

Secular Spirituality and Communal Harmony: Bhakti and Sufi Traditions in Bihar and Kashmir

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This paper explores how the Bhakti and Sufi mysticism movements have historically cultivated secular spirituality, providing a shared spiritual framework that transcended or expanded religious boundaries to foster communal harmony and continues to do so between Hindus and Muslims in contemporary South Asia. By emphasizing personal devotion, ethical behaviour, and social inclusivity, these traditions challenged religious orthodoxy and social hierarchies. Through a detailed examination of their historical contexts and contemporary fieldwork in Bihar and Kashmir, this study demonstrates how the teachings and practices of Bhakti and Sufi mystics remain essential for promoting interfaith dialogue and communal harmony. By situating these traditions within broader academic debates on secular spirituality, the paper underscores their ongoing relevance in addressing modern challenges of religious polarization and social cohesion.

Keywords:

Bhakti-Sufi, Communal Harmony, Interfaith Dialogue, Longing-Belonging Paradigm, Secular Spirituality, South Asia.

Introduction

In April 2023, I returned to India after five years during the overlapping celebrations of Ramanavami and Ramadan. My visit coincided with heightened communal tensions following the abrogation of Article 370 and the rise of the Hindutva-driven BJP government. Media reports and viral videos depicted aggressive religious displays, particularly during Ramanavami *juloos* (public parades)¹ in my hometown of Jaynagar, Bihar. From Turkey, I observed these events and the discussions on social media and YouTube, which fueled concerns about the growing polarization between Hindus and Muslims. However, upon my arrival, I encountered a different reality: conversations with community members revealed that despite the provocative displays, there was no violence, and life continued peacefully. After living there for a few days, I realized that such *juloos*

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(processions) are normal. Both Hindus and Muslims celebrate and display their special occasions peacefully. In 2024, I witnessed a very similar *juloos* during Milad-un-Nabi (the birthday of the prophet Muhammad) in the city, which demonstrates that Hindus and Muslims coexist harmoniously in their everyday interactions.

One of my significant observations was the presence of Kabirpanthis in the region. During my survey, I found that a large number of people identified as Kabirpanthis—some as distinct communities with a long tradition of following Kabir, others as Hindus transitioning to or practising Kabir's teachings, and a few from Muslim backgrounds who, while not Kabirpanthis, still respected Kabir's legacy².

During my 2024 fieldwork in Sukhi village, I met a Kabirpanthi guru, Sant³ Dhayanand Dhyani, who used both Islamic and Hindu terminology, welcoming both communities into the Kabir tradition. Many of his disciples, such as Ramajatan Das, Ramdev Shah, Lakshami Dasin, and Baiju Das, from different villages, employed the same inclusive language, using terms like "Allah," "Khuda," and "Ram." This reminded me of Bruce Lawrence's *Islamicate Cosmopolitan Spirit* (2021), particularly the "longing-belonging" paradigm, which suggests that these communities long to belong to a larger, inclusive community and thus remain open to interaction and accommodation.

I realized that if this openness continues, there is hope for communal harmony and peace. This experience sharply contrasted with the media's portrayal, prompting deeper reflection on the forces that sustain peaceful coexistence in regions like Bihar.

Similarly, during my stay in Kashmir in June 2023, I witnessed the profound cultural and religious diversity that continues to define the region. I interacted with local artists, including Abdul Qayoom Shah, a painter who depicted various religious and cultural themes—such as Narada, Kṛṣṇa, Ganesha, Karbala, birds, and the landscapes of Kashmir⁴—stating, "I depict and admire the beauty of Allah through colours and my imagination."⁵ I also explored the spiritual figures Lal Ded and Shaikh Nooruddin, both of whom are revered by Hindus and Muslims alike in the valley. The Makhdoom Sahib Shrine was another site where I observed a diverse array of visitors, including Hindus from different parts of India⁶. Abdul Qayoom Shah also introduced me to Bulbul Shah and Lal Ded, whose teachings he and his family regularly listen to.

