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SUFISM AND PLURALISM IN THE INDIAN SUBCONTINENT: A SPRITUAL RESPONSE TO DIVERSITY

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Abstract

This study examines how Sufi thought and practice contributed to the emergence of a pluralistic social order in medieval India. The Indian subcontinent has long been recognized for its rich cultural variety and religious differences. Sufism in the Indian subcontinent evolved as a powerful moral and spiritual movement that transcended sectarian and cultural boundaries. The primary objective of the research is to explore the ways in which Sufi teachings on love, service, and universal brotherhood functioned as a spiritual response to religious and cultural diversity. Methodologically, the study adopts a historical − analytical approach, drawing upon the writings of early Chishti Sufis, archival records, and the interpretations of modern scholars such as Khaliq Ahmad Nizami. Through a close reading of Sufi texts and a contextual analysis of their socio − religious milieu, the paper identifies how the khanqah system fostered social inclusivity and intercommunal harmony. The findings reveal that Sufi spirituality provided an ethical and emotional framework that enabled diverse communities to coexist without erasing their distinct identities. Ultimately, the paper argues that Sufism's pluralistic ethos remains a vital model for addressing contemporary challenges of intolerance and fragmentation in multicultural societies.

Abstrak

Studi ini meneliti bagaimana pemikiran dan praktik Sufi berkontribusi pada munculnya tatanan sosial pluralistik di India abad pertengahan. Subkontinen India telah lama dikenal karena kekayaan keragaman budaya dan perbedaan agamanya. Sufisme di subkontinen India berkembang sebagai gerakan moral dan spiritual yang kuat yang melampaui batas − batas sektarian dan budaya. Tujuan utama penelitian ini adalah untuk mengeksplorasi cara − cara di mana ajaran Sufi tentang cinta, pengabdian, dan persaudaraan universal berfungsi sebagai respons spiritual terhadap keragaman agama dan budaya. Secara metodologis, studi ini mengadopsi pendekatan historis − analitis, dengan mengacu pada tulisan − tulisan Sufi Chishti awal, catatan arsip, dan interpretasi para sarjana modern seperti Khaliq Ahmad Nizami. Melalui pembacaan cermat teks − teks Sufi dan analisis kontekstual lingkungan sosial − agama mereka, artikel ini mengidentifikasi bagaimana sistem khanqah mendorong inklusivitas sosial dan harmoni antar komunitas. Temuan menunjukkan bahwa spiritualitas Sufi menyediakan kerangka kerja etis dan emosional yang memungkinkan berbagai komunitas untuk hidup berdampingan tanpa menghapus identitas mereka yang berbeda. Pada akhirnya, artikel ini menunjukkan bahwa etos pluralistik Sufisme tetap menjadi model penting untuk mengatasi tantangan kontemporer berupa intoleransi dan fragmentasi dalam masyarakat multikultural.

Background

The Indian subcontinent has always been a place of incredible religious, linguistic, and cultural diversity. From ancient times, it has hosted a range of spiritual traditions Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, later Islam, Christianity, Sikhism, and various folk and

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tribal practices all coexisting in a shared space[1]. Within this diversity, Sufism, the mystical side of Islam, found a distinct role as a link between different communities. It emphasized love, humility, service, and unity with the divine. Sufism offered a way of speaking about spirituality that resonated with people across various religious and cultural lines. More importantly, it fostered a living tradition of pluralism long before it became a modern political or academic focus.

Unlike formal Islamic law or theological discussions, which often created strict separations between believer and non—believer, Sufism in India worked through the heart. It expressed itself not through doctrinal arguments but through poetry, music, service, and spiritual companionship. The Sufi saints who came to the Indian subcontinent, especially from the 12th century onward, did not just bring Middle Eastern spiritual ideas; they interacted with the land, its languages, its people, and its traditions. This exchange resulted in an Indian version of Sufism that was deeply connected to the region and reflected its spirit of coexistence[2].

The rise of the Chishti, Suhrawardi, Qadiri, and Naqshbandi orders marked a new stage of spiritual engagement, each adapting to local contexts in ways that promoted inclusivity. The Chishti saints, particularly Khwaja Mu'in al—din Chishti of Ajmer and Hazrat Nizam al—din Auliya of Delhi, established hospices (khanqahs) that welcomed everyone Muslim and non—Muslim, rich and poor, upper caste and untouchable. These places were not just centres of worship they served as active sites for social healing, food distribution, musical gatherings (sama'), and cultural exchange.

