

Rabiah Guiridi

Costantine University – Algeria

<https://orcid.org/0009-0009-0477-0428>

rabiaaguiridi28@gmail.com

Hindu Reform Movements and Their Relation to Islamic Sufism – The Bhakti Movement as a Model

Abstract

The Bhakti movement and Islamic Sufism are two ancient spiritual phenomena in the Indian subcontinent, both embodying a profound pursuit of closeness to the divine and the attainment of spiritual perfection. Despite their differing religious roots, there is a noticeable intersection between them in terms of practices and objectives, raising questions about the nature of their relationship.

This research aims to explore the origins of the Bhakti movement, highlight its key principles and teachings, and identify the factors that contributed to its emergence. Additionally, it seeks to shed light on the interaction between Indian and Islamic civilizations in the subcontinent and understand how this interaction shaped the spiritual and cultural identity of the region.

Keywords: *Reform Movements, Hinduism, Islamic Sufism, Bhakti Movement*

Rabiah Guiridi

Costantine Universiteti - Əlcəzair

<https://orcid.org/0009-0009-0477-0428>

rabiaaguiridi28@gmail.com

Hindu islahat hərəkatları və onların İslam təsəvvüfə ilə münasibətləri – model olaraq Bhakti hərəkatı

Xülasə

Bhakti hərəkatı və İslam sufizmi Hindistan yarımadasında iki qədim mənəvi hadisədir, hər ikisi ilahi olana yaxınlıq və mənəvi kamilliyə nail olmaq üçün dərin axtarışı təcəssüm etdirir. Fərqli dini köklərə baxmayaraq, təcrübələr və məqsədlər baxımından onlar arasında nəzərəçarpancaq kəsişmə var və bu, münasibətlərinin mahiyyəti ilə bağlı suallar doğurur.

Bu tədqiqat Bhakti hərəkatının mənşəyini araşdırmaq, onun əsas prinsiplərini və təlimlərini vurğulamaq və onun yaranmasına kömək edən amilləri müəyyən etmək məqsədi daşıyır. Bundan əlavə, o, subkontinentdə Hindistan və İslam sivilizasiyaları arasındakı qarşılıqlı əlaqəni işıqlandırmağa və bu qarşılıqlı əlaqənin bölgənin mənəvi və mədəni kimliyini necə formalaşdırdığını başa düşməyə çalışır.

Açar sözlər: *İslahat Hərəkatları, Hinduizm, İslam Sufizmi, Bhakti Hərəkatı*

Introduction

Any scholar of religious life in India will notice a prominent feature: the focus on spiritual mysticism, characterized by a direct communion between the human soul and a personal deity. This communion is rooted in an emotional and devotional relationship between the two. According to scholars, the Bhakti movement is considered the most exemplary representation of this mystical experience in Indian history.

The significance of this subject lies in the fact that the Bhakti movement acted as the lifeblood that revived Hinduism on the historical stage of India amidst the rapid events that the country witnessed, particularly the arrival of Islam in its heartland. This led to interactions and a climate of coexistence. The importance and value of this movement are also evident in its role as a foundational pillar for modern Indian thinkers such as Gandhi, Tagore, Aurobindo, and Vivekananda.

Within this framework and these developments, our research addresses the central question:
How was the Bhakti movement influenced by Islamic Sufism?

This leads to several sub-questions:

1. What are the most significant Sufi concepts and practices that were integrated into the Bhakti movement?

2. How did these exchanges contribute to shaping the spiritual identity of the Indian subcontinent?

To answer these questions, the research first explores an introductory overview of this sect, beginning with a definition of the term, an examination of its origins, and an identification of its teachings and principles, along with an introduction to its most notable advocates and saints.

Second, we examine the social, religious, political, and economic backgrounds prevalent in the country during the movement's emergence (Ahmad, 2009).

Finally, we address the core issue: the potential Islamic influence on the teachings of the Bhakti movement. This section opens with a discussion of Orientalist studies on the origins of the Bhakti movement, followed by an analysis of the connections and points of convergence between the Bhakti and Sufi traditions at the levels of beliefs and practices.

As for the reasons that motivated me to research this topic specifically, they include the following:

This study aims to challenge stereotypical ideas and misconceptions about Islam and Hinduism by uncovering new and shared aspects between them. As a Muslim researcher in the field of religious studies, I seek to explore a historically rich period of religious and cultural interactions (by understanding the similarities and differences between the two movements) in the Indian subcontinent during its period under Islamic rule. The goal is to build bridges and promote mutual understanding and coexistence between Hindus and Muslims (Dehejia, 1990).

Research

Regarding the research sources, most of them are in English, as it is the official language of Indian scholars and the general populace. Furthermore, there is an abundance of Western Orientalist studies on this sect. However, this does not diminish the presence of significant Islamic studies on the subject, which have been included in this research. Some of the key references are:

1. Sharma Krishna:

Early Indian Bhakti with Special Reference to Kabir: Historical Analysis and Reinterpretation
Bhakti and the Bhakti Movement

This Indian scholar took it upon himself to redirect academic, particularly Western, perspectives (often biased or flawed) toward a more accurate understanding of the Bhakti movement.

2. Bhandarkar:

Vaishnavism, Saivism, and Minor Religious Systems

He followed a similar path, offering critical insights into the movement's study.

3. Rekha Pande, an Indian researcher, contributed articles focusing on the conditions and circumstances that, in her view, led to the emergence of the Bhakti movement and its long-term impact on Indian society:

- *Hinduism and the Bhakti Movement*
- *The Bhakti Movement: An Interpretation*
- *Divine Sounds from the Heart*

4. Karen Pechilis:

○ *The Embodiment of Bhakti*

This work provides a detailed exploration of Bhakti as a lived spiritual experience.

These references form the foundation of this research and aim to provide a balanced perspective that incorporates both Islamic and non-Islamic viewpoints.

Additionally, the Indian scholar Tarachand, in his book *The Influence of Islam on Indian Culture*, is considered a seminal reference on the mutual influence and interaction between the two religious systems. Another notable work is Irfan Habib's *Medieval India*, along with Maryam Farooqi's article *Sufism and the Bhakti Movement*, which explores various aspects of their similarities by examining the poetic heritage of the movement's most prominent figures.

This approach adds strength and value to her study. Other studies have also addressed the specifics of the movement and the sources of its teachings.

Therefore, I chose to research the topic of "Hindu Reform Movements and Their Relation to Islamic Sufism – The Bhakti Movement as a Model" using the following methodologies:

1. Historical Approach:

This approach traces the development of the movement in its various significant aspects, identifying the points of convergence and intersection with the Sufi movement.

2. Descriptive Approach:

It describes the mystical practices of Bhakti saints and Sufi mystics and their disciples in the Indian subcontinent, such as dhikr (remembrance), service, meditation, and others.

3. Analytical Approach:

This is evident in the analysis of religious texts, historical events that brought the movement to prominence, and the rituals or symbols used in both movements, highlighting shared beliefs and meanings.

Ultimately, this research seeks to provide a simplified perspective for readers on the relationship between the Bhakti movement and Islamic Sufism within the Indian subcontinent. It also aims to shed light on one aspect of this intricate and multifaceted relationship.

1.1 The Concept of Bhakti

A - Etymological Meaning

The term *Bhakti* is derived from the Sanskrit root *Bhaj*, which, according to Panini (a renowned Sanskrit linguist and grammarian), means “to resort to something.” Over time, this root was associated with the intense emotion of love.

The word encompasses a range of meanings, the most prominent being attachment, devotion, dedication, love, piety, and worship. It also signifies detachment from what is insignificant and union with what is worthy and significant. Additionally, it conveys the idea of “participation in” or “belonging to service,” and appears in contexts such as “being part of,” “belonging to,” or “being present in something”.

At its core, the term suggests a sense of sharing and connection, as reflected in many classic Hindu sacred texts. Bhakti is often symbolized through human relationships, such as the lover and the beloved, the father and child, the man and woman, the master and servant, and the reverence for a guru (spiritual teacher). It represents the love of humans for the divine and the divine’s love for its devotees. Thus, *Bhakti* in lexicons refers to a form of personal worship characterized by profound feelings of loyalty and love toward the divine (Hardy, 1983).