Abdul Qayoom Shah, perceiving me as Hindu due to my name, treated me as such, taking me to the Hari Parbat and Shankaracharya Temple, as well as other shrines like Makhdoom Sahib, Hazrat Bal, and a Gurudwara. In those moments, I felt that he embodied more of a Hindu spirit, while I felt a deeper Muslim connection, highlighting the fluidity and interconnectedness of religious identities. This further illustrated how the Bhakti and Sufi legacies continue to inspire unity and shared values that transcend religious boundaries.

These experiences, which challenge the narrative of religious polarization often promoted in contemporary India, led me to explore the enduring influence of Bhakti and Sufi traditions and document what I observed on the ground—the relationships people establish with each other and the forces that guide their pursuit of social and communal harmony. This paper argues that these traditions, deeply rooted in the cultural fabric of regions like Bihar and Kashmir, offer a model of secular spirituality developed by the Sufi and Bhakti saints, historically known as the Sufi-Bhakti movement, which continues to promote peaceful coexistence between Hindus and Muslims. By examining both historical contexts and contemporary fieldwork, I demonstrate how the teachings of Bhakti and Sufi saints provide valuable insights into interfaith dialogue and communal harmony in modern South Asia.

The paper is structured into four sections: a historical overview of Bhakti and Sufi traditions, an exploration of Hindu-Muslim relations, an analysis of secular spirituality through the longing-belonging paradigm, and a discussion on how these traditions continue to shape social dynamics today, based on fieldwork experiences in Bihar and Kashmir.

Historical Foundations: The Bhakti and Sufi Traditions

The second millennium in South Asia was a period of profound transformation, described by Sheldon Pollock as the "vernacular millennium"⁷ and by Purushottam Agrawal as *desaj adhunikta* (vernacular modernity)⁸. Agrawal argues that the Bhakti movement in medieval India developed a public sphere that significantly contributed to this vernacular modernity⁹. During this era, diverse cultural and religious traditions intersected, evolving into new forms of knowledge, culture, and linguistic expression, leading to the emergence of a new worldview that emphasized openness and inclusivity¹⁰.

As the Bhakti movement, which originated in southern India, began to spread, it was led by sants such as the Shaivite Nayanars and Vaishnavite Alvars, many of whom were wandering minstrels who sought to communicate orally with the lowest strata of society¹¹. However, the Bhakti movement of the second millennium AD¹², in my observation and based on Agrawal's argument, was different. Rather than addressing or engaging with just one type of community, it was open to all. Purushottam Agrawal describes it as a kind of public sphere that transcended social divisions¹³. By the 12th century, Bhakti figures interacted with Sufism, which arrived in India through figures like Shaikh Ali Hujwiri and Shaikh Safiuddin Gazruni in the 11th century¹⁴. Prominent Sufi mystics such as Mu'in al-Din Chishti, Shaikh Qutub al-Din Bakhtiyar Kaki, and Nizamuddin Auliya further shaped this spiritual landscape. Despite their different origins—Bhakti being rooted in Hindu spiritual traditions and Sufism in Islamic mysticism—these movements developed a shared cultural and spiritual framework, creating a new, interconnected worldview.

This interaction between Bhakti and Sufi traditions aligns with Bruce B. Lawrence's *longing-belonging* paradigm, extensively discussed in his book *Islamicate Cosmopolitan Spirit*. Lawrence suggests that the cosmopolitan ethos, rooted in an interactive civilizational framework, hinges on the dynamic between "longing" (a desire to connect with the larger world) and "belonging" (being rooted in a specific place or community)¹⁵. The Bhakti and Sufi movements exemplify this tension and creativity, as they built bridges between different communities and facilitated an openness to other cultural and spiritual expressions. In medieval India, this dynamic was particularly evident as both traditions sought to integrate followers from diverse backgrounds into a larger, inclusive spiritual community.