Recent international scholarship on Sufism and pluralism in the Indian subcontinent underscores the profound role of Sufi spirituality in shaping interreligious harmony and cultural coexistence[3]. Studies Chowdury published highlight how Sufi orders like Deobandi, Tablighi Jamaat, Darul Uloom Nadwatul Ulama Nadwi, and Barelvi movements translated the universal Islamic principles of love, compassion, and tolerance into practical forms of social engagement[4]. Scholars including Faris[5], Khan[6], Dadoo[7] and Nile Green[8] have shown that Sufism's openness to local languages, music, and customs created a shared spiritual vocabulary that transcended sectarian barriers. Research appearing in Comparative Islamic Studies and South Asian History and Culture further indicates that Sufi shrines and khanqahs functioned as inclusive spaces where people of diverse faiths

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[1] Richard M Eaton, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier, 1204—1760* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993).

[2] Carl W Ernst, *Sufism: An Introduction to the Mystical Tradition of Islam* (Boston: Shambhala, 199AD).

[3] Seyed Mehdi Taheri, "Sufism Streamology in the Indian Subcontinent and Its Peaceful Coexistence with Other Religions" XIII, no. 3 (2024): 93—113, https://doi.org/10.5937/kom2403093T.

[4] Sciences Bartin, "The Influence of Sufi—Centric Movements on the Flourishing of Islamic Plurality in the Indian Subcontinent," *Bartin University Journal of Basic Islamic Sciences* 26, no. 2 (2024): 375—412.

[5] Salman Faris Tc, "Impact of Bhakti and Sufi Mysticism on Social Harmony: Understanding Mystical Experiences and Practices," *LECTURES: Journal of Islamic and Education Studies* 3, no. 4 (2024): 351—60.

[6] Aziza Khan, Ghulam Abbas, and Talib Ali Awan, "Sufi Contributions to Human Development and Peace: A Critical and Scholarly Analysis," *Journal of Applied Linguistics and TESOL (JALT)* 8, no. 1 (2025): 1607—21.

[7] Yousuf Dadoo, "Religious Pluralism in the Thinking of Three Qurʾanic Scholars of the Indian Subcontinent," *Religion and Theology* 20, no. 1—2 (2013): 129—52.

[8] Nile Green, "Making Sense of ' Sufism ' in the Indian Subcontinent : A Survey of Trends" 6 (2008): 1044—61.

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could interact peacefully, fostering what Ernst calls "a cosmopolitan Islam rooted in local experience." However, recent works by Alexander Knysh and Raziuddin Aquil also note that Sufi pluralism evolved within historical constraints and changing political contexts. Overall, international scholarship converges on the view that Sufism in South Asia provided not merely theological tolerance but a deeply spiritual response to cultural diversity, offering valuable insights for contemporary discussions on interfaith harmony and social integration.

This paper aims to explore how Sufism acted as a strongly pluralistic force in the Indian subcontinent. It looks at the theological ideas that supported such inclusiveness and the social, literary, and spatial practices that made those ideas a lived reality. By examining key Sufi figures, local mystical poetry, khanqah networks, and shrine−based practices, we aim to show how Islamic mysticism created a spiritual framework that allowed for the "other" without losing its own essence. Moreover, this paper argues that the legacy of Indian Sufism remains important today, especially in light of religious division, cultural loss, and spiritual emptiness. This study draws from both classic Sufi texts and modern academic analyses, including the works of Carl Ernst, Khaliq Ahmad Nizami, Richard Eaton, and Annemarie Schimmel, whose research has highlighted the pluralistic nature of Indian Sufism in both its historical and present−day forms.[9]

This study employs a qualitative historical−analytical approach to examine how Sufism in the Indian subcontinent functioned as a spiritual response to cultural diversity. The research is based on primary sources, including Sufi hagiographies (tazkirat), discourses (malfūẕat), and letters (maktūbat) of prominent saints such as Khwaja Mu'in al−din Chishti and Baba Farid. Secondary sources comprise scholarly analyses by Khaliq Ahmad Nizami, Annemarie Schimmel, Carl W. Ernst, and Nile Green, providing historical context and interpretive insights.

Data collection involved a systematic review of historical texts, archival documents, and published research on Sufi institutions, teachings, and practices. Using a thematic analysis framework, the study identifies recurring motifs such as divine love, service, tolerance, and inclusivity within both textual and institutional evidence. These themes are then interpreted in relation to the socio−cultural and religious milieu of medieval and early modern India, demonstrating the ways in which Sufi spirituality promoted pluralism and communal harmony. Triangulating multiple sources ensures analytical rigor while highlighting the ethical and spiritual dimensions of Sufi pluralism.