From the same root, the term *Bhajan* is derived, meaning devotional singing and chanting of the divine’s name or hymns glorifying the deity. This is considered a means of worship and a way to connect with the divine. Practitioners of Bhakti are referred to as *Bhaktas*, or devotees.

As we will explore later, the movement’s origins are rooted in South India, where the Tamil equivalent of Bhakti is *Anpu*, derived from the root *Ani*, meaning “to approach” and “to love.” It carries the same connotations of attachment, piety, kindness, and love for the divine, characterized by complete self-surrender and devotion.

Bhakti, or *Bhakti Marga* (the Path of Devotion), is recognized as one of the three primary paths to liberation in Brahmanical teachings:

1. Karma Yoga (the Path of Action),

2. Jnana Yoga (the Path of Knowledge), and

3. Bhakti Yoga (the Path of Devotion and Dedication).

Bhakti Yoga is regarded as the simplest and most accessible path to reach the divine or the Absolute.

B - General Meaning

The saint *Devarshi Narada*, author of the *Bhakti Sutras*, defines Bhakti as “intense love for the divine.” According to him, a person who attains Bhakti becomes free from the fear of death, achieves completeness, and no longer desires worldly things. Such a person neither grieves nor harbors hatred

but instead experiences profound contentment. This deep and rooted love for the divine, he argues, liberates believers from the material world's chains and leads them to true happiness.

Swami Vivekananda describes Bhakti as a genuine and original search for God, starting, continuing, and ending in love. A single moment of deep love directed toward the divine, he asserts, brings eternal freedom to the individual. Similarly, *Sri Aurobindo* refers to it as "the absolute surrender of the self". Thus, Bhakti, according to these perspectives, is a profound spiritual journey and divine blessing that requires total submission to divine will, connecting humans with the ultimate divine self (Eaton, 2000).

Meanwhile, *Das Gupta* views Bhakti as a divine grace that allows individuals to feel a profound sense of love and emotion for the divine while recognizing its superiority and greatness. He explains that it is not a fleeting sentiment but an intimate relationship between the devotee and the divine, grounded in love and reverence.

In common usage, Bhakti often denotes continuous contemplation of the supreme being with love (*Snehapurvam-Anudhyanam*). Love, in this context, is seen as both knowledge and intellectual activity manifested as love for the divine (*Pritirapa Jnana*). According to this view, spiritual harmony arises from fulfilling religious duties outlined in sacred texts alongside spiritual knowledge. Thus, Bhakti is seen as a holistic spiritual state that blends love, intellect, and knowledge, demanding persistent and ongoing efforts from the devotee toward the divine beloved.

Researcher *Krishna Sharma* argues that Bhakti is essentially a heartfelt devotion to the divine. It represents both a mental and emotional stance rather than a fixed set of ideas or beliefs. In a broader sense, Bhakti can be understood as religious devotion that transcends any specific Hindu sect. Sharma highlights its monotheistic dimension, especially in the worship practices of the Vaishnavite tradition, which promotes loving devotion to a personal deity (Vishnu, particularly in his incarnation as Krishna). For Sharma, Bhakti is a heartfelt experience rather than a theoretical doctrine, requiring the engagement of both heart and mind while encompassing anyone devoted to a higher power.

The Indian historian *Tara Chand* asserts that "Bhakti is the emotional aspect of religion, rooted in the emotional dimension of human consciousness. Its core elements include a personal deity, divine grace, selfless devotion, the love of the devotee, and the promise of salvation for all regardless of caste or sect, as well as internal unification".

In a similar vein, researcher *Mariam Farooqui* explains that Bhakti signifies devotion, humility, and seeking grace from the divine. It also involves a metaphysical quest to understand both the self and the supreme self, driven by an intense desire for unity with the divine. Bhakti, according to her, is achieved through complete surrender, noble deeds, meditation, and remembrance (*dhikr*). The ultimate goal is to establish a personal and intimate relationship between the divine and its devotees.

Bhakti, or the *Bhakti Marga*, emerged relatively later compared to the *Karma* and *Jnana* paths, yet it retained the essence of ancient Indian religion. This explains its enduring appeal among Hindu believers.

The roots of Bhakti trace back to the Vedic period, as referenced in the *Bhagavad Gita*, which emphasizes abandoning conventional religious practices in favor of devotion to the divine alone. The text discusses various ways of understanding the divine and practicing yoga to achieve unity with it. In essence, Bhakti represents comprehensive faith in and devotion to the worshiped deity. As a concept, Bhakti materialized into a movement that gained widespread social support and left a significant imprint on Indian history.

Origins and Spread of the Bhakti Movement

The Bhakti movement originated in southern India among the Tamil people, specifically in regions such as Tamil Nadu and Kerala. It spread through the teachings of saints from the *Vaishnavite* and *Shaivite* sects (Alvars and Nayanars) starting in the 7th century CE. Over subsequent centuries, these ideas extended to northern India. During the medieval period, India experienced profound political, social, and economic changes, prompting a search for a new meaning to life.

These saints traveled from temple to temple, singing hymns in praise of Vishnu and Shiva. Their poems were compiled in the 10th century CE into works such as *Nalayira Divya Prabandham*, which became sacred texts for the Vaishnavite sect.

It is important to note here a very significant point that Bhakti embraced people from various traditions and sects, such as the Vaishnavism sect that worships Vishnu and his incarnations, the Shaivism sect that glorifies Shiva, and the Shaktism sect which honors all the gods associated with it. The belonging to a particular sect and tradition does not prevent these devotees from practicing the Bhakti Marga, as their devotion to serving one God does not prevent them from worshiping and venerating other gods and their incarnations. To them, all gods are simply manifestations of one supreme deity.

It is very important to highlight that the most prominent feature of this movement is its heterogeneity. There were many different Bhakti movements with multiple voices in various parts of the Indian subcontinent, each having significant differences in form and style. Our research will focus on the general idea referred to by the term "Bhakti movement".

Scholars suggest that the reason behind the widespread success of this movement across India and its rise against the dominant sects and religions in Indian society during the medieval period was that it made the divine accessible to all. It transcended, rebelled, and even mocked the obscure philosophical contemplations and formal rituals prevalent in Hinduism at the time, and it protested against the caste system (varna), which was based on race and color and was the main cause of the division and fragmentation of Indian society at that time. As a result, the movement reached the vast majority and influenced their minds for nearly 800 to 900 years.

Most importantly, it was considered one of the most significant factors in shaping Hinduism during a critical period, as it emerged from within Hinduism and gave it a boost and revival after it had seen stagnation and self-isolation. It came to be known as the Hinduism of the medieval period, as it interpreted the intimate and strong relationship between God and his devotees in a way that aligned with the contemplative religious heritage of Hinduism. It also contributed to shaping the face of modern Hinduism presented to the world.

Thus, Bhakti was a driving force in the formation and continuity of Hinduism. It revived Hinduism, provided a new interpretation of the relationship between God and his devotees, and shaped the face of modern Hinduism. It can be said that Bhakti is the essence of Hinduism in its living and dynamic aspect.

2. Origins of Bhakti:

A. Bhakti in the Vedas:

When tracing the hymns of the Vedic texts, the term "Bhakti" does not appear in the Rig Veda or its other parts as a prominent devotional element or a spiritual path for liberation. It is commonly understood that the study of the Vedas is focused on the religious and ritualistic aspects (sacrifices) associated with the Brahmin priestly class.

Radha Krishnan believes that the origin of Bhakti is found in the Vedic hymns dedicated to the god Varuna. Worship of this god, which carries an awareness of the sins committed and trust in divine forgiveness, is, according to him, one of the earliest roots of Bhakti.

Naturally, Vedic hymns were recited during rituals, and at that time, the Rishis (sages) or poets felt that the inspiration they received depended on the grace and mercy of the divine. They had ample space to express their devotional stance through emphasizing phrases of longing and glorification of the deity in order to gain His favor. Here are some examples:

- "Dyaus is my father"
- "Aditi is heaven, Aditi is the firmament; Aditi is mother, father, and son" (Wilson, Rig Veda 1.89.10 (Translation and Commentary), 2024)

Bhandarkar laments that the sacrificial rituals contributed to distorting the spirit of these hymns, turning them into simple phrases and words that lost their depth and became rigid.

