boundaries.⁴⁰ The influence of Sufism within the Baul tradition—particularly as embodied by Lalon Fakir—is profound in cultivating egalitarian and humanistic values.⁴¹ Fakir and his followers employed poetry and song as mediums to convey messages of universal love and brotherhood, encouraging people to transcend religious and caste divisions in pursuit of spiritual unity. Such practices have been especially meaningful for minority communities and marginalized individuals, offering them a space to reclaim identity and dignity through an inclusive spirituality free from structural oppression. Thus, Sufism, through the Baul tradition and the legacy of Fakir, serves as a powerful source of spiritual empowerment for those historically pushed to the margins.⁴²

Sufi shrines, such as the shrine of Hazrat Nizamuddin in Delhi, have played a central role as social and religious spaces where Hindu and Muslim communities can meet and interact harmoniously.⁴³ Similarly, Sufi shrines in Pakistan, particularly those of Data Ganj Bakhsh in Lahore and Shahbaz Qalandar in Sehwan, have long served

as spiritual and social centers that welcome the poor, the marginalized, and people from diverse backgrounds.⁴⁴ These shrines are not merely sites of religious pilgrimage, but also everyday arenas where the egalitarian values and spirit of Sufi brotherhood are lived and practiced.⁴⁵

For the poor and marginalized, who are often excluded from Pakistan's socio-political structures, Sufi shrines provide spaces of acceptance and recognition as equal members of a spiritual community. Their presence at these sacred spaces symbolizes a form of everyday liberation from entrenched social hierarchies and persistent social injustice.⁴⁶

Sufism creates alternative social spaces that enable participation and recognition for those long neglected by formal power structures.⁴⁷ This demonstrates how Sufism functions not only as a spiritual practice, but also as a political and social instrument for promoting justice, inclusivity, and the empowerment of marginalized communities. Through shared spiritual experiences, Sufi rituals strengthen human solidarity while also symbolically and practically challenging the social structures that divide communities along caste or economic lines.⁴⁸

³⁹ Sobia Abid et al., *Music And Trans Culturalism: Analyzing The Role Of Coke Studio Music In Pakistan*, n.d.

⁴⁰ Abul Kalam Azad et al., "Rhetorical Criticism of Baul Lalon Shah's Songs: A Perspective on Humanity," *Journal of Ecohumanism* 3, no. 7 (2024): 1909–22, <https://doi.org/10.62754/joe.v3i7.4344>.

⁴¹ "Songs of the Bauls: Voices from the Margins as Transformative Infrastructures," accessed October 5, 2025, <https://www.mdpi.com/2077-1444/10/5/335>.

⁴² Limon Abdullah, *INFLUENCE OF SUFISM ON LALON FAKIR*, n.d., accessed October 6, 2025, https://www.academia.edu/32872637/INFLUENCE_OF_SUFISM_ON_LALON_FAKIR.

⁴³ Mr SHAIK SYED Miya, "A NOTE ON DARGAH CULTURE IN MEDIEVAL ANDHRA DESA (1287 CE – 1707 CE)," *Social Sciences* 8, no. 1 (2023).

⁴⁴ Asif Mehmood and Sajjad Hasnain, "The Lactosocial at Data Saheb's Shrine (Lahore-Pakistan): Piety, Flows, Commons, and the Community," *Human Geography*, ahead of print, SAGE PublicationsSage UK: London, England, February 19, 2024, Sage UK: London, England, <https://doi.org/10.1177/19427786241228496>.

⁴⁵ Iftikhar Ahmed Charan et al., "Rethinking Efficacy: People's Perception of Ritual Healing and Trance Religious Practices at Shrines in Pakistan," *Asian Journal of Psychiatry* 52 (August 2020): 102020, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.ajp.2020.102020>.

⁴⁶ Tayyaba Tahir, "An Anthropological Study of Religious Economies at the Shrine of Shah Rukn-e- Alam, Multan," *Global Economics Review* VI (June 2021): 202–11, [https://doi.org/10.31703/ger.2021\(VI-II\).16](https://doi.org/10.31703/ger.2021(VI-II).16).

⁴⁷ Hafiza Sana Mansoor et al., "Healing the Spirit: The Social and Religious Impact of Sufi Shrine Practices in Pakistan," *International Journal of Innovative Research and Scientific Studies* 8, no. 2 (2025): 221–27, <https://doi.org/10.53894/ijirss.v8i2.5139>.

