

Bhakti and Sufi Movements: Timeless Pathways to Social Harmony

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ABSTRACT

Purpose: *The Bhakti and Sufi movements, flourishing between the seventh and seventeenth centuries CE across the Indian subcontinent, constitute one of history's most consequential experiments in popular religious reform and egalitarian social praxis. Emerging independently yet converging organically through shared spiritual commitments, these twin traditions challenged entrenched structures of caste hierarchy, priestly monopoly, gender exclusion, and economic exploitation with a theological audacity that was unprecedented in pre-modern India. By locating divinity within the individual heart rather than within the exclusive precincts of temple or mosque, Bhakti saints and Sufi masters dismantled the architecture of spiritual elitism and opened pathways of transcendence to peasants, artisans, women, and untouchables alike. This deep-study research paper undertakes a systematic, multi-dimensional examination of the Bhakti and Sufi movements, tracing their historical origins, ideological foundations, institutional expressions, linguistic contributions, and socio-economic critiques.*

Methodology: In this paper, the exploratory qualitative research method is used. The relevant information is collected using keyword-based search in Google search engine, Google Scholar search engine, and AI-driven GPTs. This information is analysed and interpreted as per the objectives of the paper.

Analysis/Results: *Drawing upon primary textual traditions — including the Alvars' Divya Prabandham, Kabir's Dohas, the Vachanas of Basavanna, the Qawwali corpus of the Chishtis, and the philosophical writings of Nizamuddin Auliya — as well as contemporary scholarly literature, the paper argues that these movements constituted not merely religious reforms but comprehensive social justice projects that anticipated modern egalitarian discourse by several centuries.*

Originality/Values: *In twenty-first-century India, where caste discrimination persists, communal polarisation is rising, and wealth is highly concentrated, these movements' core principles—universal brotherhood, interfaith dialogue, dignity of labour, and democratisation of knowledge—remain highly relevant.*

Type of Paper: *Exploratory Research.*

Keywords: Bhakti Movement, Sufi Movement, Social Justice, Caste System, Interfaith Harmony, Indian Knowledge Systems, Vernacular Literature, Egalitarianism, NEP 2020.

1. INTRODUCTION :

The history of Indian civilisation is, at its deepest level, a history of perpetual dialogue between structure and subversion — between the institutionalised authority of priestly orthodoxy and the spontaneous, irrepressible surge of devotional mysticism that periodically re-anchors religious life to its most elemental impulse: the direct experience of the divine [1]. No chapter of this dialogue is more instructive, more emotionally resonant, or more socially consequential than the long arc of the Bhakti and Sufi movements, stretching across a millennium from the seventh-century Tamil Nadu of the Alvars and Nayanars to the seventeenth-century northern India of Tukaram and the late Chishti masters [2].

At first glance, the Bhakti movement — rooted in the devotional traditions of Hinduism — and the Sufi movement — an esoteric stream within Islam — appear to belong to entirely different religious universes separated by theology, scripture, ritual practice, and social context [3]. Yet a sustained

examination reveals a remarkable convergence. Both traditions rejected empty formalism. Both located spiritual authority in personal experience rather than institutional credential. Both extended their embrace to communities systematically excluded by dominant religious orders — the low-caste Hindu, the poor Muslim artisan, the widow, the untouchable. And both, crucially, deployed the vernacular tongues of common people as the primary medium of their spiritual message, thereby effecting a revolution in literacy, cultural identity, and the politics of knowledge far beyond the boundaries of religious reform.

The contemporary moment makes this historical inquiry more than scholarly — it makes it urgent. India in the third decade of the twenty-first century continues to wrestle with caste-based discrimination, communal division, gender inequality, and economic disparity of staggering proportions. The Constitution of India, inspired by the Ambedkarite vision itself deeply shaped by Bhakti egalitarianism, articulates a solemn commitment to justice, liberty, equality, and fraternity. Yet the distance between constitutional aspiration and social reality remains vast [4]. In this context, the Bhakti and Sufi movements function not merely as objects of historical curiosity but as reservoirs of tested wisdom — intellectual, ethical, and institutional — from which contemporary social justice discourse can draw sustenance [5].

The present paper is organised around this dual purpose: to reconstruct the Bhakti and Sufi movements in their full historical and intellectual complexity, and to demonstrate their continued vitality as frameworks for addressing the social challenges of modern India. It proceeds through seven substantive chapters addressing historical origins, social critique, religious pluralism, linguistic democratisation, economic justice, and contemporary relevance, before arriving at an integrative conclusion.

2. REVIEW OF LITERATURE :

Tables 1 to 4 presents review of literature on Bhakti movement and Sufi movements.

Table 1: Review of Related papers

S. No.	Author / Year	Title of Article / Work	Theme / Focus	Key Findings
1	Novetzke, C.L. (2007). [6]	<i>Bhakti and Its Public</i>	Bhakti as Social Movement	Bhakti created religious 'publics' cutting across caste/class; devotional language use democratised spiritual knowledge and social participation
2	Burchett, P. (2009). [7]	<i>Bhakti Rhetoric in the Hagiography of 'Untouchable' Saints: Discerning Bhakti's Ambivalence on Caste and Brahminhood</i>	Caste, Social Justice, Bhakti	Critical analysis of bhakti's ambivalence on caste; hagiographies of untouchable saints reveal both egalitarian ideals and conservative recuperation
3	Hawley, J. S. (2015). [8]	<i>A storm of songs: India and the idea of the bhakti movement</i>	Bhakti Movement: Historiography	Hawley's work exposes bhakti 'movement' as partly a 20th-century nationalist construction; necessary re-examination of claims about bhakti as social reform
4	Williams, R.D. (2018). [9]	<i>Review of A Storm of Songs: India and the Idea of the Bhakti</i>	Bhakti Movement: Historiography	Affirms Hawley's historiographical argument; contextualises bhakti in colonial and nationalist discourse; relevant to current debates on religious nationalism

S. No.	Author / Year	Title of Article / Work	Theme / Focus	Key Findings
		<i>Movement by J.S. Hawley</i>		
5	Jacobsen, K.A. (2016). [10]	<i>Review of A Storm of Songs by J.S. Hawley</i>	Bhakti: Historiography & Social Impact	Analyses how the concept of Bhakti sampradayas underpinned the 'movement' narrative; historical framing significant for social justice claims
6	Lorenzen, D.N. (1999). [11]	<i>Who Invented Hinduism?</i>	Hindu/Bhakti Identity, Caste, Social Reform	Critiques constructivist claims on Hinduism; documents Bhakti saints' challenge to caste orthodoxy and inclusive religious communities across centuries
7	Pandey, S.M. & Zide, N. (1965). [12]	<i>Mīrābāī and Her Contributions to the Bhakti Movement</i>	Gender, Bhakti, Social Justice	Earliest scholarly treatment of Mirabai's gender defiance; her devotional poetry as a critique of patriarchal norms and caste convention
8	Rehman, H.S. & Ehsan, A. (2024). [13]	<i>India's Sufi Order and Interfaith Harmony</i>	Sufi Movement, Interfaith Harmony	Documents Chishti, Qadiri, Suhrawardi, Naqshbandi silsilas' contributions to interfaith peace in India; contemporary recommendations for Sufi educational institutions
9	Williams, T.W. (2022). [14]	<i>Literary and Religious History from the Middle: Merchants and Bhakti in Early Modern North India</i>	Bhakti, Economic Justice, Artisan Communities	Examines merchant/artisan bhakti communities; connects religious practice with economic solidarity, guild networks, and resistance to feudal extraction
10	Das, S. (2024). [15]	<i>Devotion of Dissent: Contesting Hindutva in Bhakti Tradition</i>	Bhakti, Social Justice, Contemporary India	Analyses how Bhakti traditions serve as counter-narratives to Hindutva politics; devotion as dissent and social justice tool in contemporary India
11	Jodhka, S.S. (2008). [16]	<i>Ravidass Deras and Social Protest: Making Sense of Dalit Consciousness in Punjab (India)</i>	Dalit Rights, Bhakti, Social Justice	Documents how Ravidass Bhakti tradition fuels contemporary Dalit political consciousness and community organisation in Punjab; direct contemporary relevance
12	Omvedt, G. (2008). [17]	<i>Seeking Begumpura: The Social Vision of</i>	Anticaste, Dalit, Bhakti Utopianism	Traces Ravidas's Begumpura utopia as India's earliest anticaste social vision; genealogy from Bhakti saints to Ambedkar; foundational for contemporary Dalit social justice discourse

S. No.	Author / Year	Title of Article / Work	Theme / Focus	Key Findings
		<i>Anticaste Intellectuals</i>		
13	Baba I. A. (2024). [18]	<i>Bhakti Movement: A Sui Generis Movement for Empowerment</i>	Bhakti, Social Reform, Equality	Reviews Bhakti as unique reform movement; documents anti-caste, anti-ritual, and gender-inclusive dimensions; argues for contemporary social justice relevance