To summarize the academic view on the mention of Bhakti in the Vedas, we can refer to Dasa Gupta's clear statement on the matter: "Bhakti involves a mental attitude that is incompatible with the concept of worship and the Vedic and Brahminical rituals".

Therefore, researchers acknowledge that certain elements in the Vedic tradition resemble personal devotion to a specific deity, but emotional worship of a deity is not a prominent feature in the Vedas.

The role of the gods in the Vedic tradition is limited to the sacrifice ritual, which represents the practical side of their religion.

From this point, we can conclude that Bhakti, which we saw is closely linked to emotional worship and divine attachment, does not explicitly and prominently appear in the Vedic texts. Instead, the Vedic texts focused on sacrificial rituals and the priestly aspect of worship.

B. Bhakti in the Upanishads:

The term Bhakti does not appear in the Upanishadic texts as a path to liberation (Bhakti Marga). The Upanishads affirmed that Jnana (knowledge of Brahman) is the only path to Moksha (liberation).

"As one knows, one is liberated from death; there is no other path to the great liberation". The practice of Upasana (meditation) was considered a secondary means for Jnana, though it implicitly carries the essence of Bhakti. Bhakti, in its deeper sense, is reflected in the Upanishadic texts, as in the Mundaka Upanishad: "The self cannot be gained by teaching, nor by thinking, nor by study of religious texts; it can only be gained by the self itself, which reveals its true form".

What this passage highlights, according to Ramanuja, is that merely engaging in Sravana (hearing), Manana (reflection), and Nididhyasana (contemplation) without deep love for the deity—Bhakti—does not lead to liberation. According to him, only the person who receives the grace of the deity can reach liberation. Although the term Bhakti is absent from the Upanishads, there are several terms in these texts that imply liberation and salvation, such as Jnana, Vidana, Darshana, Dhyana, and Upasana, all of which were used interchangeably throughout the Upanishadic texts. The Vedantic interpretation of Bhakti transcends devotion and aims at achieving union with the infinite. This is the same view defended by Bhandarkar, who argued that one can infer Bhakti or divine love in the Upanishads. The latter texts emphasize enthusiastic meditation (Upasana) on various objects like Manas (the mind), the Sun, Purusha in the Sun or the Moon, and even food, all of which are considered Brahman. According to him, reflecting on these objects is akin to reflecting on Brahman, and this meditation can grow into intense love. As stated in the Brihadaranyaka Upanishad: "This Self is closer to us than anything else, indeed, it is more beloved than our own children".

From this, we conclude that while the term "Bhakti" does not explicitly appear in the Upanishads, the context of the Upanishads connects different concepts within the texts and clarifies how these concepts can evolve into the full concept of Bhakti.

C. Bhakti in the Bhagavad Gita:

The Bhagavad Gita is considered the oldest sacred text to declare Bhakti Marga as the highest spiritual path to liberation. It addresses the Gita as a fundamental and important text for the Vaishnavite sect, as it is the first text to emphasize personal and firm faith in a specific deity, "Krishna". Many scholars agree that it represents India's first attempt to elevate the concept of monotheism and establish the foundations of popular religion (Bhakti) independent of the Brahminical Vedic religion. Hence, we are dealing with a foundational sacred text for the Bhakti path, one of the most important paths to liberation in Hinduism.

Chapter 12 of the Gita introduces Krishna's description of Bhakti Yoga as the path to the highest spiritual achievements: *"Let your work be your supreme goal; even through performing actions for me, you can reach perfection. And if you are unable to do so, take refuge in devotion to me... No doubt, knowledge is better than concentration, and meditation is better than knowledge, and renouncing the fruits of action is better than meditation. From renunciation comes peace"*.

It also states: *"Focus your mind on me, dedicate yourself to me, offer sacrifices to me, bow down to me, and let your soul unite with me as its goal. Then you will come to me"*.

Based on these teachings, Swami Vivekananda described Bhakti Yoga as "the path of organized devotion to achieve union with the Absolute". According to the Bhagavad Gita, Bhakti Marga is the way through which spiritual union with the divine is achieved through unconditional love and devotion to the deity.

The Gita is considered the most important sacred text explaining "Bhakti Marga," and according to it, dedication and devotion to the deity Krishna ultimately lead to union with him. Bhakti is described as the easiest path to liberation compared to other paths outlined in Hindu teachings.

3. The Most Famous Teachings and Principles of the Bhakti Movement:

- **The call for monotheism:** The belief in one God, even if represented by different names and incarnations.
- **Promotion of love, peace, tolerance, and devotion:** These are considered the only means (for Moksha).
- **Protest against the influence of the Brahmin class:** Their monopoly on the opportunity to access divine grace or liberation.
- **Criticism of Jain and Buddhist teachings:** These groups are considered non-believers, or outcasts from the true Hindu fold.
- **Reliance on the guru:** The guru is seen as the sole guide to achieving liberation and freedom.
- **The practice of pilgrimage:** Pilgrimages unite the followers during the spreading of the Bhakti doctrine and ideas.
- **Use of local and regional dialects:** For preaching, instruction, and propagation, rejecting the elite dominance of the Sanskrit language. This led to the creation of a large amount of poetic literature. Bhakti contributed to the development of various cultural aspects of India, such as art, music, dance, painting, and sculpture.

The Bhakti movement also gave rise to two major currents: **Nirguna** and **Saguna**, each offering a different perspective on the nature of God and the optimal way to reach Him.

Saguna Current (Sagun): The word means "possessing attributes." Followers of this school believe that God possesses specific divine qualities such as love, mercy, and justice. Therefore, they worship the incarnations of the divine being (usually in a triad: Brahma, Vishnu, Shiva). This intellectual school adhered to the scriptural authority of the Vedas and emphasized the need for the guru as an intermediary between God and people. Personal worship of God, according to this school, is based on performing rituals, singing hymns, and recounting stories. Saints like Ramananda and Chaitanya adopted the doctrine of incarnation and worshiped Saguna forms of Ram and Krishna, respectively.

Nirguna Current (Nirguna): The word means "without attributes." According to this stream, God cannot be described or limited to any specific qualities or human forms ("Nirakara"). The divine being is seen as "Ishvara," the personal and pure spiritual aspect of the deity, transcending all names and forms ("Namaroopa"). It can only be understood through internal mystical experience. Followers of this school rejected scriptural authority and all forms of idol worship, rituals, and institutional ceremonies. They fought social discrimination and sought reconciliation between Hindus and Muslims. Prominent advocates of this current include Kabir and Nanak.

4. The Social, Economic, and Political Backgrounds of the Bhakti Movement's Emergence:

The researcher Rekha Bhandarkar explains that Indian culture or civilization has been remarkably inclusive, absorbing many different peoples that stepped onto its soil, such as the Greeks, Persians, and others, incorporating them into its fold. However, one exception to this rule was the Muslims—specifically the Turks—who maintained their distinct identity. Despite this, the relationship between Hindus and Muslims necessitated creating an atmosphere of peace for coexistence and ensuring social stability. This led to an intriguing interaction between the two groups. The Islamic ideals of tolerance towards different beliefs conflicted with the Hindu caste system—particularly the **Varna** system. Other factors also contributed to this, and the convergence between the two groups eventually led to the rise of the Bhakti movement. It was, therefore, a product of a transitional society, as a reaction to social, economic, and political changes. There is a well-known relationship between social, political, and economic conditions, as well as the religious factor. Consequently, the Bhakti movement should not be considered in isolation from these broader trends, making it necessary to explore the various changes that occurred in Indian society at the time (Chatterjee, 2020).

