



Bhakti and Sufi Movements

For Prelims: Bhakti Movement, Sufi movement, Alwars and Nayanars, [Sanskrit](#), [Lingayatism](#), [Chola Dynasty](#), [Ramanuja](#), [Sant Kabir Das](#), [Guru Nanak](#), [Sufism](#), Sufi Orders

For Mains: Indian Heritage and Culture, History, Socio-cultural Reform Movements, Sufism in the Indian Subcontinent, Bhakti Movement in India

The **Bhakti and Sufi movements** in India emerged as **religious reform movements** that emphasised devotion, personal experience, and social equality. Both movements significantly impacted Indian society, culture, and religious thought, promoting inclusivity and challenging established orthodoxies.

What is the Bhakti Movement?

- **About:** The Bhakti movement aimed to bring religious reforms through **devotion (bhakti)**.
 - Bhakti refers to devotional surrender to a personally conceived God for attaining salvation.
 - It started in **South India (Kerala and Tamilnadu) in the 8th century** and gradually spread to North and East India.
 - The movement peaked during the 15th to 17th centuries, emphasizing singing and chanting of devotional compositions.
- **Factors for the Rise of the Bhakti Movement:** Bhakti challenged evils like the caste system and untouchability, promoting inclusivity for all.
 - Before the Turkish conquest, the **Rajput-Brahman alliance dominated Northern India**. The Turkish conquest weakened Brahminical power by removing their temple wealth and state patronage.
 - The decline in Brahmin influence paved the way for non-conformist movements like the **Nathpanthis and later, the bhakti movement**.
 - Bhakti saints voiced the **common people's frustrations with feudal oppression**, though they didn't directly challenge feudalism.
 - Their teachings emphasised religious equality, appealing to **lower-caste groups and artisans dissatisfied with the traditional Brahmin hierarchy**.
- **Evolution of Bhakti Movement Traditions:** Bhakti traditions were inclusive, accommodating both women and people from lower castes.
 - Two main streams of Bhakti traditions developed namely **Saguna Bhakti** (worship of deities with attributes like Shiva and Vishnu) and **Nirguna Bhakti** (worship of a formless god).
 - **Alwars** and **Nayanars** in Tamil Nadu emerged as key Bhakti saints.
 - **Alwars:** Devotees of Vishnu, including the notable female saint Andal. Their hymns were compiled into the "**Nalayira Divyaprabandham**."
 - **Nayanars:** Devotees of Shiva, including the famous female saint Karaikal Ammaiyar. Their hymns were compiled in works like the "Tevarams."
 - The **Alvar and Nayanar saints used the Tamil language** and **not Sanskrit** for preaching and composing devotional songs, and marked shrines that later became major temples.
 - **Bhakti Movement in Karnataka:** Led by **Basavanna**, marked a significant religious and

social reform in South India.