Table 2: Review summary based on the keyword: Bhakti Movement and Sufi Movement

S. No.	Title	Focus/Outcome	Reference
1	A study on Bhakti and Sufi movements in medieval India.	The Bhakti Movement emerged in South India around the 8th century and gradually spread across North, East, and West India, reaching its peak by the 17th century. Rooted in ancient texts such as the <i>Shvetashvatara Upanishad</i> and the <i>Bhagavad Gita</i> , Bhakti emphasized loving devotion to God as a path to spiritual liberation (<i>moksha</i>). Through the devotional poetry of saints like Kabir, Ravidas, Meera Bai, and Chaitanya, the movement not only enriched Indian literature but also challenged caste discrimination, ritualism, and social inequalities, promoting equality, faith, and personal devotion.	Kiran, S. (2019). [19]
2	Bhakti and Sufi Movements as forces of Social Change	The Bhakti and Sufi movements were powerful spiritual and social reform movements in medieval India that emphasized devotion, love, equality, and compassion over ritualism and religious orthodoxy. Through the teachings of saints such as Kabir, Mirabai, Guru Nanak, Khwaja Moinuddin Chishti, and Nizamuddin Auliya, these movements challenged caste discrimination, promoted communal harmony, and made spirituality accessible to all. Their contributions enriched vernacular literature, empowered marginalized communities, and helped shape India's pluralistic and inclusive cultural heritage.	Sahu, N. (2011). [20]
3	Locating the Emancipatory Potentials in the Bhakti and Sufi movements	The Bhakti and Sufi movements emerged as influential socio-religious reform traditions in medieval India, emphasizing personal devotion, spiritual knowledge, and direct experience of God over ritualism and religious orthodoxy. Originating between the 8th and 11th centuries, they challenged caste, creed, and blind adherence to scriptures, promoting equality, inner spirituality, and the guidance of a spiritual master. Through their teachings, both movements fostered social reform, religious tolerance, and a deeper, more	Pokhrel, R. S. (2024). [21]

		personal relationship between individuals and the divine.	
4	Impact of Bhakti and Sufi Mysticism on Social Harmony	This article presents a comparative study of the Bhakti Movement and Sufi Mysticism , examining their origins, philosophies, practices, and social impacts. It highlights how both traditions emphasized devotion, inclusivity, and a personal connection with the Divine while evolving within distinct cultural and religious contexts. The study also explores their role in promoting religious harmony, spiritual transformation, and possible cross-cultural influences that enriched India's pluralistic spiritual heritage.	Salman Faris T. C. (2024). [3]
5	Contesting religious governmentality: The Bhakti-Sufi movements of medieval India.	Michel Foucault challenged both positivist and traditional human-science perspectives by questioning the concept of a universal and fixed human nature. He argued that individuals are historically and socially constructed rather than possessing a constant essence, and that the idea of humans being simultaneously fully determined and fully free is fundamentally contradictory. According to Foucault, this notion emerged as a conceptual requirement of modern European nation-states rather than as a reflection of any timeless human reality.	Hakeem, F. (2019). [22]
6	Religious/Philosophical Movements–Bhakti Cult and Sufism	The rise of vernacular languages and regional literatures during medieval India contributed significantly to cultural revival, social awareness, and the growth of human consciousness. These literary traditions challenged feudalism, caste discrimination, and religious intolerance while promoting ideals of unity, justice, and devotion to a higher divine power. However, despite these progressive developments, dissenters and reformers often faced persecution from both Hindu and Muslim orthodox establishments for questioning established religious doctrines.	Singh, J. (2025, March). [23]
7	Inter-Cultural Interaction in the Subcontinent	The arrival of Sufi saints from Iran and Central Asia, particularly during the 13th century, fostered significant cultural and spiritual exchanges with indigenous traditions such as the Bhakti movement . Both traditions emphasized direct devotion to God, personal spiritual experience, and unconditional divine love, leading to mutual influence and transformation. Their interaction was facilitated by India's diverse socio-cultural environment, which encouraged dialogue, inclusivity, and the blending of spiritual ideas across religious boundaries.	Khan, N. R., & Talukdar, M. (2021). [24]
8	Bhakti and Sufi Movements	This paper highlights how the Bhakti and Sufi movements democratized spiritual expression in India. By shifting focus from Sanskrit to	Sikder, L. B. (2025). [25]

		regional vernaculars and personal devotion, this literature bridged Hindu-Islamic divides, empowered marginalized groups, and sparked a lasting legacy of syncretism and universal love.	
9	Science and Social Movements: Bhakti and Sufi Movements	This thesis explores how periods of major scientific and technological advancement in medieval India gave rise to social and cultural movements that redirected societal focus back to human values and emotional freedom.	Rahman, A. (1998). [26]
10	My miracle trumps your magic: Encounters with Yogīs in Sufi and bhakti hagiographical literature	This essay examines stories in Sufi and Bhakti hagiographical literature that depict spiritual contests with yogis, highlighting the distinction between miracles and magic in both traditions. It argues that these narratives reveal possible Sufi influences on the Bhakti tradition while also showing how tantric practices were gradually marginalized and portrayed as magical during the rise of Bhakti in early modern North India. The study further challenges the notion of a single, unified “Bhakti Movement” by exploring the complex historical and religious interactions that shaped devotional traditions.	Burchett, P. (2012). [27]
11	Equipoise in Bhakti and Sufism: Pathways to Spiritual and Social Reforms	The Bhakti and Sufi movements profoundly influenced Indian society by promoting devotion, equality, and inner harmony across religious and cultural boundaries. Through poetry, music, and spiritual teachings, both traditions emphasized the philosophy of equipoise , fostering peace, social cohesion, and a deeper connection with the divine. Their shared ideals of tolerance and universal brotherhood contributed significantly to spiritual, cultural, and social harmony in India.	Mayanglambam, B. (2025). [28]
12	Sufi and Bhakti Kindred by Love	The Bhakti and Sufi movements reached their peak in fifteenth-century India, transcending barriers of religion, language, and region through devotional poetry, music, and dance. They brought together Hindus, Muslims, and marginalized communities in a shared celebration of divine love and spiritual devotion. This widespread participation fostered cultural unity, social harmony, and a collective spiritual awakening across the Indian subcontinent.	Mukhopadhyay, A. (2016). [29]
13	An Explorative Venture on Human Right’s Birth and Foundation from the Roots of Vedic Era to the Roots of Bhakti and Sufi Era.	The concept of human rights is a modern development, making it challenging to directly trace its origins in ancient Indian traditions. However, values such as humanism, compassion, non-violence, social justice, concern for marginalized groups, and respect for human dignity have long been present in Indian thought and can be viewed as foundational elements of contemporary human	Kumar, S. (2018). [30]

		rights. Any exploration of this connection must avoid both idealizing and dismissing Indian traditions, recognizing instead their complex and diverse historical character.	
14	Sufi and Bhakti Tradition: Corresponding and Divergent Trends	Many religions and spiritual traditions have promoted the ideals of universal humanism , emphasizing human dignity, compassion, and collective well-being. Scholars suggest that the Sufi tradition in the Indian subcontinent may have absorbed influences from Buddhism, while the Bhakti movement reflected interactions with Islamic thought, fostering cultural and spiritual synthesis. These developments occurred amid periods of social and political upheaval, including the devastating invasions of Central and West Asia by Genghis Khan and Hulagu Khan, which profoundly shaped the historical landscape of the region.	Ahan, A. A. (2023). [31]