A. Social Conditions:

In medieval Indian society, a variety of social conditions laid the foundation for the emergence and growth of the Bhakti movement. The primary reason for this was the oppression by the Brahmins, which reached its peak. The Brahmins reinforced the existing situation by solidifying the following:

1. Class Disparities: The **Varna** system dominated the network of social relationships in India at the time. It was rigid and inflexible, resulting in extreme social injustice. This system applied

oppressive policies toward the **Shandala** and untouchable classes, i.e., the lower classes, and exacerbated privileges among the higher social groups. Many were deprived of opportunities, and despite its oppressive and inhumane nature, no one dared to challenge the system, as it was supported by Brahminical religious ideology based on birth and profession. As a result, several rebellious movements against the **Varna** system emerged, such as Jainism and Buddhism, which provided an outlet for the oppressed masses. The rebellious movements reached their peak with the rise of the Bhakti movement.

2. Complex Rituals: Historically, Hindu religious beliefs and practices were highly diverse, leading to a fragmented and incoherent religious system. This was reflected in the complicated rituals and vague philosophical contemplations that required deep knowledge and understanding of sacred texts such as the **Vedas** and **Upanishads**. This understanding was traditionally accessible only through the Brahmins. Due to the deteriorating social and religious situation, Brahmins and their followers, who had turned religion into a profession, were compared to "the blind leading the blind". Moreover, the sacred texts were written in **Sanskrit**, a language that was exclusive to the Brahmin class. As a result, saints of the Bhakti movement began using local dialects and languages in their discourses and poetry, making them accessible to the illiterate masses. This facilitated communication and allowed people to reach God in a simple and straightforward way. For example, **Suradas** used the Braj dialect, a local language in his region, while **Raidas** wrote in colloquial Hindi. **Ramananda** and **Namdev** used their native **Marathi** language.

These social and linguistic shifts were central to the popularity and effectiveness of the Bhakti movement, as they made spiritual practices more accessible to the broader population, breaking down barriers imposed by the caste system and religious orthodoxy.

3. Discrimination Against Women:

In India, women were historically the most marginalized group, deprived of rights due to prevailing customs and traditions. These traditions kept them in a subordinate position under male authority (father, brother, husband, and son), as shaped by the **Manu Code** in particular. The **Bhakti movement** provided space for women to express their feelings and emotions, leading to the emergence of many female saints who rejected the ingrained stereotypes in social structures and started enjoying rights traditionally reserved for men. These women created poems and songs addressed to God, viewing Him not as a distant deity but as a lover or husband who shared in their pains, sorrows, and deep desires for personal and emotional liberation. Notable examples include **Mirabai**, **Andal**, **Mollana**, and others.

Thus, these social conditions in India during the rise of the Bhakti movement were complex and intertwined. The movement sought to offer a spiritually and socially appealing alternative, promoting equality before God, focusing on personal relationships with the divine, and simplifying worship practices (Kabir, 2011).

B. Political Conditions:

The period following the fall of **Harshavardhana's rule (the last king of the Gupta dynasty) in 648 CE** and leading up to the **Delhi Sultanate's establishment in 1206 CE** was marked by significant events and radical changes in the Indian subcontinent. Historians refer to this period as the **Early Middle Ages** or the **Late Ancient Period**. It was a time of the rise and fall of several kingdoms and states, with scholars recognizing the continued failure of these states to establish strong central authority.

A critical factor in shaping this period was the **feudal system** in India, which played a central role in determining the characteristics of the era. The spread of crafts and handwork in rural areas led to villages becoming more self-sufficient, reducing their reliance on cities, which weakened trade. By the year 1000 CE, this period marked the **decline of cities** and urban areas. The use of gold and silver coins dwindled and almost disappeared from the country. An indication of this scarcity of money or capital was the practice of granting land to priests as gifts for their services and allocating land to soldiers and government officers in place of cash salaries. This practice served as an incentive for joining the military and fighting on behalf of the king (Dalmia, Stietencron, 1995).

These political changes and instability were pivotal in shaping the society in which the **Bhakti movement** emerged, influencing the movement's reaction to social injustice, inequality, and the lack of a strong, centralized governance system.

The isolation of rural areas formed the basis for the emergence of the feudal system in India, which coincided with the absence of central authority. This led to the strengthening of the aristocratic class. All these circumstances contributed to the expansion of the influence of local nobles and the consolidation of their power. Feudalism was also responsible for the emergence of numerous small and large regional kingdoms, as each noble sought to expand his kingdom and increase its influence. After Harshavardhana, his empire was divided into several small competing states, such as the Palas in Bengal, the Chavda rulers in Gujarat, and the Rashtrakutas in Vindhya. In this new situation, characterized by the changing formation of social classes, as we have seen.

In Hindu religious belief, all these developments were not born out of the will of the existing social power or personal decisions. Rather, this new system of "feudalism" was a response to the deep social and economic crises of that period. The concept of recurring cycles of social development in India, known as the Yugas, emerges here. These are a series of cosmic cycles that explain the development of the universe and human society, starting with the Golden Age of Krita Yuga, then Treta Yuga, Dvapara Yuga, and finally Kali Yuga. After Kali Yuga, society or the world returns to Krita Yuga, and the process repeats endlessly. The Puranas and Dharmashastra of the early centuries of the Common Era provide detailed characteristics of these Yugas. Krita Yuga is the ideal refuge for peace and virtuous ethics, while Dvapara Yuga is the era of increasing evil and widespread wars. The worst phase is Kali Yuga, in which evil reaches its peak and ignorance prevails. This phase coincided with the medieval era and the Bhakti movement, which proved that Kali Yuga was a curse for the ruling classes in Indian society. In contrast, it was a blessing and grace for women and the lower, deprived classes.

Thus, India suffered from a series of turbulent political conditions before the emergence of the movement, which played a significant role in its formation. The movement provided, as we said, a spiritual and social refuge for those who were suffering from injustice and oppression, and it helped in shaping a new Indian identity that combines diversity and multiplicity.

C - Economic Situation:

As we have previously outlined briefly, the situation in the country was characterized by the decline of cities and the retreat of trade, which led to the scarcity of coinage. These factors contributed to the adoption of the "feudal system," which extended its influence over all aspects and areas of life in the country and had negative consequences. However, with the arrival of Muslim rulers, a series of changes and developments occurred in most areas of life. The Muslims introduced or established a highly advanced economic system compared to the previous one, which helped to unleash a social force that revitalized the cities at the beginning of the 14th century. This was done through the expansion of trade and the establishment of commercial centers. New cities emerged as points of trade and cultural exchange, and life returned to the cities, with each city having markets where fairs were held, such as the Delhi market, which was linked to both internal and external trade. This dynamic trade activity led to an increase in coinage and its circulation between the 15th and 17th centuries, along with the provision of transport facilities. As a result, the feudal system witnessed a severe decline and contraction, and the conditions became favorable for the rise of Bhakti in all its fields.

The new rulers (Muslims) brought with them new techniques and innovations, such as the production of silk, wool, cotton textiles, and carpets. Indian carpets, in particular, had a wide distribution. The textile industry relied on raw materials available in India: cotton was abundant and widely produced, wool was readily available due to livestock, and silk was produced from silkworms that fed on mulberry trees, which were common in India. Additionally, industries such as copper, iron, and other metals, leather goods, especially in Gujarat, agricultural tools, pottery, soap, beads, and jewelry were developed.

There was also an increase in the slave market to provide labor for various crafts, and these slaves played an important role in the urban economy, serving as a key channel for the growth of the Muslim

urban artisan class. On the economic front, the increase in artisanal production and trade created unstable conditions for the artisan and merchant classes. Most of the surplus from these artisans was seized, leading to worsening conditions for them day by day. They were not accepted on equal terms with the hereditary Indian artisans, and as a result, the city produced its own social class, in which artisans and merchants held the highest positions. Hindu law did not include them in the superior groups.

As we have seen, the economic scene was significantly affected by political conditions (such as the lack of social justice, economic and social inequality, and others), in addition to the prevailing social circumstances. The economic factor also contributed to accelerating the emergence of the movement in the field of Indian life at that time.