- **Lingayatism** is a **Shaivite tradition** founded by Basavanna in the 12th century as a social reform movement in Karnataka. It aimed to challenge the **rigid caste system, Brahmanical dominance, and rituals of Hinduism**, emphasising equality and devotion to Shiva in the form of the Ishtalinga.
 - **Vachana literature**, a unique form of devotional poetry in Kannada, emerged as the voice of this movement, authored by saints like **Basavanna, Allama Prabhu, and Akka Mahadevi**.
- Unlike the **Veerashaiva sect in Karnataka** which adheres to **Vedic traditions and caste distinctions**, Lingayatism promotes social equality and rejects Brahmanical notions.
- **Influence on Society and Culture**: Bhakti traditions gained the support of the **Chola rulers (9th to 13th century)**, who built temples and institutionalized the singing of **Tamil Shaiva hymns**.
 - These rulers also made land grants to Bhakti temples and played a key role in integrating Bhakti traditions with Brahmanical practices.
- **Bhakti and the South Indian Acharyas**:
 - **Ramanuja (11th Century)**: First among the South Indian scholars to defend the Bhakti movement philosophically. Balanced orthodox Brahmanism with popular bhakti open to all, including Sudras and outcastes.
 - Advocated bhakti as a mode of worship but did not support lower caste access to the Vedas.
 - He is famous as the **chief proponent of Vishishtadvaita subschool of Vedānta**.
 - **Nimbarka**: A Telugu Brahmin and younger contemporary of Ramanuja. Focused on devotion to Krishna and Radha, emphasizing bhakti.
 - **Madhava (13th Century)**: He did not dispute orthodox Brahmanical restriction of the Vedic study by the Sudras, and believed that bhakti provided an **alternate avenue of worship to the Sudras**.
 - His philosophical system was based on the **Bhagvat Purana**, and he is believed to have toured North India.
 - The last two prominent Vaishnava acharyas were **Ramananda** (late 14th and early 15th century) and **Vallabha** (late 15th and early 16th century) emphasised bhakti.
- **Bhakti Movement in North India**: From the 13th to 15th century, socio-religious movements flourished in North and East India, emphasizing bhakti and religious equality.
 - Tukaram (1598-1649) was a prominent Bhakti saint in Central India who worshipped Krishna as Vithoba.
 - **Vallabhacharya (1479-1531)** popularized Krishna Bhakti in the Mathura region, which became a vital center for Krishna devotion.
 - Key Bhakti figures in North India include Surdas, **Mirabai**, and **Chaitanya Mahaprabhu**, who emphasized personal devotion to Krishna.
 - Many scholars argue that **Sant Kabir Das, Chaitanya, and other leaders of the North Indian bhakti movements** were influenced by South Indian scholars such as **Ramananda and Madhava**.
 - Though the Northern bhakti movements advocated religious equality, they **generally did not reject the caste system**, Brahmanical scriptures, or privileges.
 - **North Indian bhakti movements were diverse**, with figures like **Kabir and Guru Nanak** advocating **monotheism**, while vaishnava movements like those of **Mirabai, Surdas, and Tulsidas** differed in approach.

What is the Impact of the Bhakti Movement?

- Bhakti saints encouraged **simple and ethical living as a path to salvation**, challenging immoral societal norms, challenging social evils like **untouchability** and encouraging individuals to live justly.
 - The movement **fostered critical thinking by questioning entrenched religious and social institutions**.
- The Bhakti movement made **salvation accessible to women and lower castes, breaking down rigid caste barriers** and creating a more inclusive society.
- Bhakti saints popularized religious teachings in **vernacular languages, enhancing social awareness**. The movement **vocally opposed societal evils like infanticide, sati, adultery,**

and substance abuse, contributing to the gradual erosion of these practices.

- **Music and dance forms such as kirtana**, and devotional dance forms like **Sattriya** flourished, enriching India's cultural heritage. The movement integrated **music and poetry into religious worship**, creating a lasting legacy in Indian performing arts.
- The convergence of Bhakti with Sufi ideals fostered an environment of tolerance, amity, and peaceful coexistence between different religious communities.

What is the Sufi Movement?