Theological Foundations of Pluralist Sufism

The foundations of pluralism in Sufism are deeply embedded in the Qur'anic worldview and early Islamic spiritual consciousness. Unlike later legal rigidity, the mystical aspect of Islam emphasized the unity of creation, the divine influence on all human beings, and the essential inwardness of the spiritual journey[10]. From this perspective, Sufism offered not just a way for inner purification but also a universal

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[9] See, for example, Khaliq Ahmad Nizami, *The Life and Times of Shaikh Nizam-al-din Auliya* (New Delhi: Idarah−i Adabiyat−i Delli, 1991); Carl W. Ernst, *Sufism: An Introduction to the Mystical Tradition of Islam* (Boston: Shambhala, 2011); Richard M. Eaton, *The Rise of Islam and the Bengal Frontier, 1204−1760* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1975).

[10] Ashaq Hussain, "Pluralism and Communal Harmony: Studying the Contribution of Sufis," *International Journal of Multiculturalism*, 2020.

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perspective. It viewed every soul as a seeker of the same Truth, regardless of religious identity, ethnicity, or caste.

The Qur'anic ethos includes verses that promote a deep appreciation of diversity. "O mankind! We created you from a single pair of a male and a female, and made you into nations and tribes that you may know each other" (Qur'an 49:13) is one of the most cited verses by Sufis to highlight the divine will behind human differences. This verse does not just tolerate differences; it honours them as a way to foster mutual understanding. Sufi thinkers, especially those influenced by the metaphysical insights of Ibn al－'Arabi (d. 1240), interpreted such verses through the lens of divine unity, seeing all of creation as reflections of the Divine Names. For them, excluding others meant misunderstanding the vastness of divine mercy.

This expansive worldview, rooted in love and knowledge, provided the groundwork for pluralism. In Sufi writings, the other is not an enemy to reject but a mirror of God's creative potential. Jalal al－Din Rumi's often－quoted line, "Come, come, whoever you are... ours is not a caravan of despair," beautifully captures this sentiment. The Sufi path is both inward and outward embracing humanity as a reflection of divine beauty and power[11]. When Sufism arrived in the Indian subcontinent, these universal ideas found a fertile ground. India possessed a long history of bhakti movements and folk mysticism. Furthermore, its established guru－shishya (master－disciple) traditions naturally aligned with the Sufi ideal of the murshid－student relationship.[12] More importantly, Sufis found a civilizational ethos where truth was seen as complex and where exclusivity was often viewed as arrogance instead of piety. This mutual spiritual understanding allowed for a rich blending of Islamic mystical thought and local religious sensibilities.

Notably, early Sufis in India did not come wielding swords or making sermons. They approached people with a heartfelt language, a simple lifestyle, and a radical openness. Khwaja Mu'in al－din Chishti of Ajmer, for example, never attacked Hindus or Buddhists. Instead, he emphasized compassion, hospitality, and service as the highest forms of spiritual conduct. His teachings, based on the idea of universal peace, would later influence many generations of Sufis and even Mughal emperors like Akbar.[13] The Sufi understanding of pluralism is not accidental or secondary, it is central to its metaphysics, ethics, and lived practice. It sees the world not as a battlefield of competing identities but as a garden of divine diversity. In this view, every being has a role, every path has value, and every soul is a traveller toward the Beloved. This vision allowed Sufism to resonate deeply with the cultural landscape of South Asia and become a powerful force for spiritual pluralism over the centuries.

While the khanqahs were lively spaces for inclusion, not everyone celebrated the pluralist spirit of Sufism. Many jurists and theologians of the time expressed concerns about specific Chishti and Suhrawardī practices, especially sama', inter－communal sociality, and what they saw as excessive acceptance of local customs. Syncretistic tendencies whether real or perceived often drew criticism from orthodox scholars who worried that such openness blurred doctrinal lines. Additionally, Sufi influence faced political limits. Periods of strict court orthodoxy, particularly during the reigns of some

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[11] Mohamed Mihlar Abdul Muthaliff, "Religious Pluralism and International Sufi Movement: An Analysis of Inayat Khan's (1882－1927) Mystical Thoughts," *Ulum Islamiyyah* 18 (2016): 25－44.

[12] Richard M Eaton, *India's Islamic Traditions, 711－1750* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2003).

[13] Khaliq Ahmad Nizami, *State and Culture in Medieval India* (New Delhi: Adam Publishers, 1985), 89－92.