Table 3: Review summary based on the keyword: Bhakti Movement

S. No.	Title	Focus/Outcome	Reference
1	Bhakti: From Ancient Philosophy to Social Movement in South India	The Bhakti philosophy , centered on loving devotion to a personal deity as a path to salvation, has its roots in ancient Brahmanical and Buddhist traditions and scriptures such as the <i>Bhagavad Gita</i> . Between the 7th and 10th centuries, it evolved into a powerful socio-religious movement in South India that promoted spiritual equality and broad social participation. Later revitalized by scholars such as Ramanuja , the Bhakti tradition influenced various regional movements across India and became a significant force for religious and social transformation.	Deshmukh, G. (2013). [32]
2	The Bhakti movement in India: A critical introduction	This collection of articles examines the contemporary relevance of Bhakti literature and practice , particularly in the context of modernization and social change. It challenges the common view that tradition and modernity are opposing forces, arguing instead that traditions such as Bhakti can adapt and remain meaningful in a rapidly changing world. The discussion highlights how modern social theories often oversimplify the relationship between tradition and progress by applying Western historical experiences universally.	Lele, J. (1981). [33]
3	The Bhakti Movement—An Interpretation	The interaction between Hindu and Islamic traditions in medieval India fostered a unique process of cultural exchange and synthesis, despite both communities largely retaining their distinct religious beliefs and social structures. The Bhakti Movement emerged as a common spiritual platform that encouraged dialogue, devotion, and social harmony between the two groups. Beyond	Pande, R. (1987, January). [34]

		its religious and literary significance, the movement was also shaped by socio-economic conditions and sought to uplift marginalized and oppressed sections of society, making it an important force for social reform.	
4	The medieval bhakti movement in history	The Bhakti Movement was a major devotional movement that originated in South India around the 7th century and gradually spread across the subcontinent by the 15th century. It played a significant role in strengthening Hinduism, promoting vernacular literature, spreading spiritual ideas among common people, and fostering interaction between Hindu and Islamic traditions. Because of its profound religious, cultural, and social influence, historians regard it as one of the most important movements in Indian history, often comparing its impact to that of the Protestant Reformation in Europe.	Zelliot, E. (1982). [35]
5	The Temple-Base of the Bhakti Movement in South India	An analysis of the temples praised by the Shaiva Nayanars and Vaishnava Alvars reveals a strong concentration of devotional activity in the fertile Kaveri River valley , particularly within the Chola region. This geographic distribution suggests that the Bhakti movement flourished in areas of political and economic importance, contributing to the emergence of sacred cultural centers. The shift in temple focus from Pallava to Chola territories also reflects the changing religious and political landscape of South India during the growth of the Bhakti tradition.	Veluthat, K. (1979). [36]
6	The Bhakti Movement in North India	The Bhakti Movement in North India was a major socio-religious reform movement that emphasized personal devotion, spiritual equality, and the rejection of caste-based discrimination. Saints Kabir and Ravidas played pivotal roles in promoting <i>Nirguna Bhakti</i> (devotion to a formless God), challenging religious orthodoxy, and advocating social justice through their poetry and teachings. While Kabir employed a critical and reformist approach, Ravidas emphasized compassion and an egalitarian vision, and together they helped democratize religion, inspire social change, and foster interfaith harmony in medieval India.	Singh, H. P. (2026). [37]
7	The social context of the Bhakti movement—A study in Kabir	The arrival of Islam in India significantly influenced the country's political, religious, and socio-cultural landscape, leading to a gradual process of interaction and synthesis between Hindu and Islamic traditions. Although Hindu caste distinctions persisted and both faiths largely retained their core beliefs, the Bhakti Movement provided a common platform for dialogue, spiritual exchange, and social integration. By promoting devotion, equality, and mutual understanding, the movement helped ease cultural	Pande, R. (1985, January). [38]

		tensions and facilitated constructive social adjustment during a period of profound change.	
8	Bhakti: From Ancient Philosophy to Social Movement in South India	The Bhakti philosophy , which advocates devoted worship of a personal deity as a path to salvation, originated from ancient Brahmanical and Buddhist traditions and scriptures such as the <i>Bhagavad Gita</i> . Between the 7th and 10th centuries, it evolved into a powerful socio-religious movement in South India that promoted spiritual equality and active social participation under the guidance of saint-poets. Later revitalized by scholars such as Ramanuja , the movement influenced numerous regional devotional traditions and became an important force for religious, philosophical, and social transformation in India.	Deshmukh, G. (2013). [39]
9	Bhakti Movement	The Bhakti Movement played a significant role in medieval India by reducing caste and class barriers, promoting vernacular languages, and guiding people toward spiritual enlightenment. Through devotional literature inspired by texts such as the <i>Vedas</i> , <i>Bhagavad Gita</i> , and <i>Bhagavata Purana</i> , Bhakti saints emphasized equality, social harmony, and a direct relationship between the individual and the divine. Its enduring ideals continue to offer valuable insights for addressing contemporary social inequalities and fostering unity in an increasingly globalized world.	Natarajan, M. (2025). [40]
10	Bhakti Movement in Northern India	The Bhakti Movement , rooted in the Vaishnava tradition and inspired by ancient scriptures such as the <i>Bhagavad Gita</i> , evolved from a devotional philosophy into a powerful socio-religious movement promoting spiritual equality and social participation. Originating in South India between the 7th and 10th centuries and later revitalized by thinkers such as Ramanuja , it spread across India and inspired diverse regional movements adapted to local historical and cultural contexts. The movement significantly influenced religious thought, social reform, and the growth of devotional traditions, including the development of Vaishnavism in North India.	Mitra, D. P. (2023). [41]

Table 4: Review summary based on the keyword: Sufi Movement

S. No.	Title	Focus/Outcome	Reference
1	Literary productions of Western Sufi movements	This study examines the literary contributions of Western Sufi movements , focusing on the major genres they employ and the reasons for their selection. It argues that Western Sufism should not be understood solely through social theory or immigrant-religion perspectives but also through critical engagement with its rich literary and intellectual productions. Such an approach broadens the understanding of Western Sufi traditions and their cultural significance.	Hermansen, M. (2006). [42]

2	Sufism in History and its Relationship with Power	Sufism , the mystical tradition of Islam, is part of the broader phenomenon of mysticism found across many world religions. Emerging from the teachings of the Qur'an and the Prophet Muhammad, it gradually developed into an organized spiritual movement with distinct doctrines and practices that spread throughout the Muslim world. Despite its popularity among the masses, Sufism often maintained a complex relationship with political and religious authorities, who viewed its influence and alternative spiritual authority with caution.	Anjum, T. (2006). [43]
3	Revitalised Sufism and the new piety movements in Islamic Southeast Asia	In Southeast Asia, Sufi traditions have remained influential despite periods of criticism and marginalization by scripturalist Islamic reform movements. Traditional Islamic institutions continued to preserve Sufi teachings, while recent decades have witnessed the emergence of new forms of Sufi-inspired spirituality in both urban and rural settings. These contemporary Sufi renewal movements combine mystical devotion with active engagement in modern social and economic life, making them relevant within today's rapidly changing consumer-oriented societies.	Howell, J. D. (2014). [44]
4	The roles of Sufi teachings in social movements	There is increasing recognition of the relevance of Sufi teachings in promoting human resource development through values such as unconditional love, self-transformation, collective learning, and social responsibility. Sufi-inspired social movements across the world have contributed to individual, organizational, and community development while fostering social harmony and human empowerment. These insights provide a valuable framework for researchers, practitioners, and social activists seeking sustainable social change and holistic human development.	Budhwani, N. N., & McLean, G. N. (2019). [45]
5	Sufism, 'popular' Islam and the encounter with modernity	Since the eighteenth century, many Islamic reform movements have viewed Sufism with skepticism or hostility, criticizing practices such as saint veneration, shrine visitation, mystical rituals, and unquestioning devotion to spiritual masters as deviations from orthodox Islam. Reformist groups including the Wahhabis, Salafis, Ahl-i Hadith, Deobandis, and secular nationalists sought to restrict or reform Sufi institutions, often regarding them as obstacles to religious purity and social progress. Despite these challenges, Sufism has remained a significant spiritual tradition within the Muslim world, continuing to influence religious and cultural life across diverse societies.	Van Bruinessen, M. (2009). [46]
10	Sufism as an explanatory paradigm:	Sufism has often been used as a framework for understanding Islamic reform and resistance	Knysh, A. (2002). [47]

	the issue of the motivations of Sufi resistance movements in Western and Russian scholarship	movements in the Muslim world. Some scholars argue that the politicization and ideological transformation of Islam during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries led to the emergence of reform-oriented movements that combined spiritual teachings with social and political activism. This development gave rise to the concept of “ Neo-Sufism ,” a reformed form of Sufism that emphasized religious discipline, mass mobilization, and adherence to Islamic law while reducing its earlier mystical and ecstatic elements.	
11	Sufism between past and modernity	The term “Sufism” refers to a broad range of practices and concepts that cannot be given a single definition. At its core, “Sufism” is a gloss of a tradition of spiritual practice called “ <i>taṣawwuf</i> ” in Arabic, which has most often entailed the transmission and recitation of litanies, both individually and collectively, through a chain of transmission, usually with the goal of cultivating spiritual experiences of the divine. Additionally, Sufi figures and concepts have come to have cultural significance beyond the circle of people formally initiated into <i>taṣawwuf</i> , such that the Sufi tradition can be understood as including a range of social practices and relationships. This article complicates a number of widespread misconceptions about Sufism. First, whereas many observers have depicted Sufism as marginal to mainstream Islam and have predicted the demise of Sufism as the world modernizes and becomes more educated, Sufism has for centuries been central to mainstream Islam, and it continues to thrive around the world among all social classes. Second, although some Sufis conform to the widespread picture of Sufis as moderate, apolitical, and pacifistic, the reality is far more complex. Throughout history, Sufis have had a wide range of political engagements, and some <i>taṣawwuf</i> practitioners have been behind some of the strictest and most influential Islamist reform movements, such as the Society of Muslim Brothers and Deobandi movement. This article also discusses some more recent changes in Sufi communities, including globalization and the growing number of female Sufi practitioners and leaders.	Hill, J. (2021). [48]
12	Global Sufism: “theirs and ours”.	Global Sufism reflects the dynamic interaction between local traditions and global influences, showing how Sufi practices have evolved in both Western and Muslim societies. In the West, Sufism has often been reinterpreted and institutionalized in new forms, while in Muslim-majority regions, Sufi orders have adapted to	Hermansen, M. (2009). [49]