The rise of cosmopolitan cities like Delhi and Banaras further supported this integration. As these cities became centres of commerce and urbanization, they also became hubs for cultural and spiritual exchange. Purushottam Agrawal highlights those cosmopolitan Indian cities that brought Hindus, Muslims, and people of other faiths together, fostering mutually beneficial relationships. These cities were not just places where goods were traded; they also facilitated the exchange of ideas and spiritual practices, promoting a sense of belonging to a larger community¹⁶. Artisans and merchants, who formed the backbone of these cities, gained social and cultural influence. Many prominent Bhakti poets, such as Kabir

and Namdev, emerged from this artisan class, while figures like Guru Nanak came from merchant families. These poets used their social positions to challenge caste hierarchies and promote spiritual values that transcended religious divisions. As Armando Salvatore explains in his article, "Sufi Articulations of Civility, Globality, and Sovereignty," these poets and spiritual leaders also advanced the concept of *adab* (civility), integrating transregional networks of exchange and multiplying hubs of teaching, discussion, and communal growth¹⁷. Sufis, in particular, were at the forefront of this expansion, playing a central role in developing and maintaining these networks¹⁸.

The interaction between Bhakti and Sufi traditions within these urban centres aligns with Marshall Hodgson's concept of the *Islamicate*. Hodgson, in *The Venture of Islam*, described the *Islamicate* as a cultural phenomenon that extends beyond the religious doctrine of Islam, influencing a vast social and cultural sphere. In medieval India, the blending of Bhakti and Sufi practices within cosmopolitan cities like Delhi and Banaras exemplified this *Islamicate* dynamic. These cities facilitated not only economic and social exchanges but also spiritual ones, where Muslims and Hindus engaged with each other's traditions, forming a shared cultural and spiritual environment. This environment was characterized by what Lawrence describes as "Islamic creativity in the public domain"¹⁹, where religious and cultural differences were navigated in a manner that promoted unity and collective growth.

The concepts of *sagun* (God with form or three *gunas*/qualities)²⁰ and *nirgun* (without form)²¹, central to Bhakti traditions, played a significant role in this cosmopolitan synthesis. The interplay between these two concepts reflects the tension Lawrence discusses between the verticality of "the cosmos" and the horizontal rootedness of "the polis." In medieval India, the *sagun* and *nirgun* approaches provided pathways for both Hindus and Muslims to engage with each other's spiritual practices. As artisans, poets, and merchants from diverse backgrounds gathered in cities like Banaras, the *Sagun* tradition (focused on tangible forms like idols and spiritual guides) and the *Nirgun* tradition (emphasizing a formless connection with the divine) were not only spiritual but also intertwined with the economic and urban growth of these centres. This integration of spirituality with trade, commerce, and urbanization fostered a shared spiritual framework that promoted communal harmony and social cohesion.

For instance, during my recent fieldwork in Bihar, I encountered Sant Dhayanand Dhyani, a Kabirpanthi guru in Sukkhi Village of Madhubani, who welcomed followers from different faith backgrounds using both Islamic and Hindu terminology. His approach demonstrated how Bhakti and Sufi traditions, despite their distinct origins, contributed to building a shared spiritual community that resonated with Lawrence's *longing-belonging* paradigm. The willingness of these traditions to engage with one another and integrate followers of diverse faiths highlighted the cosmopolitan and inclusive nature of this spiritual synthesis.

To sum up, the Bhakti and Sufi traditions in medieval India laid the foundation for a new worldview characterized by openness, interaction, and inclusivity. The rise of urban centres like Delhi and Banaras, along with the integration of economic, cultural, and spiritual practices, created a shared space where different communities could engage and belong. This dynamic reflects the core principles of the *Islamicate* and the *longing-belonging* paradigm, demonstrating how the spiritual and social foundations established in this period continue to influence South Asia's cultural and communal landscape.