⁴⁸ "(PDF) Baul-Sufi Interface and Cultural Tourism: A Study in Northern Rarh of West Bengal, India," accessed October 6, 2025, https://www.researchgate.net/publication/360750463_Bau_l-Sufi_Interface_and_Cultural_Tourism_A_Study_in_Northern_Rarh_of_West_Bengal_India.

**Table 3.** Sufi Spaces and Rituals as Inclusive Arenas

Tradition / Site	Practice	Impact
Qawwali (Pakistan)	Devotional music	Unites people across class and ethnicity
Baul (Bangladesh, Lalon Fakir)	Song & poetry	Transcends caste/religion; empowers marginalized
Hazrat Nizamuddin Shrine (India)	Pilgrimage & communal rituals	Promotes Hindu-Muslim interaction and equality
Data Ganj Bakhsh & Shahbaz Qalandar (Pakistan)	Pilgrimage & gatherings	Recognizes the marginalized; challenges hierarchies

Source: Author's elaboration

The table highlights how Sufi spaces and rituals across South Asia foster inclusivity in everyday religious life. In Pakistan, *qawwali* unites diverse social and ethnic audiences through shared devotional music. In Bangladesh, the Baul tradition uses song and poetry to transcend caste and religious boundaries, offering spiritual expression and recognition to marginalized groups. In India, pilgrimage to Hazrat Nizamuddin Shrine encourages interfaith encounters and a sense of equality, while the shrines of Data Ganj Bakhsh and Shahbaz Qalandar in Pakistan function as welcoming spaces that recognize the marginalized and challenge hierarchies. Collectively, these practices show how sacred rituals can also serve as social arenas that support inclusion and resistance.

Sufi Spaces and Rituals as Inclusive Arenas of Emancipatory Praxis

Pilgrimage rituals, musical performances, and devotional gatherings within Sufi traditions should not be understood merely as cultural expressions of spirituality, but as socially embedded practices that generate alternative modes of participation, recognition, and critical awareness. When read through a Freirean lens, these settings function as dialogical arenas in which religious experience

⁴⁹ Abid et al., *Music And Trans Culturalism: Analyzing The Role Of Coke Studio Music In Pakistan*.

⁵⁰ “Songs of the Bauls: Voices from the Margins as Transformative Infrastructures.”

⁵¹ Abdullah, *Influence Of Sufism On Lalon Fakir*.

becomes a form of praxis. In such spaces, particularly for those marginalized by caste, class, or religious hierarchy, participants are able to rearticulate their social identities beyond dominant structures of exclusion.

In Pakistan, *qawwali* exemplifies this dynamic by operating simultaneously as a devotional, pedagogical, and social practice. Rather than serving only as aesthetic performance, *qawwali* creates a collective auditory space in which spiritual messages of divine love, humility, and servitude are communicated in accessible, emotionally resonant forms.⁴⁹ By creating a shared sensory experience, *qawwali* temporarily suspends social distinctions rooted in class, ethnicity, and inherited status, fostering what can be understood as moments of conscientization, wherein participants encounter an alternative moral order grounded in equality and shared humanity. In this sense, *qawwali* functions as a form of cultural praxis that subtly challenges the symbolic foundations of social hierarchy, even in contexts where formal political participation remains inaccessible to marginalized groups.

A comparable yet distinct mode of praxis emerges within the Baul tradition of Bangladesh. Influenced by Sufi thought⁵⁰ and strongly associated with figures such as Lalon Fakir,⁵¹ Baul rituals employ song and poetry as tools of collective pedagogy rather than doctrinal instruction.⁵² Through metaphorical language and embodied performance, Baul practices actively reject caste divisions, rigid orthodoxy, and class-based exclusion, cultivating a shared critical consciousness rooted in experiential spirituality. From a Freirean perspective, this represents a form of popular education in which marginalized individuals are not passive recipients of religious meaning, but active participants in the production of counter-hegemonic knowledge that affirms dignity, equality, and spiritual freedom.⁵³

⁵² Azad et al., “Rhetorical Criticism of Baul Lalon Shah’s Songs.”

⁵³ Takona, John P. “Transformative Education: Paulo Freire’s *Pedagogy of the Oppressed* and Its Contemporary Resonance.” *Journal of Global Education and Research*, vol. 9, no.