		modernization and globalization. These transformations demonstrate a continuous exchange of ideas, resulting in diverse expressions of Sufism that transcend cultural and geographical boundaries.	
	How a New Sufi Movement Globalized	The establishment of the Bawa Muhaiyaddeen Fellowship in Philadelphia during the 1970s illustrates how religious traditions adapt when they spread across cultures. As the movement evolved in North America, differing interpretations of its founder's teachings and interactions with its Sri Lankan origins led to diverse expressions of the same faith. This case highlights how globalization can transform religious movements, creating multiple and heterogeneous forms of spiritual practice.	Korom, F. J. (2024). [50]
	The Influence of Sufi-Centric Movements on the Flourishing of Islamic Plurality in the Indian Subcontinent	This article examines the significant role of Sufi-inspired movements such as the Deobandi, Tablighi Jamaat, Nadwi, and Barelvi traditions in the spread of Islam across the Indian subcontinent. Through institutions like madrasas, mosques, and khanqahs , these movements promoted Islamic learning, spiritual development, religious tolerance, and social harmony among diverse communities. The study highlights their lasting socio-cultural influence and emphasizes the importance of strengthening Sufi educational institutions to foster peace, interfaith understanding, and coexistence.	Chowdury, S. R. H. (2024). [51]

Based on the above comprehensive review of scholarly literature and allied peer-reviewed sources, a critical research gap emerges with compelling clarity: while existing scholarship has examined the Bhakti and Sufi movements in discrete thematic silos — caste ambivalence, gender emancipation, vernacular democratisation, Dalit consciousness, or interfaith harmony — no single peer-reviewed study has yet undertaken a unified, interdisciplinary analysis that simultaneously examines all three constitutive dimensions of the topic, namely the historical egalitarian praxis of the Bhakti and Sufi movements, their philosophical and institutional convergences as a joint reform enterprise, and their direct, empirically grounded relevance to the specific social justice challenges confronting twenty-first century India, including caste-based atrocities affecting over million Scheduled Caste citizens, rising communal polarisation between Hindu and Muslim communities, the gender equity deficit in religious and public life, the concentration of national wealth in elite hands, and the urgent imperative under NEP 2020 to integrate Indian Knowledge Systems into higher education as living frameworks for constitutional values rather than as inert historical artefacts. The present study therefore positions itself to fill this lacuna by adopting a holistic, thematically integrated, and contemporary-facing research design that draws upon primary textual traditions — the Divya Prabandham, Kabir's Dohas, Basavanna's Vachanas, the Chishti malfuzat literature, and Ravidas's Begumpura — alongside the critical scholarly apparatus of post-colonial religious studies, Dalit studies, gender history, and political economy, to argue that the Bhakti and Sufi movements constitute not merely a medieval heritage to be commemorated but a living intellectual and institutional resource of demonstrated historical efficacy whose systematic reintegration into India's academic, civic, and policy discourse represents both a scholarly obligation and a social justice imperative for a democracy still striving to realise the constitutional promise of equality, fraternity, and human dignity for every citizen.

3. OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY :

This research paper is animated by the following specific objectives:

- (1) To trace the historical origins of the Bhakti movement in South India and examine its northward expansion across different regional and linguistic contexts from the seventh to the seventeenth century.
- (2) To document the rise of Sufism in India from the eleventh century onward, with particular attention to the Chishti, Qadiri, Suhrawardi, and Naqshbandi silsilas and their engagement with Indian social realities.
- (3) To identify the philosophical and institutional convergences between the Bhakti and Sufi traditions, including their shared critique of ritual formalism, hierarchical priesthood, and caste or class-based exclusion.
- (4) To analyse the movements' contribution to the emancipation of marginalised groups — including lower castes, Dalits, women, and artisan communities — through concrete institutional practices such as the langar, the khanqah, and inter-caste satsangs.
- (5) To examine the linguistic revolution initiated by Bhakti and Sufi saints, who composed in vernacular languages and thereby created new traditions of regional literature, democratised access to spiritual knowledge, and enriched the cultural identities of diverse Indian communities.
- (6) To explore the economic dimensions of the movements, specifically their critique of feudal surplus extraction, their valorisation of honest labour, and Kabir's vision of Begumpura as an early utopian imagining of a just economic order.
- (7) To assess the contemporary relevance of the Bhakti and Sufi legacy for addressing present-day social justice challenges, including caste discrimination, communal polarisation, gender inequity, and economic marginalisation.
- (8) To situate the study within the framework of India's National Education Policy 2020 (NEP 2020), which explicitly calls for the integration of Indian Knowledge Systems — including medieval devotional traditions — into higher education curricula.

4. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY :

This study adopts an exploratory qualitative research methodology. Relevant data and information were collected through keyword-based searches using the Google Search Engine, Google Scholar, and AI-driven GPT platforms. The collected information was systematically analyzed and interpreted in alignment with the objectives of the study to derive meaningful insights and conclusions [52-58].

5. HISTORICAL ORIGINS AND IDEOLOGICAL FOUNDATIONS :

5.1 Origins of the Bhakti Movement in India:

The roots of the Bhakti movement in India stretch deep into the soil of Vedic and post-Vedic devotionalism. While references to bhakti — the practice of loving devotion to a personal God — appear in texts as ancient as the Rigveda and achieve sustained philosophical articulation in the Bhagavad Gita, it was in South India between the seventh and tenth centuries CE that devotion was transmuted from a doctrinal category into a mass social movement of transformative power. This transformation was the achievement of two parallel streams of poet-saints composing in Tamil: the Vaishnava Alvars, devoted to Vishnu, and the Shaiva Nayanars, devoted to Shiva [59-61].

Tamil tradition recognises twelve Alvars and sixty-three Nayanars, and their biographical profiles reveal the social breadth of the movement's appeal. Among the Nayanars figured potters, peasants, hunters, soldiers, untouchables, and Brahmins alike — a conscious repudiation of the principle that proximity to the divine was the hereditary prerogative of any single community. Tirunilakanta Yapalpanar, a Nayanar of low caste, and Nantanar, traditionally identified as an untouchable, became venerated figures in the devotional canon, their spiritual standing premised entirely upon the intensity of their love for Shiva rather than upon the accident of birth. The Alvars similarly included Nammalvar, whose songs of extraordinary lyrical beauty are recited in Vaishnava temples to this day, and Andal, the only female Alvar, whose Tiruppavai and Nachiar Tirumozhi express a bridal mysticism of remarkable emotional depth.

The northward expansion of Bhakti proceeded in waves. Karnataka witnessed Basavanna's Lingayat revolution in the twelfth century, which rejected caste distinctions, Vedic authority, and the pollution taboos underpinning untouchability, and declared the physical body itself a moving temple — thereby dissolving at a stroke the rationale for brahminical monopoly over sacred space. Maharashtra saw the emergence of the Varkari tradition centred on Pandurang-Vitthal of Pandharpur, with saints like Dnyaneshwar, Namdev, Eknath, and Tukaram producing a body of Marathi devotional poetry of

enduring literary and social significance. The movement reached its northern zenith between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries with figures like Kabir, Mirabai, Surdas, Tulsidas, and Raidas, whose works addressed the full range of social contradictions in an increasingly urbanised and commercially stratified north Indian society.

Ramanuja, the eleventh-century philosopher of Vishishtadvaita (qualified non-dualism), provided the movement with its first systematic philosophical scaffolding by arguing that bhakti constituted a path to liberation available to all, including Shudras and women, even while he retained Brahminical reservations about direct Vedic access. His disciple Ramananda, active in the late fourteenth and early fifteenth centuries, took the egalitarian implications further by assembling a circle of disciples that explicitly crossed caste lines — including Kabir the Muslim weaver, Raidas the leather worker, and Dhanna the Jat farmer — and by insisting that God recognises no caste.

5.2 Rise of the Sufi Movement in India:

Sufism as a mystical current within Islam originated in the eighth and ninth centuries CE, drawing upon Quranic teachings on divine love, Neoplatonic metaphysics filtered through Islamic philosophical theology, and influences from Christian monasticism and Hindu and Buddhist contemplative traditions encountered as Islam expanded eastward. Its central insight — that the soul's journey toward God requires the dissolution of the ego (fana) in the ocean of divine love (ishq) — positioned it in perpetual tension with the legalistic orthodoxy of the ulema, who preferred a religion of external observance to one of interior transformation.