Hindu-Muslim Relations: Intersections and Dynamics

The significance of secular spirituality in South Asia is deeply intertwined with the complex and longstanding issue of Hindu-Muslim relations. This topic remains not only regionally relevant but also globally significant, as the dynamics between these communities have been the subject of extensive debate over centuries. Sher Ali Tareen, in his recent work *Perilous Intimacies: Debating Hindu-Muslim Friendship After Empire*, provides a detailed account of the challenges and possibilities inherent in Hindu-Muslim relations. Tareen argues that the issue of friendship gained particular importance during the colonial period when Muslim sovereignty was undermined by British rule. He suggests that while connections and tensions between Hindus and Muslims existed historically, they were further exacerbated by colonial policies. Tareen highlights three major themes in the study of South Asian religions: communalism in colonial India, the violence and consequences of Partition, and the challenges faced by religious minorities in postcolonial India and Pakistan²².

Tareen introduces the concept of a "continuity/rupture problem space," questioning whether British colonialism in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries represented a significant rupture or merely a continuation of pre-

existing religious and political dynamics²³. His exploration of "friendship" draws from philosophical perspectives, such as those of Aristotle and Derrida, to explain how the concept is often accompanied by the potential for enmity. During the colonial era, the loss of Muslim sovereignty made the debate on friendship between Hindus and Muslims even more pronounced. Tareen contrasts the perspectives of traditional ulema like Ahmad Raza Khan, who viewed such friendships as perilous, with those of modern scholars like Abul Kalam Azad, who saw them as opportunities for promise and unity²⁴.

In *Beyond Turk and Hindu*, Bruce B. Lawrence and David Gilmartin reexamine the formation of religious identities in South Asia, challenging the rigid categories often imposed by colonial influence. They argue that the labels "Hindu" and "Muslim" were, to a large extent, constructed and reinforced through British translations and categorizations, rather than reflecting inherent divisions in South Asian society²⁵. As an example, they cite Ajmer Sharif, a site where the number of Hindu visitors to Moinuddin Chishti's shrine surpasses that of Muslims, demonstrating a fluid and interconnected religious culture. Lawrence and Gilmartin emphasize the need for a nuanced understanding of South Asian diversity, moving beyond restrictive labels and recognizing broader cultural norms such as the "Islamicate" and the "Indic"²⁶. Their analysis aims to understand identity formation in pre-colonial South Asia by acknowledging the interplay between Islamicate and Indic worldviews, thereby transcending rigid categories.

The central concern is not only the potential conflict between Hindus and Muslims but also the conditions that enable and sustain inter-religious and inter-communal friendships. Such friendships go beyond religious boundaries and aim toward the collective good, expanding moral horizons and promoting peace and prosperity. Bruce Lawrence, through his *longing-belonging* paradigm, describes this phenomenon as the attempt to create a spiritual and moral unity that transcends communal identities²⁷. He draws parallels with the Indic concept of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*, meaning "the world is one family". In this context, friendship is more than just an opportunity or a threat; it involves *adab* (civility), aesthetics, beauty (*jemal*), secular spirituality, vernacular expression, and the creativity of new possibilities. The mutual search for prophets and *tawhid* within Hinduism by Muslims, and the similar quest by Hindus within Islam, exemplify an eagerness to bridge differences and seek the divine beyond sectarian lines.

Figures like Satya Pir, Kabir, Lal Ded, Nund Rishi, and Shaikh Nooruddin stand as reference points, not just for Hindus and Muslims but also for Sikhs and Buddhists. Their teachings, which often cross religious boundaries, provide models for secular spirituality that promote shared values and communal harmony. Sufis and Bhakti practitioners frequently utilized each other's terminology, symbols, and language, reflecting a fluid, interconnected spiritual culture that aimed to unite rather than divide.

In conclusion, while Tareen and Lawrence both acknowledge the persistence of conflict between Hindus and Muslims, they recognize a parallel force that fosters peace and prosperity: secular spirituality. This force, rather than replacing Hindu and Muslim elements in South Asia, operates alongside them, offering an alternative vision for inter-communal unity. Bruce Lawrence's concept of *barzakh*²⁸ as discussed in his book *Islamicate Cosmopolitan Spirit*, is crucial in this context. He describes *barzakh* as an intermediary space where different spiritual traditions and cultural practices meet and blend, creating a framework for understanding and cultivating a shared identity²⁹. This intermediary space is not merely theoretical but actively shapes the dynamics of Hindu-Muslim relations, providing a spiritual and ethical basis for overcoming historical divisions. This theme will be further explored in the next section.