Sufi shrines further institutionalize these dynamics by functioning as enduring social spaces where egalitarian values are enacted through everyday practice.⁵⁴ The shrine of Hazrat Nizamuddin in Delhi, for instance, operates as an interreligious social arena in which Hindu and Muslim devotees participate side by side in pilgrimage, music, and communal rituals.⁵⁵ Such interactions go beyond symbolic tolerance; they create live, dialogical engagement that disrupts rigid communal and caste-based boundaries embedded in the broader social order. Similarly, major shrines in Pakistan, such as those of Data Ganj Bakhsh in Lahore and Shahbaz Qalandar in Sehwan,⁵⁶ serve as inclusive spaces where the poor, the socially marginalized, and those on the religious periphery are recognized as equal participants within a shared spiritual community.

For communities systematically excluded from formal socio-political institutions, participation in these shrine-centered practices constitutes a form of symbolic and social liberation. Being recognized within these sacred spaces challenges dominant hierarchies by affirming the dignity and moral worth of individuals who are frequently rendered invisible by state power, class privilege, or religious elites. From the perspective of Islamic liberation theology, such practices translate the ethical implications of *tawhid* into lived social relations, transforming equality from an abstract ideal into a concrete and embodied reality.

Taken together, Sufi rituals and spaces across South Asia function as arenas of emancipatory praxis in which spirituality intersects with social critique. Through music, pilgrimage, and communal participation, these practices cultivate solidarity, foster critical awareness, and quietly contest hierarchical structures without relying on

formal political mobilization. Rather than remaining purely symbolic, Sufi rituals actively reshape social relations by producing alternative moral and social imaginaries that challenge caste, class, and religious domination in context-specific ways.

Table 3. Sufi Spaces and Rituals as Inclusive Arenas of Praxis

Tradition / Site	Practice	Mode of Praxis	Social Impact
Qawwali (Pakistan)	Devotional music	Cultural-pedagogical praxis	Fosters solidarity; disrupts class and ethnic boundaries
Baul (Bangladesh)	Song & poetry	Collective pedagogical praxis	Cultivates critical consciousness; resists caste and orthodoxy
Hazrat Nizamuddin Shrine (India)	Pilgrimage & communal rituals	Dialogical interreligious space	Challenges communal and caste divisions
Data Ganj Bakhsh & Shahbaz Qalandar (Pakistan)	Pilgrimage & gathering	Embodying egalitarian practice	Recognizes marginalized groups; contests hierarchy

Source: Author's elaboration.

The table demonstrates how Sufi spaces and rituals operate as interconnected forms of emancipatory praxis across different regions. In each context, these practices transform sacred rituals into social arenas that foster inclusion, recognition, and subtle resistance to hierarchical forms of power.

Social Impact and Contemporary Relevance: Emancipation, Tensions, and Limits of Sufi Praxis

Historically, the Chishti order has had a strong appeal among Dalit communities seeking relief from the systemic discrimination imposed by the Hindu caste system.⁵⁷ While conversion to Islam

1, 2025, pp. 87–107. <https://doi.org/10.5038/2577-509X.9.1.1351>.

⁵⁴ Charan et al., "Rethinking Efficacy."

⁵⁵ Miya, "A NOTE ON DARGAH CULTURE IN MEDIEVAL ANDHRA DESA (1287 CE – 1707 CE)."

⁵⁶ Mehmood and Hasnain, "The Lactosocial at Data Saheb's Shrine (Lahore-Pakistan)."

⁵⁷ "In Search of a Utopian Society: Situating 'Dalit' Conversions in Contemporary India Situating 'Dalit' Conversions in Contemporary India on JSTOR," accessed



through Sufi networks is often narrated as a straightforward story of liberation, a more critical reading reveals a complex process shaped by both emancipatory aspirations and persistent social constraints.⁵⁸ For many Dalits, engagement with Sufi communities represented not merely a formal change in religious affiliation, but an attempt to renegotiate stigmatized identities through access to more egalitarian religious spaces.⁵⁹ However, conversion did not automatically erase inherited social hierarchies, as caste-like distinctions and socio-economic marginalization frequently persisted within Muslim communities themselves. From a Freirean lens, Dalit conversion to Sufi-inflected Islam thus constitutes a form of aspirational praxis—one that opens possibilities for conscientization and dignity, while remaining embedded in broader structures of inequality that limit its transformative reach.