- **About:** The Sufi Movement refers to the rise and **spread of Sufism, or Islamic mysticism**, which emphasizes personal experience and direct communion with God.
 - It emerged as a response to the **formalism and rigidity of institutionalised religion**, focusing on inner spiritual experience and the purification of the heart.
- **Core Practices and Beliefs:** Sufis organized themselves into communities centered around **khanqahs (hospices)**, led by a **master (shaikh or pir)**. They formed **spiritual lineages (silsilas)** that linked disciples to the Prophet Muhammad.
 - Sufi tombs, or dargahs, became sites of pilgrimage (ziyarat), where people sought spiritual blessings.
 - Practitioners engage in spiritual exercises, including self-mortification, zikr (**remembrance of God**), **sama (musical recitals)**, and **Fana-o-Baqa** (dissolution of self for union with God) to induce mystical states of ecstasy.
- **Growth of Sufi Movement in the Islamic World:** Early Sufism was marked by esoteric interpretations of the Quran, focusing on virtues like repentance, abstinence, and trust in God. Major early centres included **Mecca, Medina, Basra, and Kufa**.
- **Growth of Sufism in India:** Sufism entered India with the **establishment of the Delhi Sultanate** in the early 13th century, bringing new orders and practices to the region.
 - **Al-Hujwiri** was the earliest prominent Sufi in India, settled in Lahore, and authored **Kashf-ul Mahjub**.
 - The 13th and 14th centuries marked the growth of Sufism, spreading messages of **compassion and love** for all, known as **sulhe-kul**.
- **Sufi Orders in India:** By the 14th century, Sufi orders had established a strong presence across India from Multan to Bengal. Sufi orders in India were categorised into two broad types; they are **Ba-shara (Follow Islamic law (Sharia))** and **Be-shara (Not bound by Islamic law)**. By the 12 century, the Sufis were organised in 12 orders or Silsilas.
 - **Major Sufi Orders:**
 - **Chishti Order:** Most influential Sufi order in India. Founded by **Khwaja Moinuddin Chishti** in Ajmer during Muhammad Ghori's reign. Akbar followed this order and was devoted to **Salim Chishti**.
 - **Key saints: Hamiduddin Nagori, Qutbuddin Bhaktiyar Kaki, Baba Farid, and Nizamuddin Auliya.**
 - Ziyarat (pilgrimage) to the tombs of Sufi saints and qawwali (mystical music) became key elements of Chishti devotionism, promoting religious pluralism.
 - Chishti Order emphasised love as the bond between God and individuals, tolerance of different faiths, and simplicity. Chishtis avoided contact with the ruling class.
 - **Suhrawardi Order:** Introduced by **Bahauddin Zakaria** in Multan. This order is known for living in luxury and accepting state assistance. Bahauddin Zakaria served in the court of **Iltutmish** and was made Shaikh-ul-Islam.
 - Unlike the Chishtis, the Suhrawardis accepted gifts and posts from the government and advocated combining religious knowledge with mysticism.
 - **Naqshbandi Order:** Emphasised the **primacy of Shariat** and opposed innovations (biddat) and rejected Sufi traditions like musical assemblies (sama) and pilgrimages to saints' tombs.
 - Key figures include **sheikh Ahmad Sirhindi**, who promoted the doctrine of **Wahdut-ul-Shuhud** (apparentism).
 - **Rishi Order (Kashmir):** The Rishi order of Sufism flourished in Kashmir during the 15th and 16th centuries. It was established by **Shaikh Nuruddin Wali**, prospered in the rural environment of Kashmir and influenced the people's religious life, drawing

inspiration from the popular **Shaivite bhakti tradition** and being rooted in the socio-cultural milieu of the region.

What is the Impact of Sufi Movement?

- **Religious Impact:** The Sufi emphasis on personal devotion, love for God, and equality attracted many people, leading to conversions, especially in rural areas.
 - **Sufi teachings emphasized the unity of God (tawhid)** and the equality of all humans, promoting religious tolerance and creating a bridge between Hinduism and Islam. The Chishti order, in particular, opened its doors to people of all faiths, fostering an environment of coexistence.
- **Social Impact:** Sufism attracted followers from all sections of society, including the **lower castes, outcasts, and marginalized groups**, who found solace in the egalitarian message of the Sufi saints.
 - The doctrine of universal brotherhood and the idea that all are equal in the eyes of God **weakened the hold of caste hierarchies in the regions influenced by Sufi teachings.**
 - *Sufi khanqahs (monasteries)* and *madrasas (schools)* became centers of learning.
- **Cultural Impact:** Sufism deeply influenced Indian music, especially with the development of **qawwali**, a devotional music form that originated in **Sufi sama (musical gatherings).**
- **Literature:** Sufi poets made significant contributions to the literary tradition of India, particularly in **vernacular languages.** They composed mystical poetry in languages like **Punjabi, Hindawi** (a precursor to modern Hindi and Urdu), **and Urdu.**
 - Figures like Bulleh Shah, Shah Husain, and Sultan Bahu are notable for their devotional poetry, which continues to resonate in the subcontinent.
- **Political Impact:** The Sufi concept of *Sulh-i-Kul* (peace with all) influenced the Mughal emperor Akbar, who adopted a **policy of religious tolerance.**
 - Akbar's efforts to create **Din-i-Ilahi, a syncretic faith** blending elements of Islam, Hinduism, and other religions, were influenced by the Sufi emphasis on universal brotherhood and tolerance.
 - Many rulers, including the Delhi Sultans and the Mughal emperors, patronized Sufi saints and orders, which reinforced their political authority and facilitated their control over diverse religious communities.