Secular Spirituality and the Longing-Belonging Paradigm

The concept of "secular spirituality" may not have been explicitly articulated during the second-millennium Bhakti-Sufi movements, but the characteristics exhibited by these traditions align closely with what we now understand as secular spirituality. These movements not only fostered inclusivity, and transcended religious boundaries, but also expanded the rigid religious boundary and emphasized ethical behavior, central elements that resonate with Bruce B. Lawrence's *longing-belonging* paradigm or *adab* culture due to the rise of urban spaces.

In the context of medieval India, Bhakti and Sufi traditions engaged with diverse communities and developed shared spiritual frameworks, particularly in cosmopolitan cities like Delhi and Banaras. As discussed earlier, these cities became hubs for commerce, culture, and spiritual exchange, where different communities interacted and coalesced³⁰. This environment fostered the emergence of secular spirituality, as economic and spiritual exchanges facilitated the blending of religious and cultural

practices, providing both a sense of belonging and the opportunity for spiritual exploration beyond rigid boundaries.

Armando Salvatore's interpretation of the *Islamicate*, with its emphasis on *adab* (civility), supports this understanding. Sufi leaders and traders cultivated transregional networks across Afro-Eurasia, which extended into South Asia, integrating pre-Islamic, Persianate, and local traditions³¹. This inclusive approach, which Salvatore describes as a civilizing influence, parallels the inclusivity of the Bhakti movement, where spiritual leaders like Kabir, Lal Ded, and Guru Nanak promoted a form of spirituality accessible to all, regardless of religious or social background.

Bruce B. Lawrence's *longing-belonging* paradigm is crucial to understanding how these traditions operated within South Asia. The *longing* aspect reflects a desire for connection beyond local boundaries while *belonging* represents the rootedness and attachment to local traditions. In the Bhakti-Sufi synthesis, we see this dual dynamic at play: Sants and mystics cultivated spiritual communities that welcomed people from different backgrounds while promoting the idea of a shared, larger spiritual identity. This echoes the Indic philosophy of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*, meaning "the world is one family". The Bhakti and Sufi practices thus embodied a form of secular spirituality that transcended sectarian divisions, emphasizing the unity of humanity and the divine.

The teachings of figures like Kabir and Shaikh Nooruddin exemplify this approach. As discussed in the earlier sections, these figures used a combination of vernacular languages and shared symbolism to connect people from different faiths, promoting a common ground where secular spirituality could flourish. Their practices and teachings created what Lawrence describes as *barzakh*—a metaphorical bridge that allows for the merging of spiritual knowledge from diverse traditions. This blending of Bhakti and Sufi elements demonstrates how the *longing-belonging* paradigm fostered an inclusive and expansive spiritual community.

Sufi and Bhakti leaders not only transcended religious divisions but also engaged with the socio-economic dynamics of their time (see "British Rule: The Deconstruction of Artha and Destruction of Shastra" in the book *Kabir, Kabir*³²). As explored in the first section, the rise of urban centres and the integration of trade networks allowed for an exchange of spiritual practices that aligned with the economic and cultural growth of the region. This demonstrates how secular spirituality was both a product and

facilitator of societal development, integrating spiritual teachings with the realities of urban and commercial life.

To sum up, the section, the Bhakti and Sufi traditions of medieval India established the foundation for secular spirituality by cultivating inclusive spiritual communities and embracing the *longing-belonging* paradigm. These traditions offered pathways for different communities to engage with shared spiritual experiences, creating a sense of unity that transcended rigid religious identities and promoted communal harmony. The synthesis of these traditions continues to shape South Asia's spiritual and cultural landscape, reflecting an ongoing legacy of interconnectedness and secular spirituality.