Similarly, pilgrimage to Sufi shrines in India and Pakistan functions as a socially inclusive practice that both challenges and coexists with entrenched hierarchies.⁶⁰ Shrines associated with figures such as Hazrat Nizamuddin, Data Ganj Bakhsh, and Shahbaz Qalandar operate as spaces where marginalized individuals gain visibility and symbolic recognition often denied within formal socio-political institutions. At the same time, these sites also generate social tensions, as their popularity among lower-class devotees and religious minorities has frequently attracted criticism from orthodox religious elites and state actors who view shrine-based practices as

heterodox or politically destabilizing. From the perspective of Islamic liberation theology, such tensions underscore the ambivalent nature of Sufi praxis: while it embodies ethical commitments to equality rooted in *tawhid*, it simultaneously exposes the limits of spiritual spaces in dismantling deep structural domination without broader social transformation.

In Bangladesh, the Baul tradition offers another instructive example of how spiritual practice can enable empowerment while also generating contestation. Baul practices—particularly those associated with Lalon Fakir—have long provided space for women⁶¹ to participate as singers, poets, and spiritual practitioners, thereby challenging gender norms⁶² embedded in dominant religious⁶³ and social frameworks.⁶⁴ However, this relative inclusivity has often been met with resistance. Historically, Baul communities have faced marginalization, moral suspicion, and at times active repression from religious authorities and nationalist discourses that frame syncretic spirituality as a threat to social order. From a Freirean perspective, Baul praxis functions as a form of counter-pedagogy that cultivates critical consciousness among its adherents, even as it remains vulnerable to exclusion and delegitimization within broader structures of power.

Across India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh, Sufism thus articulates a shared ethical commitment to ontological equality grounded in *tawhid*⁶⁵, while manifesting divergent and often

October 6, 2025,
<https://www.jstor.org/stable/48749130?seq=1>.

⁵⁸ Abdul Aboobackar, “Dalits and Their Conversion to Islam: An Analytical Study of The Event in Meenakshipuram,” *IQĀN* 4 (June 2022): 1–13, <https://doi.org/10.36755/iqan.v4i02.385>.

⁵⁹ Uddin, “Casteist Demons and Working-Class Prophets,” October 2023.

⁶⁰ Mansoor, Hafiza Sana, et al. “Healing the Spirit: The Social and Religious Impact of Sufi Shrine Practices in Pakistan.” *International Journal of Innovative Research and Scientific Studies*, vol. 8, no. 2, 2025, <https://doi.org/10.53894/ijirss.v8i2.5139>

⁶¹ “Songs of the Bauls: Voices from the Margins as Transformative Infrastructures.”

⁶² Azad et al., “Rhetorical Criticism of Baul Lalon Shah’s Songs.”

⁶³ “Full Article: ‘Genderless Souls?: Sufi Women in Sociopolitical Contexts,’” accessed October 6, 2025, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/14755610.2024.2426343>.

⁶⁴ Sa’diyya Shaikh, “Friendships, Fidelities and Sufi Imaginaries: Theorizing Islamic Feminism,” *Religions* 14, no. 9 (20231231): 1.

⁶⁵ “In Search of Al-Insān: Sufism, Islamic Law, and Gender | Journal of the American Academy of Religion | Oxford Academic,” accessed October 6, 2025, <https://academic.oup.com/jaar/article-abstract/77/4/781/746634>.



contested forms of social engagement.⁶⁶ Equality within Sufi traditions operates not as an accomplished social fact, but as a normative horizon that continually confronts caste, class, gender, and religious hierarchies without fully escaping them.⁶⁷ This ongoing tension distinguishes Sufism from both rigid religious orthodoxy and overly idealized narratives of harmony, positioning it instead as a dynamic field of struggle in which spiritual ethics are translated—imperfectly and unevenly—into lived social practice.

By foregrounding these tensions, Sufism can be understood not as a utopian alternative to hierarchical religion, but as a historically situated socio-religious praxis whose emancipatory potential is realized through ongoing negotiation with dominant power structures. Its contemporary relevance lies precisely in this unfinished quality: Sufism sustains spaces of critique, dialogue, and partial forms of liberation that challenge systems of domination, while simultaneously revealing the structural limits of spirituality when it operates without broader social and structural transformation.