D - Religious Situation:

During the Gupta dynasty's rule in North India, from the 4th century to the 6th century CE, Hindu culture became firmly entrenched. They referred to themselves as the Bhagavats, "those who worship and pray to God," associating themselves with the god Vishnu, thus establishing a precedent for a hereditary monarchy blessed with divinity. This was followed by the Pandya dynasty (around 550 BCE), the Chera dynasty (around 400 BCE), the Chola dynasty (around 301 BCE), and the Pallava dynasty (275 BCE), all of which adopted and spread Hinduism to large parts of the country. Sanskrit became the language of the gods and the official language of the state. In the south, the Dravidians immediately embraced these ideas, calling themselves "descendants of Lord Brahma" and became supporters of Vedic traditions.

Irfan Habib points out that one of the key strengths of Hinduism was its claim to have provided or established a set of laws and social rituals to organize the lives of individuals, as they were part of the "Dharmashastra" legislative code. Thanks to books and commentaries issued over centuries, it set the religious and ritual foundations for the Varna class system.

During this period, the Jain and Buddhist religions began to decline and eventually disappear in the lands where they had originated. Hindu sects emerged, which gained popular support and royal patronage. These sects—Vaishnavism, Shaivism, and Shaktism—provided a refuge for the oppressed Hindu masses and were referred to as "sympathetic religions" that discouraged people from converting to Jainism and Buddhism (Lorenzen, 1995).

Buddhist and Jain temples were converted into Hindu temples, and intellectual freedom was not suppressed unless it posed a threat to the social order. The most significant achievement of the Brahmins was the institutionalization of the caste system by introducing excessive rituals and taboos, particularly against women and the lower classes. The classes were further divided into many sub-castes, which suffered exploitation by the higher classes, as well as the excessive use of power by the priests towards them. There were also purification rituals for sins and other complex rites. The Brahmins also presented statues and idols as legitimate representations of the gods, claiming that divine favor could only be obtained through them, thus preventing individuals from forming a personal and emotional connection with their god.

With the arrival of Muslims in India and their destruction of temples and idols, as well as the limitation of Brahmin power, the masses realized that these idols had no real power and could not protect themselves from danger, let alone protect them. This realization was a key factor that led people to adopt emotional worship of God as a form of popular monotheism.

Ultimately, Bhakti surpassed both Jainism and Buddhism, not only due to royal patronage (particularly from the Delhi Sultanate rulers) but also because it employed various popular means that aroused public enthusiasm, such as Bhajans and Kirtans (chanting hymns), repetition of God's name (Nam Japa), and dancing as a spiritual form of worship. Additionally, Bhakti embraced an approach of equality, declaring that "one should not inquire about caste." According to Bhakti, a person's devotion to the name of Hari defined their belonging, not their caste. The saints of the movement emphasized that the foundation of society should be love and brotherhood, and they stood firmly against the economic norms of society.

In summary, the Bhakti movement managed to surpass Jainism and Buddhism due to a combination of factors, including royal patronage, the use of simple popular means, a focus on

equality, and an emphasis on love and brotherhood. These factors made Bhakti a movement that attracted and had a profound impact on the lives of millions of people.

5. Advocates and Saints of the Bhakti Movement:

The leaders or spiritual guides of the Bhakti movement were not reformers sitting on luxurious thrones preaching to the people. Most of them came from lower classes or were artisans and merchants. (If we exclude saints such as Chaitanya (1486-1533), the great teacher of the chanting and Kirtan of "Hari Krishna" in Bengal, who spread it throughout the country, and Saint Mirabai (1498-1546) from Rajasthan, known for her enthusiastic Kirtan directed to Lord Krishna, they were mostly from higher classes like Brahmins or Kshatriyas (warriors)). The most famous among them was the philosopher Kabir (1440-1510), who was a weaver and sold cloth in the market. He emphasized that every devotee should work hard, earn their living through honest labor, and help others. He is also known for his condemnation of all forms of caste-based discrimination, stating: "How can a person be born a Shudra and remain a Shudra till death? One makes a Brahmin thread himself and then wears it" (Thapar, 2002, p. 318-332).

Philosopher Ramanuja (1017-1137) is considered one of the pioneers of the Bhakti movement. He infused the teachings of the Vaishnavite sect with philosophical depth through his interpretations and monistic views. He insisted that everyone is capable of achieving communion with God and, thereby, eternal bliss through Bhakti. His disciple, Ramananda (1299), also opposed the dominance and influence of the Brahmin class and the caste system as a whole. He is famous for saying: "No one should ask another about their caste or creed; whoever worships the deity is a king of the deity".

Additionally, philosopher Madhava (1197-1246), a Vaishnavite saint from the south, became known for his dualistic philosophy, which opposed Ramanuja's monism. His belief was that God, the human soul, and the world are separate. He affirmed that faith in God's grace in the form of Krishna alone could save a person from the cycles of birth and death. The great poet Tulsidas (1532-1623), born into a Brahmin family and living during Emperor Akbar's time, is regarded as the greatest devotee of Lord Rama. He dedicated himself to Rama through devotion, worship, and meditation. Another prominent Vaishnavite saint from the south, Vallabhacharya (1479-1531), also came from a Brahmin family. He promoted a universal religion that rejected discrimination based on caste, creed, or gender, and he emphasized the complete identity of both the soul and the world with the Supreme Soul. His influence was profound on saints like Mirabai and Narsi Mehta.

The Marathi poet Namdev (1270), who was a tailor, showed that individuals from the Brahmin or higher castes had to renounce their caste privileges and superiority complex in order to join the movement.

6-Possible Islamic Influences on the Teachings of the Bhakti Movement:

A. Orientalist Studies on the Origins of Bhakti:

The popular Bhakti movement gained considerable attention in Western academic circles, particularly during the last quarter of the 19th century. Orientalist studies often portrayed the Bhakti movement as the Indian equivalent of Protestant Christianity, with the Bhagavad Gita enshrining its most prominent features and teachings. They even referred to it as "India's Gospel" and characterized it as a reformist, monotheistic movement, considering it the first true case of monotheism in India. Orientalists generally recognized and defined Bhakti as a monotheistic movement associated specifically with the Vaishnavite sect. Its teachings and the poetry of its philosophers centered around the deity Vishnu, revered as the "God of Love." They labeled it the Bhakti religion. This Orientalist perspective primarily arose from comparing the movement to Protestant Christianity and exclusively linking it to the Vaishnavite sect.

Wilson was the first to mention Bhakti, albeit in a general manner, in his writings on Hindu religious sects. He noted elements of Bhakti while studying the Vaishnavite sect in Bengal, referencing Krishna-Bhakti within Vaishnavism. By 1909, Bhakti had been included in the *Encyclopedia of Religion and Ethics* as a fully developed religion and doctrine. Numerous other studies exist, but only a few examples can be highlighted here (Schomer, McLeod, 1987).

The Indian scholar Sharma, as previously discussed, reviewed prominent Orientalist views on Bhakti and demonstrated that most were rooted in interpretations shaped by a Western European

perspective. These interpretations reflected subjective opinions and evaluations without reference to the movement's original context (Hinduism) and judged it from a Christian viewpoint, which fundamentally differs from Bhakti.

B. Bhandarkar's Critique of Orientalist Theories:

Bhandarkar, a professor of Sanskrit at Elphinstone College and a former governor of the Mumbai region, was one of the most prominent critics of Orientalist theories concerning the origins of the Bhakti movement. He traced the local developments within the Vaishnavite sect's religion and criticized Orientalists for oversimplifying the characteristics of Bhakti, treating it as a homogeneous phenomenon. According to Bhandarkar, the movement encompassed significant diversity in beliefs and practices. He also faulted Orientalists for comparing it to Christianity, which led to a misunderstanding of its nature. Moreover, they neglected the historical and cultural contexts in which the movement emerged, analyzing it in isolation from its background.

In contrast, Bhandarkar utilized his extensive expertise in manuscripts and primary sources to offer a more profound and comprehensive perspective on the movement. He emphasized its deep Indian roots and linked it to the Vedic and Puranic traditions. He argued that Bhakti was not a reformist movement in the Western sense but rather a natural evolution of Hinduism. Consequently, his research marked a turning point in academic studies of the Bhakti movement.