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Delhi Sultans, reduced the social space for Sufi−led pluralist efforts. These tensions show that Sufi pluralism was not an unquestioned ideal but a negotiated moral practice shaped by historical circumstances. Acknowledging these challenges does not lessen the importance of the Sufi contribution instead, it emphasizes their commitment to coexistence in a complex religious landscape.

Historical Development of Sufism in India: The Diversity of the Indian Subcontinent

The Indian subcontinent has historically been one of the most culturally and religiously diverse regions in the world. Comprising present−day India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Nepal, Bhutan, and Sri Lanka, the region has hosted multiple civilizations, languages, and religious traditions for over two millennia. Hinduism, Buddhism, Jainism, and later Islam and Sikhism have coexisted alongside various indigenous faiths and local folk practices[14]. This diversity is reflected not only in religious belief but also in language, art, literature, social customs, and legal systems.

Throughout history, the subcontinent's social fabric has been shaped by dynamic interactions among communities, including periods of cooperation, intellectual exchange, and syncretism, as well as conflict. Scholars of South Asian history emphasize that this pluralism created a fertile environment for spiritual movements that transcended rigid communal boundaries[15]. Within this context, Sufism emerged as a powerful force for interfaith engagement, social cohesion, and cultural integration. Its emphasis on love (ishq), service (khidmat), and universal ethical values allowed it to address the challenges of coexistence in a highly diverse society, providing a spiritual framework for tolerance and inclusivity.

The history of Sufism in the Indian subcontinent is not just about migration or expansion it is a rich story of interaction, change, and cultural blending. When Sufis started coming to India from the 11th century on, they did not just introduce Islamic spirituality. They sparked a lively spiritual exchange with an already diverse society. This led to the gradual and natural growth of a distinct Indian form of Sufism, shaped by both the saints and the land.

In the early days, Sufi mystics often travelled with traders, pilgrims, and even the armies of Muslim rulers. However, unlike political leaders, the Sufis were not interested in conquest or control. They chose to settle in remote towns, barren areas, and village outskirts places that lacked royal sponsorship or strict religious authority. Through years of quiet presence, helping the poor and humble devotion, they began to earn people's affection. Figures such as Shaikh Ali Hujwiri (Data Ganj Bakhsh) in Lahore and Khwaja Mu'in al−din Chishti in Ajmer did not preach forcefully they inspired through their character, generosity, and spiritual appeal.[16]

The rise of the Chishti silsilah was a pivotal moment in this history. Khwaja Mu'in al−din Chishti (d. 1236), who founded the Chishti order in India, established a tradition that prioritized love over law, music over argument, and kindness over pressure. He was

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[14] Rakhi Chakraborty and Swarnendu Roy, "Exploration of the Diversity and Associated Health Benefits of Traditional Pickles from the Himalayan and Adjacent Hilly Regions of the Indian Subcontinent," *Journal of Food Science and Technology* 55, no. 5 (2018): 1599−1613.

[15] Rukmini Bhaya Nair, "Precolonial Universality and Postcolonial Diversity: The Example of the Indian Subcontinent," *Beyond Universalism*, n.d., 137.

[16] Annemarie Schimmel, *Islam in the Indian Subcontinent* (Leiden: Brill, 1980), 123−126.

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followed by a strong spiritual lineage, including Qutb u'd din Bakhtiyar Kaki in Delhi, Baba Farid in Pakpattan, and Nizam al—din Auliya in Delhi. Each of these saints created distinct ways of spiritual and social engagement. They did not isolate themselves but lived among the people, providing food and shelter in their khanqahs. They also turned down political support, which allowed them to stay above the politics of their time.

Under Nizam al—din Auliya (d. 1325), the Chishti khanqah in Delhi became a vibrant centre of spirituality. His doors were open to everyone Hindus, Muslims, Brahmins, Dalits, artisans, women, seekers, kings, and outcasts. His message was simple yet powerful "Love all and hate none." This openness was not a calculated strategy but a genuine spiritual belief, rooted in the Sufi understanding of God's presence in every human being.[17]

Other orders, like the Suhrawardis in Multan and Uchh, as well as later groups like the Qadiris and Naqshbandis, also thrived in different regions. While the Suhrawardis were more accepting of state support, they too added to the culture of spiritual hospitality and moral guidance. The Deccan, Bengal, and Kashmir soon became important centres of Sufi influence, where the saints combined Persian, Arabic, and local languages into a spiritual expression that ordinary folks could relate to. In these areas, Sufism was not separate from society it became part of it. From lullabies to harvest songs, and shrine festivals to local sayings, the Sufi view of the world touched the daily lives of millions.