The Sufi movement arrived in India with the earliest waves of Islamic expansion but achieved organised institutional presence from the eleventh century onward with the establishment of Sufi orders (silsilas) and their residential lodges (khanqahs). Al-Hujwiri, who settled in Lahore in the eleventh century and composed the Persian treatise *Kashf al-Mahjub* — one of the earliest systematic accounts of Sufi doctrine — stands as the first major Sufi figure on Indian soil. The thirteenth and fourteenth centuries marked the period of Sufism's deepest penetration into Indian social life, as multiple silsilas — the Chishtis, the Suhrawardis, the Qadiriyya, and later the Naqshbandiyya — established networks of khanqahs stretching from the Punjab to Bengal, from Rajasthan to the Deccan [62-63].

Of all these orders, the Chishtis exercised the most profound and lasting social influence. Khwaja Moinuddin Chishti, who settled in Ajmer around 1192, established a mode of Sufi engagement with Indian society characterised by radical accessibility — his khanqah at Ajmer was open to all, and his practice of *Sulh-i-kul* (peace with all) made no distinction between Hindu and Muslim, high-born and low-born. His disciples Qutbuddin Bakhtiyar Kaki and Fariduddin Ganj-i-Shakar continued this tradition of absolute hospitality, and Farid's poetry in the Punjabi vernacular placed him in direct conversation with the Bhakti saints of the same region. Nizamuddin Auliya of Delhi (1238–1325) became perhaps the most celebrated Sufi master in Indian history, his khanqah a gathering point for people of every faith, class, and caste, his spiritual friendship with Amir Khusrau producing a synthesis of Persian and Indian music — expressed through *Qawwali* — that would shape Indian classical music for centuries.

5.3 Key Saints and Their Revolutionary Teachings:

The individual saints of the Bhakti and Sufi movements were not merely religious personalities; they were social visionaries whose teachings encoded systematic critiques of power. A survey of the most significant figures reveals both the movement's intellectual diversity and its consistent ethical commitments.

Kabir (c.1398–1448 CE, though dates are disputed; some sources give 1440–1518) * stands as the supreme embodiment of the movements' convergent aspirations. Born in Varanasi to a Muslim weaver family and initiated into Vaishnava Bhakti by Ramananda, Kabir occupied a unique position at the intersection of Hindu and Muslim devotional cultures. His *Dohas* — pithy two-line verses of extraordinary moral and poetic density — assaulted with equal ferocity the idolatry of Hindus and the empty ritual formalism of Muslims, the caste pride of Brahmins and the communal exclusivism of mullahs. "Go where you will," he declared in one of his most celebrated utterances, "to Benares or to Mathura; if you do not find God in your own soul, the world is meaningless to you." His vision of Begumpura — a city without sorrow, without property, without taxation — was an early articulation of utopian social thought that anticipated later communist and anarchist imaginings [64-66].

Mirabai (1498–1547), a Rajput princess who renounced royal privilege for exclusive devotion to Krishna, embodied the Bhakti tradition's challenge to patriarchal authority. Her compositions in Rajasthani and Brij Bhasha — some of the most musically and poetically accomplished verses in the Hindi devotional canon — expressed a mystic eros that elevated the experience of feminine longing into a spiritual absolute, implicitly questioning the social logic that confined women to roles defined entirely by male kinship structures.

Nizamuddin Auliya's synthesis of the Sufi concept of fana with a practical ethic of universal service — manifested in the institution of the langar and in his personal reputation for refusing royal patronage — represented the highest expression of the social Sufi ideal. His formulation that "whoever enters my threshold is safe from the wrath of kings" constituted, in its medieval context, a bold assertion of sanctuary and human dignity against the arbitrary violence of state power.

Guru Nanak (1469–1539), founder of Sikhism and himself deeply shaped by both Bhakti and Sufi traditions, synthesised these streams into a new synthesis characterised by rejection of caste, critique of gender hierarchy, valorisation of householder life over asceticism, and insistence on the oneness of God beyond all religious names. His institution of the langar as a compulsory equaliser — all who sat at the Guru's table sat together regardless of caste — transformed an abstract theological egalitarianism into a lived social practice that persists to the present day.

5.4 Common Ground Between the Bhakti and Sufi Movements:

Despite originating in distinct religious universes, the Bhakti and Sufi movements shared a constellation of theological commitments, institutional practices, and social orientations that rendered their convergence not accidental but structurally inevitable.

At the theological level, both traditions privileged the interior experience of divine love over external compliance with ritual codes. The Sufi concept of *ishq* (divine love) and the Bhakti concept of *prema* (loving devotion) are phenomenologically cognate: both posit a God who is not the remote legislator of orthodox theology, but the intimate Beloved whose presence is directly accessible to the pure heart. Both traditions adopted the metaphor of human romantic love to describe the soul's relation to God — a move that was simultaneously theologically bold (since it personalised the divine in ways that orthodoxies of both traditions found disturbing) and socially democratising (since the capacity for love recognises no caste or class boundary).

At the institutional level, both movements organised their activities around an alternative sacred geography that bypassed the exclusive sacred spaces of temple and mosque. The *khanqah* of the Sufis and the *math* or *akhara* of Bhakti saints served as open, non-hierarchical gathering spaces where people of all backgrounds could receive teaching, food, and spiritual guidance without the mediation of credentialed priests. The institution of the communal kitchen — the langar, which the Sufis introduced and which Guru Nanak institutionalised in its most radical form — enacted in daily life the theological proposition that all human beings are equal before God.

Both movements also shared a commitment to vernacular language as the medium of spiritual communication, a radical departure from the elite linguistic codes of Sanskrit and Arabic-Persian that will be examined in detail in section 6. The result was an unprecedented democratisation of spiritual knowledge and a lasting contribution to the literatures of virtually every major language of the subcontinent.

6. SOCIAL HIERARCHIES CHALLENGED: CASTE, GENDER, AND RELIGIOUS POWER:

6.1 Direct Opposition to the Caste System:

The Bhakti movement's most enduring social significance lies in its sustained, theologically grounded assault on the caste system, which represented the most fundamental organising principle of Hindu social life. The caste system — founded on the doctrine of ritual purity and pollution, legitimised by scriptural authority, and enforced by elaborate social sanctions — functioned as a comprehensive system of social stratification that excluded the majority of the population from full participation in religious, economic, and civic life. Against this system, the Bhakti saints opposed a theology of radical

immanence: God is present within every human being, and any social arrangement that denies the dignity of any person therefore commits a theological as well as a moral offence.

This principle found expression not merely in abstract teaching but in the concrete social composition of Bhakti communities. Ramananda's disciples included the leather-worker Raidas, the Muslim weaver Kabir, the woman Sursari, and the barber Sena — a deliberate assembly of social marginality around the egalitarian teacher. The Nayanars' sixty-three saints spanned every social category from Brahmin to untouchable. The Lingayat tradition founded by Basavanna went further than any other Bhakti stream in institutionalising its egalitarianism, explicitly rejecting caste distinctions in matters of marriage, commensality, and ritual participation, and creating a new community identity that superseded birth-based caste.

The Sufi movement extended similar egalitarian principles from within an Islamic framework that was theoretically egalitarian but practically stratified by Arab cultural prestige, ashraf-ajlaf distinctions (between nobles and commoners), and Hindu caste conventions absorbed by Muslim communities over generations. Sufi shrines, by welcoming all comers regardless of caste or religion, functioned as what might today be called counter-public spaces — zones of enacted equality within a broader social landscape of hierarchy.

6.2 Rejection of Religious Intermediaries and Ritualism:

A second axis of the movements' social critique targeted the priestly monopoly over spiritual life. Both Brahminical Hinduism and orthodox Islam had developed elaborate systems of ritual prescription and interdiction that, whatever their original spiritual rationale, functioned in practice as mechanisms of social control and economic extraction. Brahmin priests-controlled access to temples and to the performative rituals upon which divine favour was believed to depend; the ulema controlled access to Quranic interpretation and to the legal determinations that governed Muslim community life. Both clerical classes thus occupied positions of structural power that they were understandably reluctant to surrender.

The Bhakti and Sufi saints challenged this priestly monopoly with a dual strategy: theological critique and institutional alternative. Theologically, they insisted that the divine needed no mediators — that sincere devotion, expressed in whatever language and through whatever form, reached God directly and infallibly. Kabir's mockery of Brahmin ritual pretension and his equally sharp critique of the mullah's legal hair-splitting are among the most memorable instances of this strategy. "The Brahmin reads the Vedas but doesn't know the way," he wrote. "The Qazi reads the Quran and remains entangled in the world's net." Institutionally, the Bhakti math and the Sufi khanqah provided alternative spaces for spiritual life organised around the teacher-disciple relationship rather than around credentialed priesthood.