Many opinions have been presented regarding the origins of the Bhakti movement. Weber argued that Bhakti was both a means and a condition for spiritual emancipation, suggesting it was a powerful idea introduced to India through Christianity. He believed Christianity exerted significant influence on Hinduism, especially during the period of the great epics. Some apparent similarities were highlighted, such as the emphasis on divine love, establishing a personal relationship with the deity, and the central role of saints. However, these similarities were insufficient for researchers to draw definitive conclusions. Christian communities in South India had little noticeable impact on Hindu social life, and the possibility of actual contact between Hindus and Christians during the medieval period remains weak and unsupported by strong evidence.

While Orientalism helped introduce the Bhakti movement to the West, its perspective was constrained by cultural and religious influences. According to proponents of Bhakti, the movement is rich and diverse, far exceeding Orientalist perceptions.

The Bhakti Movement and Islamic Sufism in the Indian Subcontinent

A-Understanding Islamic Influence Through Sufism

Before analyzing the theory that Islamic teachings, specifically Sufi practices, influenced the Bhakti movement, it is essential to explore the arrival of Islam in India and the integration of Sufi orders into Indian social life. This contextualization provides a clearer understanding of the historical events of the time.

B-The Connection Between the Two Civilizations Before and After Islam

The historical relationship between the Indian subcontinent and the Arab world dates back centuries. Researchers point to numerous examples of these connections, particularly through trade relations. There were many Arab settlements along India's coasts, most notably on the Malabar Coast, which held special significance before the 7th century CE. These settlements underscore the longstanding ties between the two civilizations even before Islam emerged as a unified political power.

The Arrival of Islam in India

Islam's engagement with India began during the Rashidun Caliphate and continued under the Umayyads. Around 95 AH / 712 CE, the commander Muhammad bin Qasim Al-Thaqafi successfully conquered Sindh (modern-day Pakistan). By the dawn of the 4th century AH (10th century CE), the leader Mahmud of Ghazni established the Ghaznavid Sultanate in India after defeating the Rajputs (Hindu kings) in northern and southern parts of the country.

In 584 AH / 1188 CE, Shihab al-Din Ghuri toppled the Ghaznavid state, advancing deep into India and reaching Delhi. His conquests lasted for 18 years until his assassination by a Hindu assailant. One of his Mamluks, Qutb al-Din Aibak, established the first Islamic principality in India,

which endured for over three centuries (602–932 AH / 1206–1526 CE). During this period, five Islamic dynasties ruled India:

- **The Mamluk Dynasty** (602–686 AH / 1206–1288 CE)
- **The Khalji Dynasty**, founded by Jalal al-Din Khalji (686–720 AH / 1288–1320 CE)
- **The Tughlaq Dynasty**, founded by Ghiyath al-Din Tughlaq (720–813 AH / 1321–1411 CE)
- **The Sayyid Dynasty** (813–855 AH / 1411–1451 CE)
- **The Lodi Dynasty**, founded by Sikandar Lodi (855–932 AH / 1451–1526 CE)

Afterward, India entered the Mughal era, considered the golden age of Islam in the region, during which Islamic civilization flourished significantly.

A Brief Overview of Sufi Orders in the Subcontinent

While Islamic conquests paved the way for Islam's entry into the Indian subcontinent, the major effort and decisive energy that solidified a unique Indian-Islamic identity came from the Sufi orders. These orders, led by their prominent, learned, and disciplined saints, assumed the responsibility of spreading authentic Sufi teachings among India's diverse religious communities.

The Four Main Sufi Orders in the Indian Subcontinent

1. The Suhrawardiyya Order

Founded by Sheikh Shihab al-Din Umar al-Suhrawardi (d. 632 AH), this order played a significant role in spreading and deepening Islam in the Indian subcontinent. Sheikh Baha al-Din Zakariya Multani was instrumental in its propagation. The Suhrawardiyya order was distinguished by its unique principles, which attracted many followers. These included the focus on monotheism, divine love, spiritual discipline, and moral refinement. Its values of tolerance, openness to other cultures, and social services for marginalized groups greatly facilitated its integration into Indian society.

2. The Chishtiyya Order

One of the most famous and widely followed Sufi orders in India, the Chishtiyya holds a special place in the hearts of Indian Muslims. It spread through the efforts of Sheikh Mu'in al-Din Hasan al-Sanjari al-Ajmiri (d. 634 AH), followed by Sheikh Qutb al-Din Bakhtiar Kaki (d. 634 AH), Sheikh Farid al-Din Ganj Shakar (d. 1265 AH), and Sheikh Nizam al-Din Awliya (d. 725 AH). The practices of this order centered on audible dhikr, controlling the breath, linking the heart with the Sheikh through love and reverence, fasting, night prayers, and reducing speech, food, and sleep.

3. The Qadiriyya Order

Founded by Imam Abd al-Qadir al-Jilani, the Qadiriyya order attracted many adherents in India. Its teachings emphasized closeness to God through voluntary acts of worship and constant dhikr, aiming to maintain an ever-present awareness of God.

4. The Naqshbandiyya Order

Established by Baha al-Din Muhammad ibn Muhammad Naqshband, this order was introduced to India by Sheikh Khwaja Baqi Billah Dehlawi, who learned it from Sheikh Amkangi and made Delhi its center. The Naqshbandiyya focused on silent dhikr, without moving the lips, and emphasized righteous actions.

Other Sufi Orders

Though less prominent, other Sufi orders in India included:

- The **Mevleviyya** (associated with Jalal al-Din Rumi, d. 672 AH)
- The **Jalaliyya**
- The **Bukhariyya**
- The **Shattariyya**
- The **Ashiqiyya**
- The **Ghawthiyya**
- The **Firdawsiyya**
- (Anwar, n.d., p. 68).

The Pivotal Role of Sufism

In summary, while Islamic conquests opened India's doors to Islam, the Sufi orders played a decisive role in rooting Islam deeply within Indian society. By embodying values of love, tolerance,

and spiritual discipline, the Sufis transformed Islam from a foreign religion into a beloved faith that resonated with both Muslims and Hindus, fostering harmony within the diverse Indian community.

C- Academic Opinions on the Influence of Islam on the Concepts and Beliefs of the Bhakti Movement:

We begin our exploration of this topic with the stance of the Hindu historian Tarachand, who authored an important book on the influence of Islam and Muslims on various aspects of Indian culture. According to him, as previously mentioned, a significant number of Muslims settled in Indian coastal trade regions—such as the Malabar Coast—where the Tamil teachers (founders of the Bhakti movement) originated. These Muslim settlers were welcomed by the locals as traders, and they began spreading the principles of Islam. They gained considerable political and social influence, which enabled them to communicate with the masses in a simple and spontaneous manner (Rizvi, 1978, p. 89-92).

It is well-known that southern India was the first region where Islam encountered Hinduism. As previously noted, during the social upheavals and political unrest of that time, the south experienced intense religious strife between the dominant Brahmanical religion and its offshoots, Jainism and Buddhism. According to Tarachand, this turmoil unsettled people's minds, making them receptive to new ideas from any source. Islam presented itself with a simple faith, clear doctrines, defined rituals, and an emphasis on the equality of all humans regardless of gender or status.

He highlights this influence by stating:

"Thus, without distorting facts, we can assume that if foreign elements appeared in Hinduism during its development in South India after the 7th century, unrelated to Hinduism's natural evolution and not contradicting its essence, they were likely the result of Islamic influence. This is especially evident when considering that Hindu reform focused on the same matters prohibited by Islam and that the new ideas adopted were precisely those that distinguish Islam from other religions".

Jawaharlal Nehru also emphasized this impact, stating:

"Thus, Islam came to India as a religion before it arrived as a political force centuries later. Hinduism felt the pressure of these new ideas, and Islam itself changed somewhat in India compared to other regions. The strict monotheism of Islam had an impact on Hinduism".

Similarly, the Indian scholar K.M.Paikkar remarked on the influence of Islamic monotheism on Indian thought and religion, saying:

"It is clear and established that Islam's influence on Hinduism was profound. The concept of worshiping one God in Hinduism owes much to Islamic teachings. Religious and intellectual leaders of that era, even while giving their deities various names, called for the worship of one God, asserting that God is singular, worthy of worship, and the source of salvation and happiness. This influence is evident in the religions and movements that emerged in India during the Islamic era, such as the Bhakti faith and the teachings of Kabir Das".