This growth, however, was not without challenges. There were critiques from orthodox scholars, occasional clashes with political rulers, and pushback from caste elites who feared the egalitarian spirit of the Sufis. Yet the movement continued because it addressed genuine human needs spiritual longing, social respect, and community harmony. Unlike dry scholarship or distant rituals, Sufism in India made the Divine personal and immediate. Thus, the historical development of Sufism in the Indian subcontinent shows its unique ability to listen, change, and provide comfort in a fragmented world. It did not erase India's cultural diversity; it embraced it. In doing so, it created a sacred landscape of shrines, poems, and human connections that still inspire seekers across boundaries.

Khanqah as an Institution of Coexistence

One of the most important institutions where Sufism promoted a culture of pluralism in the Indian subcontinent was the khanqah. This spiritual hospice served as a centre for mystical training and as a social refuge open to everyone. Unlike mosques, which mainly focused on group prayers and often had religious boundaries, khanqahs welcomed common people, outcasts, the curious, and those who were heartbroken. They did not ask for proof of faith or lineage. In these quiet and simple spaces, the Sufi vision of universal love and coexistence came to life. Khanqahs acted as alternative centres of authority and community. They provided shelter to travellers, meals to the hungry, healing to the sick, and wisdom to those seeking spiritual guidance. Importantly, these spaces were truly inclusive. People from various Muslim and non—Muslim backgrounds visited them. Many visitors included Hindus, Sikhs, and followers of folk traditions who found in the Sufi saint a figure of compassion and spiritual connection, regardless of their differing beliefs.[18]

In the Chishti tradition, the khanqah was the heart of spiritual life. Under Nizam al—din Auliya, the khanqah at Ghiyaspur in Delhi became a living symbol of the Sufi

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[17] Nizami, *The Life and Times of Shaikh Nizam*, 140—143.

[18] Richard M. Eaton, *Essays on Islam and Indian History* (New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 2000), 100—104.

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ideal of sulh−e−kul, or universal peace. It was not a place of political power or elite scholarship. It was where the poor received food daily through langar, where mystical music, or sama', filled the air, and where a peaceful defiance against religious exclusion took place. Nizam al−din instructed his followers to avoid discrimination based on religion, caste, or status. His choice to stay away from the royal court or political alliances strengthened the moral authority of the khanqah.[19]

Khanqahs like these arose in Ajmer, Pakpattan, Bidar, Gulbarga, and Srinagar. Each one served as a part of the spiritual network of inclusive Islam. In Punjab, the hospice of Baba Farid became a gathering place for Hindu ascetics and Muslim seekers. In the Deccan, the khanqahs of the Qadiri and Shattari orders interacted with local yogic traditions, freely exchanging language and concepts. The Sufi shaykh was often seen as a pir or baba, whose authority came not from issuing fatwas but from spiritual states and divine grace. This model of coexistence was practical it was part of everyday life. The rituals of 'urs, food distribution (niyaz), poetry recitation in local dialects, and the welcoming of all visitors created a real sense of unity despite differences. These spaces made the sacred tangible through human kindness, where religious identity became less important than spiritual honesty.

However, the openness of the khanqah did carry risks. At times, conservative theologians accused Sufis of mixing different beliefs or introducing innovations. Yet, the strength of their lived example, the love they received from the people and their moral consistency protected them from marginalization. In many areas of the subcontinent, khanqahs became more influential than mosques or madrasas in shaping people's understanding of Islam. The history of these institutions shows how Sufi ideals transformed social structures. The khanqah was more than just a building it was a vibrant community of compassion, a spiritual republic where the only requirement was a longing heart. This legacy makes the khanqah not just a historical fact but a model for spiritual community in a world that is becoming more divided.

Sufi Poetry as a Language of Inclusion.

If the khanqahs were the physical spaces of Sufi pluralism, then Sufi poetry served as its emotional and intellectual heart. In the Indian subcontinent, the message of Sufism did not stay limited to Persian texts or Arabic writings. It flowed into the everyday languages of the people Punjabi, Hindi, Bengali, Sindhi, Urdu, Kashmiri and touched their hearts. The Sufi poets, often skilled in both spiritual practice and local expressions, became champions of a mystical language that went beyond formal religion. Through metaphor, song, and symbol, they built connections across boundaries that politics and dogma could not break.