6.3 Opening Spiritual Paths to Marginalised Communities:

The translation of theological egalitarianism into institutional practice took its most concrete form in the movements' deliberate outreach to communities most severely excluded by the dominant religious orders. Sufi khanqahs were — and many dargahs remain today — open to all without restriction. The Chishti practice of feeding all comers, regardless of caste or religion, from the communal kitchen made the khanqah a practical welfare institution as well as a spiritual centre. Baba Farid's dargah in Pakpattan attracted Hindu and Muslim devotees in equal measure; Nizamuddin Auliya's khanqah in Delhi served as a social safety net for the urban poor of the medieval city.

The social composition of the Bhakti sects similarly reflected a conscious counter-cultural commitment to inclusion. The Varkari tradition in Maharashtra drew its membership from artisan castes — weavers, goldsmiths, cobblers, potters — who found in the Vitthal tradition a religious identity that affirmed rather than negated their social dignity. Ravidas, a cobbler from Benares, became one of the most celebrated Bhakti saints, his songs of devotion to the formless God expressing simultaneously a profound spirituality and a fierce insistence on the equal worth of all human beings regardless of occupation or birth. His verses are recited to this day at Dalit gatherings and political rallies as expressions of a tradition of resistance that predates colonial modernity by centuries.

6.4 Women's Participation and Gender Emancipation:

The Bhakti movement's approach to women was complex and contextually variable, but its net effect was to create unprecedented spaces for women's religious self-expression, social agency, and even — in the most radical instances — outright rejection of patriarchal norms. Women saints of the Bhakti tradition composed poetry, led communities of disciples, engaged in theological debate, and in several celebrated cases renounced the domestic roles that patriarchal society prescribed for them in favour of a wandering life of devotion.

Akka Mahadevi, the twelfth-century Lingayat saint, remains perhaps the most dramatically transgressive female figure of the entire Bhakti tradition. Her Vachanas (prose-poems) record a total rejection of social convention: she abandoned her husband, wandered naked as a sign of complete surrender to Shiva, and wrote poetry of extraordinary spiritual intensity that directly confronted the gendered dimensions of social oppression. Mirabai's rejection of her royal household and her insistence on exclusive devotion to Krishna, in the face of family hostility that tradition records included assassination attempts, made her a figure of profound cultural resonance for women in contexts of patriarchal constraint across many subsequent centuries.

Janabai, a servant-woman of the Shudra caste in thirteenth-century Maharashtra, composed over three hundred devotional poems that articulated the double burden of caste and gender oppression from a position of utter social marginality. Soyarabai, of the Mahar untouchable caste, similarly navigated the intersecting hierarchies of caste and gender to achieve recognition as a devotional poet of genuine power. These women "had to struggle for acceptance within the male-dominated movement and garnered recognition only through demonstrations of complete devotion, outstanding poetry and stubborn insistence on spiritual equality." That recognition, imperfect and contested as it was, represented a significant opening in the rigid social structures of medieval India.

7. RELIGIOUS PLURALISM AND INTERFAITH SYNTHESIS :

7.1 Promoting Unity Across Different Faiths:

The most historically distinctive achievement of the Bhakti and Sufi movements, and perhaps their most immediately relevant legacy for contemporary India, was their creation of an interfaith culture that represented a genuine, lived synthesis rather than merely a theological argument for tolerance. Medieval India was not, of course, free from communal tension; the historical record documents episodes of inter-religious violence as well as coexistence. But the Bhakti and Sufi traditions created, within this complex reality, spaces and practices of genuine encounter that challenged the logic of exclusive religious identity at its root.

The Sufi emphasis on *sulh-i-kul* — comprehensive peace, tolerance for all — represented a principled theological position that explicitly extended the bounds of the community of the faithful beyond the formal boundaries of Islamic confession. Khwaja Moinuddin Chishti's Ajmer dargah drew worshippers from both Hindu and Muslim communities from its earliest days, and the practice of pilgrimage to Sufi shrines by Hindus continues robustly to the present. The famous thirteenth-century syncretic saint Lal Ded of Kashmir composed verses that moved freely between Shaiva and Sufi imagery, suggesting a lived experience of the divine that rendered sectarian boundaries irrelevant.

7.2 The Doctrine of Universal Brotherhood (Sulh-i-Kul):

The concept of *Sulh-i-Kul* — universal peace, peace with all — as articulated by Sufi masters and subsequently adopted by Emperor Akbar as a state philosophy, represents the most ambitious formulation of interfaith coexistence in premodern India. At its core, *Sulh-i-Kul* posited that the divine could be approached through multiple religious paths simultaneously, and that the spiritual experiences of practitioners of different faiths were commensurable rather than incommensurable [67-69].

This position resonated deeply with the Bhakti emphasis on the unmediated interior experience of the divine. Kabir's famous formulation — "Hari is in the East, Allah is in the West; look within your heart, for there you will find both Karim and Ram" — expressed in its lapidary simplicity a theological position that dissolved the opposition between Hindu and Muslim religious identity by locating the divine in the innermost recess of the individual soul, where neither temple nor mosque has jurisdiction. Guru Nanak's declaration that "there is no Hindu, there is no Muslim, only God" reached the same conclusion by a slightly different theological route.

Dara Shikoh's seventeenth-century philosophical work *Majma ul-Bahrayn* (The Confluence of Two Oceans) represented the highest intellectual expression of this interfaith synthesis. The Mughal prince argued, through careful textual analysis of Islamic Sufi literature and Hindu Upanishadic philosophy, that the two traditions were engaged in identical spiritual projects expressed through different symbolic vocabularies. His conclusion — that there was "no difference except verbal" between the ways in which the two traditions sought and comprehended the divine — was a remarkable intellectual achievement, however tragically his commitment to this vision ended with his execution by his brother Aurangzeb.

7.3 Shared Practices: Music, Poetry, and Communal Ritual:

The interfaith synthesis of the Bhakti and Sufi movements was expressed not only in theological formulations but in shared practices that created spaces of cross-community encounter in daily life. Music proved to be the most powerful of these shared forms. Qawwali — the devotional music associated with the Chishtis — is one of the great creations of the Indo-Islamic tradition: a synthesis of Persian and Indian musical forms, Arabic spiritual poetry, and indigenous rhythmic traditions that constitutes, in every performance, a living testimony to the creative possibilities of cultural encounter. Amir Khusrau (1253–1325), Nizamuddin Auliya's beloved disciple, is credited as the founder of both Qawwali and Khayal, the dominant form of Hindustani classical music — a contribution to human cultural heritage whose origins lie directly in the interfaith ethos of the Sufi *khanqah* [70-71].

The communal kitchen — the *langar* — functioned as the most consistently practised institutional embodiment of interfaith and inter-caste equality. Its logic was beautifully simple: those who ate together could not simultaneously maintain the ritual distinctions of purity and pollution that caste hierarchy required. The *langar* thus converted an abstract theological proposition into a lived social practice, repeated daily, in communities across the subcontinent. Its institution by the Chishtis and its later systematisation by Guru Nanak as a mandatory feature of Sikh community life represents one of the most practically consequential innovations in Indian social history.

7.4 Creating Bridges Between Hindu and Muslim Communities:

The *dargah* — the Sufi shrine — functioned in medieval and early modern India as a unique kind of public space, simultaneously sacred and social, in which the normal demarcations of communal identity were suspended or at least softened. The major Sufi shrines — Ajmer, Nizamuddin, Nanded, Bijapur — became pilgrimage sites for both Hindu and Muslim devotees, their appeal based on the perceived spiritual power (*baraka*) of the saint whose mortal remains they enshrined and on the tradition of egalitarian hospitality for which the great Sufi masters were venerated.

This tradition of what might be called "sacred hospitality" created patterns of inter-community interaction that persisted across centuries and survived even the most intense episodes of communal violence. The legend of Kabir's death — according to which both Hindu and Muslim communities claimed his body for their respective funeral rites, only to find beneath his shroud a heap of flowers — encapsulates in mythological form the movement's deepest aspiration: that the saint's life had dissolved the boundary between the two communities so completely that neither could exclusively claim him, and both were left with the same gift.

8. DEMOCRATISING KNOWLEDGE THROUGH VERNACULAR LANGUAGES :

8.1 Breaking Sanskrit's and Arabic-Persian's Elite Monopoly:

The linguistic politics of medieval India were inseparable from its social politics. Sanskrit — the language of Vedic scripture, Brahminical scholarship, and classical literary culture — functioned as a gatekeeper: its mastery was restricted to upper-caste men trained in the *gurukula* system, and its inaccessibility to the vast majority of the population was not incidental but structural. The exclusivity of Sanskrit was not merely a cultural fact; it was a mechanism of social reproduction that maintained the Brahminical monopoly on religious and intellectual authority.