In this context, the spread of Sufi ideas and the rise of the Bhakti movement was greatly influenced by a spirit of understanding and tolerance. The Sufis sought to convert Hindus to Islam by appealing to their hearts, rather than through force and coercion. On the other hand, the main objective of the Bhakti movement was to reform Hinduism, even if it meant accepting and incorporating some Islamic concepts into its doctrinal system to defend Hinduism against the rise of Islam and its dominance. It is evident that the Bhakti movement was willing to adapt some Islamic ideas, considered foreign to its religious system, to preserve and strengthen Hinduism.

The scholar Bhattacharya, in his analysis of the issue, linked the early medieval period (700-1486 AD) to the concept of the religion of love. He argued that this concept became clearer from the 8th to the 15th century, a period that witnessed significant flourishing of Sufism in both the Islamic and Hindu worlds. On the Islamic side, figures like Rabia al-Adawiyya, al-Muhasibi, and Dhul-Nun emerged, while on the Hindu side, we saw figures like Shankara, Kolisekhara, and the Alvars, with Ramanuga (1137-1016) and Yamunacharya as key leaders of the Vaishnava sect (Bhattacharyya, 1989, p. 1). Bhattacharya sought to highlight the unity within the religious and philosophical diversity of that period, asserting that a common thread tied the Muslim Sufis and Hindus together, which was their emphasis on love as a core value.

In religious studies, the concept of the "religious commonality" is well-known. Foundational religious texts across different faiths, including Islam and Hinduism, share certain elements. According to this idea, the poets of the Indian Sufis and the saints of the Bhakti movement had the same focus on one God and one human being, albeit expressed with different terms and names. Their shared goal was to establish a special relationship between God and his worshipers. The similarities between the two systems made it easier to present Islamic principles to Hindus without provoking their resistance. If we look at one of the most famous philosophers and thinkers of Hinduism and the Bhakti movement, Shankara Acharya, who imbued Hinduism with a philosophical foundation by reinterpreting the sacred Hindu texts, particularly the Upanishads, his greatest achievement—according to his followers—was his codification of the philosophy of Advaita or monism, also called "Ekan Yoga," which sought a mental approach to God. This concept was likened by researchers to Ibn Arabi's philosophy of the Unity of Being (Mirabai, Hawley, 2005).

The establishment of this monotheistic tendency, as we have seen in the sacred texts, stripped of the dualistic ideas prevalent at the time in various Hindu schools, along with Shankara's desire to purify his community from the moral corruption it faced, likely needed an external push from a monotheistic religion with firm foundations, such as Islam. This is further rooted in the fact that this Brahmin thinker, Namboodiri, was born and raised in the Malabar region, which, as previously mentioned, was a major hub for ships arriving from the Arabian Peninsula. While his life and career are filled with myths and unverified accounts of direct Islamic influence, his teachings and interpretations, which advocate for the unity and abstraction of the absolute self, clearly show the strong and profound impact of Islamic principles on his thought.

The scholar Mariam Farouki also supports the notion of Islamic influence, stating:

"During its third phase, around the 12th century, the Bhakti movement took on a reformist character, and in this stage, it specifically accepted the influence of Islam and Sufism... In northern India, the movement closely resembled the Chishtiya Sufi order... It produced a number of devoted ascetics who consciously absorbed Islamic influence, such as the Sufi saints".

Furthermore, the scholar Youssef Hussein sees the movement's history divided into two main phases. The first phase, from the time of the Bhagavad Gita to the 13th century, coincided with the spread of Islam in the Indian subcontinent. The second phase, spanning the 13th to the 16th century, he views as the period of deep intellectual fermentation within the Bhakti movement, which was a natural result of Islam's connection with Hinduism. According to him, the Islamic missionary activity, based on faith and piety, attracted the attention of a key figure in Hindu philosophy and thought—Ramanuga, who lived in the 12th century. This influence led to religious reflections on the concept of God. Similarly, his disciple Ramananda, who likely witnessed the rapid spread of Islam in northern India, is believed to have been inspired by the advances made by Islam. The majority of Indians converted to Islam willingly as it offered them a higher social status. In his travels, he may have encountered Islamic ideas, which unknowingly inspired him. He then attempted to simplify Hindu teachings and made them more appealing to believers.

No discussion about Islam in the Indian subcontinent would be complete without mentioning the Sufi orders and mystics, who played a major role in spreading Islam in the region. As previously mentioned, alongside the Hindu Bhaktas, the Sufis contributed significantly to creating an atmosphere of peaceful coexistence between the followers of both religions during that crucial period in Indian history.

During the Mongol invasions that swept through Central Asia, Iraq, and Persia, many scientific scholars and Sufis fled these regions and migrated in large numbers to the Indian subcontinent, with many settling in Delhi and its surrounding areas. By the 11th century, Safi ad-Din Kaziruni became the first Sufi to settle in the Multan region. In a short period, India, especially Delhi, became the heart of the Sufi movement. Sufi masters quickly integrated into the Indian society due to the openness of their beliefs, practices, and tolerance towards local customs and traditions. They had a tendency to incorporate and assimilate a wide range of doctrinal systems into their own. These Sufis taught and preached to the Indian masses in local languages.

It is important to note that when Islamic Sufism entered the Indian subcontinent, it underwent significant changes, particularly in its metaphysical aspects, due to local influences.

Islamic Sufism presents itself as a form of knowledge or science that is only revealed to the chosen servants of God, who are granted the privilege of uncovering the secrets of the Qur'an. For Sufis, knowledge is considered a mystical experience in which human will is directed toward its beloved subject, ultimately leading the soul to union with it through intuitive knowledge. This experience led the Sufis to develop a unique vocabulary and terminology that only they understood, often leaving others confused and bewildered.

Divine love is at the heart of the Sufi experience and is the foundational principle upon which Sufi mystics built their understanding of God and their love for the Divine. According to them, the highest form of love for God can only be achieved by the lover's total absorption into the Beloved (Article, p. 4). The Sufi lover and seeker progresses from one stage to another, beginning from the stage of seeking God to the stage of knowing God, ultimately achieving the goal of their spiritual journey.

The close and deeply ingrained relationship between the Sheikh and Murid in Sufism, based on obedience, emulation, and devotion to the Sheikh, is a central aspect of Sufi thought. The bond between them is expressed in the famous saying among Sufi elites: "He who has no Sheikh, his Sheikh is the devil" (*The Bhakti and Sufi Movements in India*).

Sufis promoted the concept of equality and brotherhood among humans, as reflected in their teachings. The **Khanqah** (Sufi center) they established had a unique atmosphere where no distinction was made between social classes. People worked together, ate together, reinforcing the general principle of equality. The Sufis emphasized the unity of God and the higher path of sincerity, above rituals like Hajj and fasting. They incorporated Hindu words and used Urdu and other local dialects, which easily attracted the lower classes. The gatherings at the Khanqah included crowds of Hindus and Muslims with a unified spiritual orientation, and their influence was profound on Indian reformers and thinkers.

It is not surprising that Bhakti communities, which built their foundation on divine love and forming a personal, direct connection with God without an intermediary, were drawn toward the leading figures of Sufi thought in the subcontinent. Many of the movement's features and teachings emerged due to the interaction between local religious practices and those of Islam. Those who study the history of India during the Delhi Sultanate and the Mughal era see significant interaction and influence between Sufi saints and Bhakti saints. Both sought to promote an atmosphere of harmony and peace between the two communities. They shared similar ethical, emotional, and aesthetic ideals, stressing compassion, longing, selflessness, and purifying the soul from envy and hatred, all aimed at achieving the common good. Because both movements emphasized divine love and direct communion with God, the Bhakti movement found itself drawn toward Sufism and its teachings.

Features of the Sufi-Bhakti Convergence:

Many scholars suggest that the Sufi saint **Mu'in al-Din Chishti**, originally from Sistan (modern-day Afghanistan), was the first Sufi to introduce the practice of **Sama** (listening and singing devotional music) to the Indian subcontinent. Gradually, the practice of Sama gained widespread popularity, especially among the Hindu and Muslim communities in India. For the Sufis, **Sama** (devotional music) symbolized rising above the material world and seeking a connection with the divine through unconditional and eternal love, without intermediaries.