One of the earliest and most influential among them was Baba Farid (d. 1265). His Punjabi verses were so powerful that they were later included in the Sikh scripture, the Guru Granth Sahib. Farid's poetry spoke of divine love, human humility, moral restraint, and the futility of hatred. He did not claim Muslim superiority instead his verses highlighted our shared human frailty and the mercy of a loving God available to everyone. His lines simple, clear, and rooted in local language resonated with people from different religions.[20]

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[19] Khaliq Ahmad Nizami, *Some Aspects of Religion and Politics in India During the Thirteenth Century* (Aligarh: Aligarh Muslim University, 1961), 85−88.

[20] Christopher Shackle, "Baba Farid and the Sikh Tradition," in *Sikh Identity: Continuity and Change,* ed. Pashaura Singh and N. Gerald Barrier (New Delhi: Manohar, 1999), 51−72.

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In Sindh, Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai (d. 1752) stands out as a symbol of inclusive mysticism. His work, Shah Jo Risalo, mixes Islamic, Hindu, and folk elements, using images of local heroines Sassi, Marui, Momal as metaphors for the soul's longing for the Divine. Bhittai's verses reflect compassion for the oppressed, respect for women, and a keen awareness of the universal human quest for truth. In his view, the distinctions between Hindu yogis and Muslim faqirs dissolve; what truly matters is sincerity, not sect.[21]

No poet captures the inclusive spirit of South Asian Sufism more vividly than Bulleh Shah (d. 1757). A disciple of the Qadiri master Shah Inayat, Bulleh Shah wrote in Punjabi. His verses were boldly rebellious challenging clerics, mocking caste pride, and celebrating the universality of love. "Bulleya, ki jaana main kaun?" ("O Bulleh, what do I know of who I am?") is more than just a line it is a mystical assertion of the unimportance of external labels. He mingled with yogis, criticized religious authorities, and sang of divine love that knows no boundaries. His poems are still popular among Sikhs, Hindus, and Muslims, sung at shrines, festivals, and even modern Sufi concerts.[22] Even in Bengal, the poetry of Lalon Fakir (d. 1890) and earlier Baul traditions show a remarkable blend of Sufi, Vaishnavite, and Tantric influences. Lalon's songs question strict beliefs and present a vision of spirituality that is embodied, ethical, and deeply inclusive. His line, "If you don't find your soul in your body, where else will you find it?" captures the Sufi search for the Divine within oneself rather than through external rituals.

What connects these poets is not just their mystical insight but their accessibility to everyday people. They did not write for scholars but for shepherds, potters, washermen, weavers, and widows. Their verses became the spiritual literature of the masses. They made mystical knowledge more accessible and expressed a religiosity that was inward, ethical, and inclusive. In a region marked by caste divisions and sectarian tensions, Sufi poetry established a new way of expressing unity one that did not erase differences but gently embraced them in divine love. In their words, a language of radical welcoming is found. The Divine is not a distant ruler but a beloved friend. The path is open to anyone with a passionate heart, not just the elite. The destination is not a rigid structure of orthodoxy but a garden of friendship dostī, ishq, maḥabba where everyone is welcome.

Case Study of a Spiritual Response to Diversity

While Sufi philosophy and poetry beautifully convey the ideas of pluralism, it is in practice, across specific historical and social contexts, that these ideas gain their full meaning. The Indian subcontinent has numerous case studies where Sufi traditions became active agents of inter−communal harmony, cultural blending, and ethical change. These real−life examples from shrine spaces to saintly relationships show how Sufism addressed not just individual spiritual needs but also the collective needs of society.

Nizam al-Din Auliya and the Delhi Community

Few figures embody spiritual pluralism as clearly as Hazrat Nizam al−din Auliya (d. 1325) of Delhi. He often says that "Every visitor should be served something; if there is nothing to offer, a cup of water may be offered". His khanqah attracted people from all walks of life, regardless of faith, status, gender, or profession. Among his regular visitors were Hindu musicians, courtesans, faqirs, scholars, and common labourers. The Sufi saint

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[21] Annemarie Schimmel, *Pain and Grace: A Study of Two Mystical Writers of Eighteenth-Century Muslim India* (Leiden: Brill, 1976), 133−140.

[22] Javed Majeed, *Nation and Region in Grierson's Linguistic Survey of India* (London: Routledge, 2018), 166−169.