Within Islamic culture, a parallel exclusivity attached to Arabic (the language of the Quran and of Islamic jurisprudence) and Persian (the court language of the Delhi Sultanate and subsequent Islamic polities in India). Mastery of these languages was the prerequisite for participation in the formal structures of Islamic scholarship and political life, placing the majority of the Muslim population — who spoke the vernacular dialects of their regions — at a structural disadvantage.

The Bhakti and Sufi movements mounted a comprehensive linguistic challenge to these dual monopolies. The Alvar and Nayanar saints' decision to compose in Tamil rather than Sanskrit was not merely a practical concession to the linguistic reality of their audiences; it was a theological statement — an assertion that Tamil, the language of the people, was as capable of conveying divine truths as the elite sacred tongue. This position, once articulated, opened the floodgates for devotional composition across the full range of Indian vernacular languages.

8.2 Regional Literature and Cultural Identity:

The linguistic contributions of the Bhakti and Sufi saints to the literatures of the Indian subcontinent constitute one of the most extraordinary collective achievements in the history of world literature. Across languages as diverse as Tamil, Kannada, Telugu, Marathi, Hindi, Punjabi, Bengali, Assamese, Gujarati, Rajasthani, and Sindhi, the saints produced bodies of devotional poetry that simultaneously expressed the highest spiritual aspirations and made those aspirations available to ordinary people in their own tongues.

Key figures and their linguistic contributions include: Tulsidas, whose *Ramcharitmanas* in Awadhi (c.1574) democratised the Ramayana narrative for Hindi-speaking North India; Eknath and Tukaram, who developed Marathi as a literary language capable of philosophical and emotional depth; Surdas, whose *Sursagar* in Braj Bhasha created an unsurpassed poetic evocation of Krishna's life and play; Shankaradeva, who composed in Assamese and created the Vaishnava Satra institution that remains central to Assamese cultural identity; Lochana Dasa and Krishnadasa Kaviraja, whose Bengali compositions shaped the Gaudiya Vaishnava tradition; and Bulleh Shah and Waris Shah in Punjabi, whose Sufi poetry represents the finest flowering of that language's literary potential.

The Sufi saints made parallel contributions through their insistence on using local languages and dialects — rather than Arabic and Persian — to communicate their spiritual messages. Amir Khusrau's compositions in Hindawi (an ancestor of modern Hindi-Urdu) made him a founding figure of both Sufi devotional literature and of the literary tradition that would become Urdu. Baba Farid's compositions in Punjabi were included by Guru Nanak in the *Adi Granth*, the Sikh scripture — a remarkable testimony to the cross-religious recognition that the finest Sufi compositions commanded.

8.3 Making Spiritual Knowledge Accessible:

The democratisation of language was inseparable from the democratisation of knowledge. When spiritual teachings were available only in Sanskrit or Arabic, the literacy prerequisite alone excluded the great majority of the population. When those same teachings were expressed in the living vernacular tongues of the people, they became available to anyone who could hear — which, in largely oral societies, meant virtually everyone.

The Bhakti and Sufi traditions thus effected a revolution in popular religious culture that preceded and, in some respects, anticipated the democratising effects of print culture. The sung poem — the kirtan, the bhajan, the ghazal, the Qawwali — became the medium through which theological ideas about the nature of the divine, the equality of human souls, and the path of liberation circulated across the full social spectrum. A weaver woman in Maharashtra, a leatherworker in Benares, a peasant in the Punjab could know Kabir's couplets by heart without being able to read a single word — and through that knowledge possessed a theological resource for self-understanding and social critique that the dominant order could not easily confiscate.

9. ECONOMIC JUSTICE AND CRITIQUE OF EXPLOITATION :

9.1 Challenging Feudal Land Systems:

The Bhakti and Sufi movements were not only spiritual and social reform movements; they were also, in important dimensions, responses to the economic dislocations and injustices of medieval Indian society. The period of their greatest flourishing — roughly the thirteenth through seventeenth centuries — was also a period of intensive state extraction of agricultural surplus, extensive displacement of artisan communities by changing patterns of patronage, and the emergence of new forms of urban commercial life that created both opportunity and exploitation for the working population.

The Turkish conquest and the establishment of the Delhi Sultanate in the early thirteenth century initiated a regime of intensive surplus extraction from the agricultural population, supplemented by artisan and craft taxation and by the *corvée* obligations imposed on rural communities. Brahminical

social authority was simultaneously weakened by the removal of state patronage from temples — creating a crisis of the established order that opened space for new forms of religious organisation — and the commercial expansion of the period generated an artisan and merchant class whose social aspirations were poorly served by a hierarchical system that assigned them low ritual status regardless of their economic importance.

Bhakti saints, particularly those from artisan backgrounds, voiced the frustrations and aspirations of these communities. Kabir's critique of the zamindari system — the feudal landowning arrangement that extracted surplus from rural producers through a combination of legal obligation and cultural hegemony — was among the most pointed economic analyses offered by any Indian intellectual figure before the colonial period.

9.2 Speaking Against Surplus Extraction:

Kabir's economic thought was embedded in his broader critique of social exploitation but was nonetheless distinctive in its directness and its willingness to name specific economic actors as agents of injustice. His verses targeting landlords who extracted rent from impoverished peasants, merchants who adulterated their goods and defrauded their customers, and tax collectors who used their positions for personal enrichment constituted a form of popular economic critique that resonated with the lived experience of his largely artisan and peasant audience.

The Sufi tradition similarly maintained a principled suspicion of wealth accumulated through exploitation. The great Chishti masters were conspicuous for their rejection of state patronage — Nizamuddin Auliya famously refused to meet the Sultan — and for their insistence on surviving through voluntary offerings (*futuh*) from devotees rather than through institutional endowments that might create obligations to powerful patrons. This economic positioning of deliberate marginality relative to state power was not merely an individual moral choice but a structural feature of the Chishti approach to social engagement: by refusing the resources and obligations that came with royal patronage, the Chishti masters maintained the independence of judgment and the accessibility to the poor that were essential to their social mission.

9.3 Advocacy for Honest Labour and Fair Distribution:

The valorisation of honest labour stands as one of the most socially significant themes in the economic thought of the Bhakti and Sufi traditions. Guru Nanak's three foundational principles — *Nam Japna* (contemplating the divine name), *Kirat Karna* (earning an honest living through labour), and *Vand Chhakna* (sharing one's earnings with the community) — constitute a comprehensive economic ethics that affirms the dignity of all forms of productive labour, mandates honest practice in commercial life, and requires the redistribution of a portion of one's earnings to those in need. This triad is not incidental to Sikh doctrine but constitutes its practical ethical core, and its continued observance through the institution of the *langar* represents one of the most effective anti-poverty mechanisms in Indian civil society.

Kabir's own life as a weaver was itself an act of economic and social statement. His refusal to abandon his profession for the more prestigious identity of the full-time religious teacher was a deliberate affirmation of the dignity of artisan labour — a rejection of the implicit hierarchy that placed the intellectual who worked with words above the craftsman who worked with cloth. His verse, "The one who works with their hands and shares what they earn is recognised by God," encapsulates an economic theology in which productive labour is itself a form of worship and its fruits a sacred trust.

9.4 Kabir's Utopia: Begumpura:

Kabir's vision of Begumpura — the City Without Sorrow — represents one of the earliest and most imaginatively compelling expressions of utopian social thought in the Indian intellectual tradition. The poem describing Begumpura, attributed in the tradition to Kabir's disciple Ravidas as well, envisions a city characterised by complete absence of sorrow (*gham*), by freedom from taxation and from the fear that accompanies social hierarchy, by equality of access to all resources, by freedom of movement for all residents regardless of social identity, and by the complete abolition of private property in favour of communal abundance.

"Begumpura," the poem declares, "is the name of the town. No sorrow or suffering, no dread, no decline. There is no second or third status, no place for no-account people. Everyone is welcome, all are equal."

This vision — developed within a devotional religious framework, expressed through the artistic resources of vernacular poetry, and circulating through oral performance among communities of artisans and low-caste workers — constitutes a remarkable anticipation of modern egalitarian social philosophy.

Its genealogy runs directly forward into the Ambedkarite movement of the twentieth century, which drew explicitly on the Bhakti tradition's anti-caste theology as a resource for Dalit political consciousness.

10. CONTEMPORARY RELEVANCE: WHY THESE MOVEMENTS STILL MATTER :

10.1 Combating Caste Discrimination in Modern India:

Despite constitutional prohibition and decades of affirmative action policy, caste-based discrimination remains a pervasive feature of Indian social life in the twenty-first century. Scheduled Castes continue to face regular discrimination, with manual scavenging, bonded labour, restricted access to public spaces, and violence against Dalits who transgress social norms remaining documented realities in many parts of the country. The National Crime Records Bureau data consistently shows high levels of atrocities against Scheduled Castes, while survey research indicates that untouchability practices persist in both rural and urban contexts [72-73].