Contemporary Resonance: Fieldwork Reflections on Bhakti-Sufi Influence

In May 2023, I embarked on fieldwork in India to explore how the Bhakti-Sufi traditions continue to influence contemporary social and spiritual dynamics in Bihar and Kashmir. This journey allowed me to connect my personal experiences and observations with the broader arguments made earlier about the role of these traditions in promoting secular spirituality and interfaith harmony in South Asia. My fieldwork provides tangible evidence of how these mystical traditions are practised today, offering a real-world perspective that underscores their ongoing relevance.

1. Discovering the Spirit of Bihar

Returning to my hometown of Jaynagar, Bihar, I encountered a reality that sharply contrasted with mainstream media's portrayal of communal tensions. While news outlets often amplify divisions, my conversations with local residents, including Maulavi Muhammad Kalim Ashraf from a local madrasa, revealed a deeply rooted tradition of peaceful coexistence. Despite some aggressive displays during the Ramanavami celebrations seen in the media, Muhammad Kalim Ashraf told me in an interview that the community's fabric remained unshaken, demonstrating the strength of local bonds. One example he gave was during Muharram, where both Hindus and Muslims sponsor the event, with Hindu and Muslim youth coming together for *lathi khel* (stick fighting demonstrations), transforming what could be seen as a religious event into a shared cultural celebration.

Central to this harmony is the influence of Kabir, whose teachings continue to resonate among various communities in Bihar. During my visit, I met with Sant Dhyanand Dhyani, a Kabirpanthi guru who has authored 18 books since 1974, including many bhajan collections. He embodies Kabir's inclusive philosophy by welcoming followers from different faith backgrounds. His use of both Islamic and Hindu terminology—referring to “Allah” and “Ram” interchangeably—reflects a blending of spiritual practices that transcends religious divides, illustrating how Kabir's legacy still facilitates a shared spiritual identity in contemporary Bihar³³. For instance, when I visited a Muslim tailor to order some conference bags, I asked if he knew about Kabir. He responded affirmatively, stating, "Whatever Kabir said was the truth," showing no hesitation in associating himself with Kabir.

Kabir's poetry plays a significant role in this dynamic. During the *Guru Purnima* celebration in Sukhi village, Kabir's verses were performed with music, creating a powerful communal experience that united people across different social and religious backgrounds. A notable verse recited during the event was:

*"Mati chun chun mahal banaya, kahe ghar hamara,
na ghar tera, na ghar mera, chidiya rain basera, Udja hans akela."*

(Translation: Even if you are rich or big like a palm tree, so what, if people do not get the shadow and the fruit is too high for anyone to reach.)

This verse, which emphasizes the impermanence of material possessions and the universal nature of the soul, resonated deeply with the audience, demonstrating how Kabir's teachings continue to challenge social hierarchies and foster a sense of shared spirituality.

Another powerful verse that was frequently quoted during my fieldwork was:

*"Pothe padhi-padhi jag mua, pandit bhaya na koi,
Ekey akhar prem ka padhe so pandit hoye."*

(Translation: If you have read so many books, it does not mean that you have become learned or wise if you do not know love.)

This verse underscores that true wisdom does not come from reading books alone but from understanding the essence of love (*prem*). This central theme of love is a key element in the Bhakti-Sufi movement, bridging diverse communities by promoting a spirituality rooted in compassion and inclusivity. Kabir's emphasis on love transcends sectarian divides, making his teachings universally accessible and relevant across social and religious boundaries.

One of Kabir's poems that Ramjatan Das shared with me during an interview addresses contemporary religious conflict and is also dialectical in nature. That is to say, the poet converses with the listener and asks questions to answer.

"Hindu kahat Ram hamara, Musalman Rahmana,

Apas me dono larat-marat hai, maram koi nai jana.

(Translation: Hindus say Ram is the God, and Muslims say Rahman. Both fight with each other for it, but no one knows the truth.)