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did not make distinctions he saw each visitor as a human soul in need of love and guidance. Nizam al−din declined royal gifts, avoided court support, and remained committed to helping the marginalized. His insistence on langar, a free kitchen open to everyone, and his regular spiritual gatherings (majalis) fostered a space of trust and mutual respect in a city often divided by political conflicts.[23] His shrine in Delhi still stands as a deeply plural space. Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, and Christians continue to visit, tie threads of hope, and offer flowers. The saint's life shows that for Sufis, pluralism was not just a theory but a daily practice of inclusion, humility, and quiet resistance to exclusion.

Baba Farid and the Sikh Mystical Canon

The legacy of Baba Farid (d. 1265) in Pakpattan presents another strong case of interfaith exchange. His Punjabi verses, written in the local language, were later chosen by Guru Arjan Dev, the fifth Sikh Guru, for inclusion in the Guru Granth Sahib. This was not just a matter of literary appreciation it revealed a deep connection between Farid's mystical ethics and the Sikh focus on devotion, service, and equality. This inclusion is significant because it expresses an implicit spiritual unity. Baba Farid, a Muslim Sufi, becomes part of the sacred scripture of Sikhism not as a borrowed voice but as a kindred spirit. Even today, Sikh ragis sing his shabads in Gurdwaras, and Sufi visitors recite the same verses at his shrine in Pakpattan. This shared spiritual heritage challenges narrow definitions of religious identity and highlights a deeper Indian mystical tradition of openness.[24]

The 'Urs of Khwaja Mu'in al-din Chishti in Ajmer

Perhaps no event better symbolizes the practical pluralism of Indian Sufism than the annual 'Urs of Khwaja Mu'in al−din Chishti in Ajmer. Every year, thousands of pilgrims Hindus, Muslims, Christians, Dalits, tribals, and foreign tourists come to the Dargah to honour a man who, in life and death, became a unifying spiritual figure. The rituals at the 'Urs do not require formal religious affiliation. Offerings are made, qawwalis are sung in various languages, and prayers are offered for health, justice, and peace. Hindu families come seeking blessings for marriage or childbirth. Muslims gather to give thanks or ask for forgiveness. What takes place here is not a crude form of syncretism but a shared respect for a man whose life exemplified compassion and hospitality.[25]

Lalon Fakir and the Baul-Sufi Dialogue in Bengal

In Bengal, the 18th and 19th centuries saw the unique growth of the Baul−Sufi dialogue, especially through the figure of Lalon Fakir. Rejecting both Islamic orthodoxy and Hindu rituals, Lalon highlighted the unity of the human soul and the uselessness of external markers like caste or creed. His songs combined Persian, Bengali, and local folk expressions, and they are still sung in both Sufi and Vaishnavite circles. Lalon never claimed exclusive ownership of truth he embodied a mystical humility that resists finality.

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[23] Khaliq Ahmad Nizami, The Life and Times of Shaikh Nizam−u'd−din Auliya (New Delhi: Idarah−i Adabiyat−i Delli, 1991), 144−150.

[24] Harjot Oberoi, *The Construction of Religious Boundaries: Culture, Identity, and Diversity in the Sikh Tradition* (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1994), 215−218.

[25] Carl W. Ernst, *Sufism*, 163−165.

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His shrine in Kushtia, Bangladesh, remains a pilgrimage site for Muslims, Hindus, and seekers from all walks of life, where his songs serve as a bridge across religious divides.[26]

These cases are not outliers. They represent a deeper current in Indian spiritual life shaped by Sufi pluralism an ethos that challenged communal divides, questioned caste hierarchies, and acknowledged the sacredness in all beings. In these spaces and figures, we see a powerful counter—narrative to the language of religious separation, a living tradition of what Khaliq Ahmad Nizami once referred to as the "Sufi culture of the masses."[27]

Contemporary Challenges

How can the pluralistic and inclusive teachings of Sufism in the Indian subcontinent address the challenges of cultural and religious diversity in today's society? Today, the inclusive and diverse spirit of Indian Sufism faces serious and ongoing challenges. The tradition that once offered a spiritual language for coexistence is now caught in the middle of religious division, rigid ideologies, and cultural forgetfulness. While Sufi shrines still attract millions, their deeper teachings of love, tolerance, and unity are often overshadowed by identity politics, sectarian messages, and the commercialization of faith. This crisis is not just about theology it mirrors larger social, political, and knowledge shifts in South Asia and around the world.