From the 13th century onward, Hindu devotional songs became part of **Sama** gatherings, particularly with the rise of the **Vaishnavite** sect, whose hymns like **Vishnu Pad** expressed devotion. This development paralleled the growth of Sufi Sama rituals, which were performed in local languages and dialects.

In a manner similar to Islamic Sufism, **Bhakti saints** sought to achieve spiritual ecstasy (a state of heightened consciousness where the saint transcends ordinary awareness through devotion, dance, and ecstatic utterances) as part of their spiritual journey. The **Bhakti devotee** (Murid) embarks on a spiritual experience, marked by the recitation of devotional poetry, singing religious hymns, and engaging in passionate dances.

One of the central practices in Bhakti thought is **Sravana** (listening to sacred texts and religious songs about God), which holds a significant place due to its association with devotion and **Vedic knowledge**. Bhakti saints emphasize three elements in this practice: **Sravana** (listening), **devotion** (bhakti), and **Vedic knowledge** (Vidya). This practice deeply connects the devotee with divine love and the sacred teachings. Additionally, the **Kirtan** and **Sama Kirtan** (devotional chanting and singing) are popular forms of expressing divine love and dedication, aiming to achieve spiritual ecstasy and union with the Absolute.

Both Sufism and Bhakti evolved in parallel, influencing each other significantly, particularly with Islam's teachings shaping major Bhakti ideas. This mutual influence led to the development of shared rituals and practices, fostering an atmosphere of tolerance and coexistence in the Indian subcontinent.

Sufi and Bhakti Influence on Indian Culture

Studying the medieval history of India reveals that the convergence of Sufi and Bhakti ideas led to some of the most creative forms of literary expression, particularly **devotional poetry**. Both Sufis and Bhakti saints excelled in using local languages to express deep spiritual emotions and ethical ideals, helping them communicate their message to the masses. They lived simple and sometimes marginal lives, offering practical advice to the lower classes of society—who were often excluded from sacred texts and temple worship. Their approach allowed them to gain a large following, and they became revered as saints and heroes in the eyes of the common people.

Both the **Sufi** and **Bhakti** movements played a crucial role in shaping the culture of India, advocating for values of tolerance, mutual respect, and peaceful coexistence, especially during a time of intense religious conflict. They presented a model of peaceful coexistence between different faiths, helping to reduce religious friction.

Bhakti's Integration into Hinduism

However, it is important to note that Bhakti, like other reform movements arising from the parent **Brahmanism/Hinduism**, did not aim for radical changes in society or religion. Most reform movements tend to evolve gradually and face resistance from traditional powers. After achieving its initial goals, Bhakti was absorbed back into the broader Hindu tradition. The Brahmanical elite regained prominence as the opposition movements, like Jainism and Buddhism, declined. As a result, strict Brahmanical traditions were reinstated, such as the return to **Sanskrit** and the marginalization of **Tamil**. Bhakti ideas and practices were incorporated into mainstream Hinduism, and many of the rituals now practiced in Hinduism carry distinct traces of Bhakti influence.

Thus, the Bhakti movement, with its emphasis on divine love and the personal relationship with God, left a lasting impact on the spiritual and social fabric of India, even as its practices became assimilated into the broader Hindu tradition.

We conclude our discussion with a quote that I consider to summarize the research and inquiry into the Bhakti movement, which is as follows: 'We can say that the Bhakti movement, though it originated against injustice and tyranny, and in order to eliminate social divisions and apply the principles of equality, justice, and social solidarity, as well as to advocate for creating an atmosphere of love, peace, tolerance, and mutual dialogue for harmony between different religions and sects, was, however, a Hindu missionary call to preserve the ancient Hindu culture and present it to the Hindu community, composed of various sects, religions, and ideas, in a certain framework and indirectly by coloring the philosophies of Hinduism with the hues of Islamic Sufi paths (Khan, 2017).

Conclusion

In this research, we aimed to shed light on the relationship between the **Bhakti movement** and **Islamic Sufism** during a critical period in the history of India, when religion was the central standard by which social, political, and economic affairs were measured. We explored the origins of the Bhakti movement, its key teachings, principles, and the socio-economic and political contexts in which it emerged. We also focused on the pivotal connection between Bhakti and Sufism in terms of ideas and beliefs.

From our findings, we concluded that the **Bhakti movement**, as a reformist movement within Hinduism, centered on emotional worship and devotion to a personal God. Its goal was to transcend

earthly obstacles and achieve unity with the Divine. The emergence of this movement was influenced by several factors, especially the impact of Islamic Sufi teachings within the Indian subcontinent.

The main conclusions from this research are as follows:

- The **Bhakti movement** is one of the most important religious and social protest movements in India. It played a vital role in shaping modern and contemporary Indian society, with its foundation rooted in love, devotion, and establishing a direct relationship between the individual and God, expressed through devotional poetry and music.

- The movement is based on several key principles, the most important of which are divine love, which forms its core, the intimate relationship with God without intermediaries, the principles of equality, service as a form of worship, and tolerance among humans, regardless of worldly standards.

- The Indian subcontinent witnessed complex social, economic, and political conditions, many of which contributed to the emergence of this liberatory movement with deep effects on Indian society.

- The teachings of the Bhakti movement became widely known through the works of poets and philosophers who contributed to enriching the cultural and literary heritage of India at the time, including poetry, literature, sculpture, and music.

- The influence of **Islamic Sufism** on India was initially optional, as seen in the contemplations and philosophical teachings of figures such as **Shankara** and **Ramananda**, who aligned their ideas with Sufi practices. Key aspects of Sufism that influenced Bhakti included the commitment to monotheism, emotional devotion, the rejection of formal rituals, and the concept of liberation from earthly bondage through asceticism and worship.

In conclusion, while Bhakti emerged as a response to social injustice and a call for equality, it also indirectly promoted Hindu culture. It introduced a more inclusive approach to spirituality, where devotion to God and personal liberation were central, and it interacted with Islamic Sufism to create a unique synthesis of ideas, fostering an atmosphere of religious tolerance and peace.

References

1. Ahmad, A. (2009). *Islamic Sufism in India*. Routledge.
2. Dehejia, V. (1990). *Slaves of the Lord: The Path of the Tamil Saints*. Munshiram Manoharlal.
3. Hardy, F. (1983). *Viraha-Bhakti: The Early History of Krishna Devotion in South India*. Oxford University Press.
4. Eaton, R. M. (2000). *Essays on Islam and Indian History*. Oxford University Press.
5. Lorenzen, D. N. (1995). *Bhakti Religion in North India: Community Identity and Political Action*. SUNY Press.
6. Dalmia, V., & Stietencron, H. v. (1995). *Representing Hinduism: The Construction of Religious Traditions and National Identity*. SAGE Publications.
7. Rizvi, S. A. A. (1978). "Interaction Between Sufism and Bhakti in Medieval India." *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress*, 39, 89-102.
8. Thapar, R. (2002). "Cultural Transaction and Early India: Tradition and Patronage." *History and Theory*, 41(3), 318–332.
9. Chatterjee, P. (2020). *Bhakti Movement*. In *Britannica Encyclopedia*. Retrieved from <https://www.britannica.com>
10. Schomer, K., & McLeod, W. H. (Eds.). (1987). *The Sants: Studies in a Devotional Tradition of India*. Motilal Banarsidass.
11. Kabir, S. (2011). *Songs of Kabir* (R. Tagore, Trans.). Penguin Classics. (Original work published in the 15th century)
12. Mirabai, & Hawley, J. S. (2005). *Songs of the Saints of India*. Oxford University Press.
13. *The Bhakti and Sufi Movements in India*. Retrieved from Cultural India
14. Khan, R. (2017). "Sufi-Bhakti Traditions: A Shared Heritage". Retrieved from Academia.edu

Received: 01.09.2024

Revised: 25.11.2024

Accepted: 10.01.2025

Published: 28.02.2025