The last line, which is the gist of Kabir's poetry: *Kahat Kabir suno bhai sadhi, inme kaun diwana?*

(Translation: Kabir says, listen, O saint, who is mad here?)

I find Linda Hess's work *Bodies of Song* to be a significant contribution to the study of Kabir. She argues in the book that:

"To know Kabir, you should know people, places, and times. You should use your ears, voice, nose, and skin as well as more cerebral capacities. You should appreciate the local in performance, starting with the first location: your own body"³⁴.

Furthermore, the word "Bodies" is a key term here, implying a kind of dialectic or communal involvement. My visit to India and my fieldwork revealed a reality in contrast to what I had been hearing and seeing in the media, which had made me apprehensive before my return. That media portrayal was not entirely inaccurate but was undoubtedly political. Linda Hess, in *Bodies of Song*, specifically in Chapter 8, "*Political and Spiritual Kabir*," addresses this issue effectively. She uses the dichotomy between

spirituality and politics (as represented by Gandhi and Ambedkar) to explore these complexities.

One of Kabir's poems, which I heard many times during my school days and, if I remember correctly, read in school textbooks, may have contributed to fostering harmonious coexistence in society at a certain level:

*"Bura jo dekhān main chala, bura na milia koi,
Jo dil dekha apna, mujhse bura na koi."*

(Translation: "I set out to find bad people, but I found none. When I looked into my own heart, I realized that no one is worse than me.") This suggests that Kabir advises us to look inward and examine ourselves before passing judgment on others.

This poetry of Kabir is relevant both to his time and to the contemporary world, as it continues to address modern challenges. These verses exemplify the *longing-belonging* paradigm discussed by Bruce B. Lawrence, where communities seek to transcend narrow identities in favour of a broader, inclusive spiritual belonging.

2. Discovering the Spirit of Kashmir

In June 2023, I travelled to Kashmir and witnessed the rich tapestry of cultural and religious diversity that defines the region. I was hosted by Abdul Qayoom Shah, a painter whose art reflects the fusion of Hindu, Buddhist, and Islamic influences in Kashmiri culture. His paintings, depicting figures from various religious traditions, exemplify how art and spirituality blend to promote unity³⁵.

Exploring Kashmir's spiritual heritage, I encountered the legacies of Lal Ded and Shaikh Nooruddin (Nund Rishi). These figures, much like Kabir in Bihar, are revered by Hindus, Muslims, and Buddhists alike, illustrating a shared spiritual heritage that transcends communal boundaries. Lal Ded, known as "Lali Maa," and Nund Rishi remain central to Kashmir's collective memory, with their poetry and teachings celebrated across religious lines. This reflects Lawrence's *longing-belonging* paradigm, as these figures provide a common ground where diverse communities find connection and meaning.

Through these interactions, I observed how the Sufi-Bhakti legacy fosters unity in Kashmir's socio-cultural fabric. During a walk with Abdul Qayoom Shah, we visited various sacred sites, including the Hari Parbat, Shankaracharya Temple, and Makhdoom Sahib Shrine. Despite our differing religious backgrounds, our shared experiences at these locations underscored the fluidity of religious identities and the interconnectedness of spiritual practices in the region.

3. Kabir's Legacy in Contemporary Social Dynamics

My fieldwork in Bihar reveals that Kabir's teachings continue to inspire diverse communities, offering a model for coexistence and social cohesion. Contrary to the common belief that Kabirpanthis predominantly come from lower castes, my observations indicate that Kabir's message appeals to people across social and caste lines. For instance, Professor Purnendu Ranjan shared that Kabir's voice was influential not only among marginalized communities but also in political movements like communism in Bihar. Kabir's critique of social hierarchies and emphasis on love and devotion resonated with a wide audience, transcending caste and class divisions.