Table 5. Social Impact and Contemporary Relevance of Sufism

Region / Tradition	Key Practice	Social Impact	Limits & Tensions
Chishti (India)	Dalit engagement	Caste critique; dignity formation	Hierarchy persists within Muslim society
Sufi Shrines (India & Pakistan)	Pilgrimage	Inclusion; interreligious encounter	Elite contestation; limited structural change
Baul (Bangladesh)	Music & poetry	Women's empowerment; anti-hierarchy	Marginalization by dominant discourses
Regional Sufi Ethos	Tawhid	Ethical equality & solidarity	Gap between ideals and material reality

Source: Author's elaboration.

⁶⁶ Layli Uddin, "Casteist Demons and Working-Class Prophets: Subaltern Islam in Bengal, circa 1872–1928," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 33, no. 4 (2023): 1051–75, <https://doi.org/10.1017/S1356186323000366>.

The table illustrates that while Sufi traditions across South Asia generate significant emancipatory effects, they also remain shaped by persistent social tensions. Rather than functioning as idealized spaces of harmony, Sufi practices emerge as contested arenas where spiritual ethics, social hierarchies, and political power intersect.

Conclusions

This study argues that Sufism in South Asia should be understood not merely as a mystical or ethical tradition, but as a form of emancipatory praxis that engages with caste hierarchy, religious orthodoxy, and social exclusion. Viewed through Paulo Freire's theory of liberation, Sufi rituals, music, shrines, and communal life function as spaces of critical conscientization, enabling marginalized groups to reinterpret caste and hierarchy as historically produced structures of domination rather than divinely sanctioned orders. In this sense, Sufism links spiritual experience to critical awareness and collective action.

From the perspective of Islamic liberation theology, particularly the work of Asghar Ali Engineer, the emancipatory force of Sufism is grounded in the lived enactment of *tawhid*. Rather than remaining a metaphysical doctrine, divine unity is translated into a theological critique of caste, gender inequality, and religious elitism. Sufi traditions thus reconfigure *tawhid* as an ethical principle that delegitimizes social hierarchy and affirms human dignity within concrete social relations.

The analysis further shows that Sufi spaces, such as *qawwali* gatherings, Baul performances, and shrine-centered practices, operate as alternative social formations that temporarily suspend dominant hierarchies and enable inclusive encounters across caste, class, gender, and religious boundaries. While these practices do not dismantle

⁶⁷ Abubakar Abubakar, "The Values of Sufism As Foundation of Tolerance and Brotherhood in Multicultural Society," *International Journal on Advanced Science, Education, and Religion* 8, no. 2 (2025): 156–68, <https://doi.org/10.33648/ijosser.v8i2.906>.



structural inequality in a systemic sense, they generate symbolic and experiential challenges to hegemonic social orders by reshaping subjectivity, belonging, and moral imagination.

At the same time, this study critically acknowledges the limits and tensions of Sufi praxis. Persistent socio-economic inequalities within Muslim communities, contestation by orthodox religious elites, and the marginalization of syncretic traditions reveal ongoing tensions between Sufi egalitarian ideals and material social conditions. These contradictions caution against idealizing Sufism and instead position it as a contested site of ethical struggle rather than a fully realized project of liberation.

Overall, Sufism in South Asia emerges as a historically situated tradition whose significance lies in its capacity to mediate between spirituality and social critique. By integrating Freirean liberation theory with Islamic liberation theology, this study conceptualizes Sufism as a dynamic arena where religious ontology is continuously translated into praxis—producing forms of resistance, solidarity, and dignity that remain partial, negotiated, and socially embedded.

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Author Contribution Statement

Cahaya Mulyani Sakti was responsible for the conceptualization and design of the study, data collection, data analysis and interpretation, drafting and revising the manuscript, and final approval of the version to be published. Mohammad Izdiyan Muttaqin and Mulawarman Hannase contributed as academic mentors by providing scholarly guidance, critical advice, constructive feedback, and intellectual reinforcement throughout the research and writing process. Muhammad Umer Dar and Saadiya Tahreem contributed as readers and field-based collaborators by reviewing the manuscript, assisting with proofreading and corrections, and supporting the collection of contextual field data as individuals residing in the research location.

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The authors declare that there are no competing interests.

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