Differences Between the Bhakti and Sufi

Aspect	Bhakti Movement	Sufi Movement
Religious Influence	Largely influenced to Hindus	Followed mainly by Muslims
Origins	Originated in 8 th -century South India	Origin traced to 7 th -century Arabian Peninsula (early days of Islam)
Religious Movement	Regarded as a social revival and reformation movement in Hinduism	A religious order within Islam, often misunderstood as a separate sect
Spread	Spread across East and North India from the 15th century	Spans many continents and cultures

How Did Bhakti and Sufi Movements Interact?

- **Similarities in Egalitarian Practices:** Both movements promoted religious equality, with rituals like langar (free kitchen) common to both. **Initially popularized by Sufis, langar was later**

adopted by Guru Nanak to combat caste hierarchy.

- The Bhakti and Sufi movements shared rituals and practices. For example, [Chaitanya's Vaishnava kirtana](#) resembled the Sufi sama (musical concert), suggesting some degree of interaction.

▪ **Cultural and Mystical Exchange:** Music and poetry played a significant role in both movements as a medium to express their devotion. Sufi qawwalis and bhakti songs focused on themes of divine love, suffering, and longing.

- Both Sufism and Bhakti emphasized an internal, personal journey towards God, characterized by love, devotion, and emotional intensity. Sufism's *ishq* (divine love) mirrors Bhakti's *viraha* (longing for God).

▪ **Mutual Influence:**

◦ **Influence of Sufism on the Bhakti Movement:**

- Saints like Guru Nanak had interactions with Sufis, particularly in their mutual rejection of orthodox religious practices.
- The Sufi concept of *pir* (spiritual guide) and mystical union with God resonated with the Bhakti idea of *guru* (teacher) and the devotee's personal relationship with the divine.
 - Many Sufi poets, including Amir Khusrau, composed verses in regional languages like Hindawi, which mirrored the Bhakti saints' use of vernacular languages to spread their message. This fostered a shared literary and musical culture.

◦ **Influence of the Bhakti Movement on Sufism:** The Rishi Sufi order, founded by Shaikh Nuruddin Wali in Kashmir, was deeply influenced by **non-conformist ideas and the teachings of the Bhakti saint Lal Ded**. The

- Rishis adopted aspects of Kashmiri Shaivism and incorporated local devotional practices into their Sufi philosophy.

Conclusion

The Bhakti and Sufi movements challenged religious orthodoxy, promoted vernacular languages, and fostered inclusivity across caste and class lines. Their interactions led to cultural and spiritual exchanges, particularly in music and literature, contributing to a shared **ethos of religious tolerance and universal brotherhood**. Ultimately, these movements left a lasting impact on India's religious, social, and cultural landscape, shaping its syncretic traditions.

UPSC Civil Services Examination, Previous Year Questions (PYQs)

Prelims

Q) With reference to the religious history of medieval India, the Sufi mystics were known to pursue which of the following practices? (2012)

1. Meditation and control of breath.
2. Severe ascetic exercises in a lonely place.
3. Recitation of holy songs to arouse a state of ecstasy in their audience

Select the correct answer using the codes given below:

- (a) 1 and 2 only
- (b) 2 and 3 only
- (c) 3 only
- (d) 1, 2 and 3

Ans: (d)

Mains

Q) Evaluate the nature of the Bhakti Literature and its contribution to Indian culture. **(2021)**

Q) Sufis and medieval mystic saints failed to modify either the religious ideas and practices or the outward structure of Hindu / Muslim societies to any appreciable extent. Comment. **(2014)**

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