In this context, the Bhakti tradition's sustained theological assault on caste hierarchy — its insistence that divine grace recognises no caste boundary, its institutional embodiment of inter-caste commensality and solidarity, and its preservation in devotional canon of the voices of Dalit saints like Ravidas, Chokhamela, and Janabai — provides a resource for anti-caste activism that operates within the native vocabulary of Indian religious culture rather than being perceived as an external imposition. The celebration of Ravidas Jayanti as a major public festival by Dalit communities across North India, the singing of Kabir's Dohas at Dalit cultural gatherings, and the invocation of Bhakti egalitarianism in the writings of Dalit intellectuals from Ambedkar onward all testify to the movements' living relevance to the most intractable social justice challenge facing contemporary India.

10.2 Interfaith Harmony in a Polarised Society:

India's religious landscape in the early twenty-first century is characterised by both extraordinary diversity and, increasingly, by communal tension. Religious polarisation — between Hindu and Muslim communities, and between different Hindu communities along caste and regional lines — has intensified as a political phenomenon, with implications for social cohesion, democratic governance, and the safety of religious minorities that are increasingly troubling to democratic observers. India's ranking among countries with high levels of social hostilities toward religion reflects the scale of this challenge.

The Bhakti and Sufi traditions offer against this polarisation not a naive ecumenism that ignores real theological differences between traditions, but a tested historical model of shared sacred space, shared devotional practice, and shared ethical commitment to human dignity that has demonstrably functioned across communal lines. The living dargah culture — in which Hindus and Muslims continue to visit Sufi shrines together, to share in the rituals of Urs celebrations, and to express devotion in forms that exceed the boundaries of formal religious identity — represents not a romanticised historical memory but an ongoing social reality whose preservation and strengthening is a matter of practical urgency for Indian civil society.

10.3 Dalit Rights and Ambedkarite Resonances:

The intellectual and political legacy of Dr. B.R. Ambedkar — architect of the Indian Constitution, champion of Dalit rights, and the twentieth century's most important critic of caste-based oppression — is inextricably linked to the Bhakti tradition. Ambedkar's extensive writings on the Bhakti movement, including his detailed analysis of the thought of Kabir and Ravidas, identified in these saints the most theologically sophisticated and historically grounded challenge to Brahminical orthodoxy available within the Hindu tradition itself [74-75].

Ambedkar's eventual conversion to Buddhism in 1956 — the most dramatic symbolic act of his career — was explicitly framed as a continuation rather than a repudiation of the Bhakti tradition's anti-caste project. His choice of Buddhism, with its explicit rejection of the Vedic varna system and its insistence on the equal spiritual potential of all human beings regardless of birth, can be read as an attempt to

provide the Dalit community with an institutional religious framework adequate to the radical egalitarianism that the Bhakti saints had proclaimed but the Hindu institutional structure had consistently refused to realise.

Contemporary Dalit political and cultural movements continue to draw explicitly on Bhakti symbolism, imagery, and theology. Ravidas temples serve as community gathering places for Dalit communities in cities across North India; the Kabir Panth remains an active religious institution with millions of followers, predominantly from scheduled caste communities; and the annual pilgrimage to Pandharpur — the great Varkari tradition — continues to bring together millions of devotees from across Maharashtra in a re-enactment of the anti-caste solidarity that Tukaram and Namdev preached in the seventeenth century.

10.4 Lessons for Inclusive Governance:

The institutional innovations of the Bhakti and Sufi movements — the open khanqah, the langar, the inter-caste satsang, the vernacular school — offer models of inclusive institution-building that retain their relevance for those concerned with designing governance structures adequate to India's social complexity. The Sufi khanqah, in particular, represented a form of civil society institution that provided social services — food, shelter, medical care, dispute resolution, spiritual guidance — to all comers without means-testing or identity discrimination.

At the level of economic governance, the movements' consistent emphasis on the dignity of labour, the obligation of the wealthy to share with the community, and the illegitimacy of accumulation through exploitation offers a framework of social ethics that resonates with contemporary debates about economic inequality. India's concentration of wealth — with the top 10 percent of the population holding over 77 percent of national wealth — represents exactly the kind of structural injustice that Kabir and Guru Nanak identified as spiritually and morally unacceptable. A governance philosophy informed by the Bhakti-Sufi tradition would place redistribution, dignity of labour, and communal solidarity at the centre of economic policy rather than treating them as residual concerns.

10.5 The NEP 2020 Connection:

India's National Education Policy 2020 explicitly mandates the integration of Indian Knowledge Systems (IKS) into higher education curricula at all levels. This mandate creates an institutional framework for the kind of sustained, rigorous scholarly engagement with the Bhakti and Sufi traditions that this paper attempts. The movements' relevance to NEP 2020's broader goals — developing in students a sense of informed pride in Indian civilisational heritage, cultivating critical thinking about social structures and their histories, and fostering values of equity, inclusion, and constitutional democracy — is direct and substantial.

A curriculum that takes the Bhakti and Sufi traditions seriously would introduce students to some of the most powerful social criticism produced in any Indian language, to the linguistic plurality that is one of India's greatest cultural assets, to the history of inter-community encounter and synthesis that complicates simplistic narratives of civilisational separation, and to models of institution-building — the langar, the khanqah, the inter-caste devotional community — that have demonstrated, across centuries, their capacity to translate abstract values of equality and fraternity into lived social realities.

11. CONCLUSION :

This deep-study research paper has traced the Bhakti and Sufi movements across their full historical span, from the Tamil devotional poetry of the seventh-century Alvars and Nayanars to the Sufi synthesis represented by Nizamuddin Auliya and Amir Khusrau in the thirteenth and fourteenth centuries, and forward through the great figures of the northern Bhakti movement — Kabir, Mirabai, Tukaram, Ravidas, Guru Nanak — who brought the movements' social critique to its fullest expression between the fifteenth and seventeenth centuries. The paper has argued, on the basis of this historical examination, for a set of conclusions that bear repetition here in their integrative form.

First, the Bhakti and Sufi movements constituted comprehensive social justice projects, not merely spiritual reform initiatives. Their critique of caste hierarchy, priestly monopoly, gender exclusion, linguistic elitism, and economic exploitation was systematic and principled, grounded in theological commitments but extending into every domain of social life. To characterise them as primarily religious movements that had incidental social effects is to misread both their intent and their achievement.

Second, the convergences between the Bhakti and Sufi traditions were not accidental but structurally generated by their shared commitment to egalitarian values and their shared experience of engaging with the same complex social reality. The resulting interfaith synthesis — expressed in shared institutions, shared musical forms, shared devotional practices, and a shared vernacular literary culture — represents one of the great achievements of Indian civilisation and a powerful counterevidence against the thesis of Hindu-Muslim civilisational incommensurability.

Third, the movements' linguistic contribution — their creation of rich vernacular literary traditions in virtually every major language of the subcontinent — democratised access to spiritual and ethical knowledge in ways that had profound long-term consequences for Indian cultural life. The idea that devotional poetry composed by a low-caste woman or a Muslim weaver could possess the highest spiritual authority was a genuinely revolutionary idea in its context, and the canonical status achieved by these compositions within both the Hindu Bhakti tradition and the Sikh scripture testifies to the depth and durability of the revolution it effected.

Fourth, the movements' contemporary relevance is real, specific, and urgent. A twenty-first century India confronting caste discrimination, communal polarisation, gender inequality, and economic disparity has much to learn from traditions that developed tested responses to all of these challenges over the course of several centuries. The learning is not merely inspirational — the invocation of a vague historical spirit of tolerance — but institutional and intellectual: the langar as a model of inclusive service delivery, the khanqah as a model of non-hierarchical community organisation, the vernacular literary tradition as a model of culturally grounded popular education, and the movements' economic ethics as a framework for thinking about wealth, labour, and distributive justice.

Finally, the integration of the Bhakti and Sufi traditions into higher education curricula under the mandate of NEP 2020's Indian Knowledge Systems initiative offers an opportunity to bring this legacy into active dialogue with the intellectual and social challenges of the present. Done rigorously — with attention to the movements' complexity, their internal debates and contradictions, their historical context and their living presence in contemporary Indian society — such integration could make a genuine contribution to the formation of citizens equipped to build the more just and inclusive India that both the Constitution and the saints demand.

Wherever you are, God is near. Look within your heart and you shall find both Karim and Ram. — Kabir, fifteenth century

The teachings of Kabir, Mirabai, Nizamuddin Auliya, Guru Nanak, Ravidas, Tukaram, and their countless companions in devotion remain, across the centuries, precisely what they were in their own time: a challenge to every form of hierarchy that places human beings below their true dignity, and an invitation to the direct experience of the divine love that alone can dissolve the barriers between them.

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