One of the most visible threats comes from the rise of religious nationalism. In modern India, efforts to define the nation in narrow religious or cultural terms have put minority traditions, including Sufism, under scrutiny. Radical Salafist groups sometimes label Sufi shrines as "un—Islamic." At the same time, hyper—nationalist narratives dismiss them as "foreign imports." In this environment, the Sufi message which insists that truth goes beyond religious labels and that love is the highest path to the Divine becomes uncomfortable for both sides.[28]

Even within the Muslim community, there is an increasing shift toward strict or ideological expressions of Islam that don't allow for mystical depth. Sufi practices like sama', honouring saints, and visiting shrines are increasingly labelled as innovations (bid'a) by reformist movements. In some places, the spiritual warmth and openness of the khanqah is being replaced by strict doctrinal control. This internal narrowing threatens to sever the ties that once connected Islam to local cultures, languages, and moral values.

Additionally, modern forms of spirituality often detached from community roots have started to use Sufi language while ignoring its ethical foundations. Words like 'ishq, fana', and wahdat appear in popular media and online spaces, often stripped of their real meanings. While this may show an ongoing interest in Sufi ideas, it also lessens their transformative power. Without the deeper discipline of the silsilah the murshid—murid relationship, and the social ethics of service and humility, Sufism risks becoming mere decoration.

Another challenge is the loss of historical memory. Many young South Asians grow up with little awareness of the Sufi legacy that once shaped their cultures. People visit shrines and enjoy qawwalis, but the philosophical and ethical core of the tradition is often hidden. The teachings of Nizam al—din Auliya, Bulleh Shah, or Shah Latif Bhittai are no

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[26] Carola Erika Lorea, Folklore, *Religion and the Songs of a Bengali Madman: A Journey Between Performance and the Politics of Cultural Representation* (Leiden: Brill, 2016), 92—95.

[27] Nizami, *State and Culture in Medieval India*, 77.

[28] Irfan Ahmad, *Religion as Critique: Islamic Critical Thinking from Mecca to the Marketplace* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2017), 198—202.

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longer central to public education or cultural discussions. This disconnect from heritage creates a gap that easily gets filled by exclusionary ideologies.

However, amid these challenges, there are still signs of resistance and revival. Sufi scholars, musicians, and grassroots communities continue to embrace the tradition not out of nostalgia, but as a living reaction to the fragmentation of modern life. In times of violence, many still seek comfort at the shrines. In moments of despair, the words of mystics continue to resonate among people. The essence of Sufism, with its emphasis on divine unity, moral responsibility, and the dignity of every person, still burns brightly in hearts across South Asia. What we need today is not just to preserve Sufi rituals or festivals, but to reclaim its pluralistic vision as a moral and spiritual guideline. In a world increasingly defined by barriers physical, mental, or religious the Sufi path reminds us that the highest spiritual goal is not separation but unity. In the subcontinent, where the wounds of partition, caste, and communalism still hurt, the legacy of Indian Sufism calls out gently yet powerfully for healing.

Conclusion

The story of Sufism in the Indian subcontinent is not just a part of religious history it is proof of the possibility for spiritual diversity, cultural exchange, and human dignity. At its best, Indian Sufism provided not only a theological view but also an ethical framework for civilization. Love crossed boundaries, service became worship, and the Divine was found not only in mosques but in the hearts of all creation. It encouraged a religious attitude that was open, gentle, and inclusive. From the khanqahs of Delhi to the dargahs of Ajmer, from the verses of Baba Farid and Bulleh Shah to the teachings of Chishti saints, this tradition created a shared sacred space. It asked for compassion, not conversion; it invited sincerity, not uniformity. This gentle challenge to both political power and strict orthodoxy made Sufism a refuge for many Muslims and non−Muslims alike.

However, as this paper has shown, the modern world presents serious challenges to this vision. Sectarianism, religious nationalism, spiritual consumerism, and cultural amnesia all threaten the Sufi spirit. The inclusive message that once filled shrines and songs now clashes with fears and exclusive narratives. Despite this, the seeds planted by the Sufis remain alive. They are woven into language, poetry, rituals of remembrance, and the hearts of ordinary people who refuse to abandon coexistence. By recalling the legacy of Indian Sufism today, we are not simply honouring past achievements we are finding a moral and spiritual guide for the future. In a world dividing under the strain of differences, the Sufi message provides an important counterpoint true religiosity does not seek dominance but embraces humility, it builds bridges instead of walls, and it promotes love over fear. The Indian subcontinent, with all its contradictions, remains a rich ground for this revival if we are open to hearing the silence of the dargah, the longing of the qawwal, and the tears of the faqir. In these expressions lies a vision of togetherness and a call for peace, both of which we urgently need in our fragmented times

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