Kabir's verses, which challenge both Hindu and Muslim orthodoxies, have retained their relevance. His poetry, often described as "Shabdo ki Chot" (a slap of words), continues to awaken audiences, prompting reflection on social norms and encouraging unity. For example:

*"Pathar puje hari mile, to main puju pahar
tante te chakki bhali, pis khaye sansar."*

(Translation: If worshipping stone, one finds god then I should worship the mountain, if not then a grinding stone is better with which people grind grains and eat.)

By critiquing ritualistic practices, Kabir's poetry remains a powerful tool for social change, fostering a secular spirituality that invites individuals to reflect on their spiritual and social commitments beyond rigid identities.

This immersion into Kashmiri and Bihari life further demonstrated the relevance of the Sufi-Bhakti legacy in fostering unity and understanding across religious divides. The teachings and stories of saints like Lal Ded, Shaikh ul-Alam or Nund Rishi, and Kabir continue to inspire a culture of

tolerance and inclusivity, where religious identities are not rigid but fluid and interconnected.

Conclusion

The Bhakti and Sufi traditions, deeply embedded in South Asia's cultural and spiritual heritage, provide a profound model for fostering secular spirituality and harmonious coexistence. This paper has demonstrated how these movements transcended religious boundaries, cultivating shared spiritual frameworks that continue to promote interfaith dialogue and social cohesion, especially between Hindus and Muslims in regions like Bihar and Kashmir. By analyzing their historical contexts and contemporary resonance through fieldwork, this study highlights the enduring relevance of these traditions in addressing modern challenges of religious polarization and communal tensions.

The Bhakti and Sufi movements emerged during periods of social and political change, offering revolutionary approaches to spirituality and social reform. The Bhakti movement's emphasis on divine love, personal devotion, and egalitarianism challenged the caste and gender hierarchies prevalent in Indian society. Similarly, Sufi mysticism's focus on cultivating a personal connection with the divine and inner transformation provided an alternative to orthodox practices within the Islamic tradition. Together, these movements created an environment where the boundaries between Hinduism and Islam were fluid, allowing for an exchange of ideas that fostered inclusivity and communal harmony.

Central to the legacy of these traditions is the concept of secular spirituality—a spirituality that transcends institutionalized religion and focuses on universal values like love, compassion, and ethical behaviour. This inclusive spirituality, embodied by figures like Kabir, Lal Ded, and Shaikh Nooruddin, remains relevant today. Kabir's teachings, for example, continue to resonate with diverse communities in Bihar, while Lal Ded and Nund Rishi's legacies inspire a sense of unity in Kashmir. These figures illustrate the *longing-belonging* paradigm described by Bruce B. Lawrence, demonstrating how individuals and communities navigate their spiritual identities by seeking connections beyond sectarian lines while remaining rooted in local traditions.

The fieldwork I conducted in Bihar and Kashmir confirms the ongoing impact of the Bhakti-Sufi legacy on contemporary social dynamics. In

Bihar, Kabir's teachings are not limited to marginalized communities but appeal to people across social and caste divides, reflecting the inclusive and egalitarian nature of his message. In Kashmir, the teachings of Lal Ded and Nund Rishi continue to bridge religious divides, illustrating the fluidity of spiritual identities and the interconnectedness of different faiths. These examples underscore the power of these traditions to foster social cohesion, demonstrating how their secular and inclusive spirituality remains a unifying force amidst modern challenges.

As South Asia faces increasing religious polarization and communal tensions, the Bhakti and Sufi movements offer invaluable lessons for building a more harmonious society. Their teachings of love, inclusivity, and the celebration of diversity provide a practical blueprint for promoting interfaith dialogue and peace. By fostering a sense of shared spiritual heritage, these traditions transcend religious boundaries and create pathways for unity and understanding.

Above all, the Bhakti and Sufi traditions offer an essential model of secular spirituality for addressing the ongoing challenges of religious division and communal tensions in contemporary South Asia. They emphasize that true spirituality is rooted in the inner transformation of individuals, cultivating ethical behaviour and compassion for the common good. As the region continues to grapple with forces of division, the lessons from these traditions offer a beacon of hope, guiding communities toward a future characterized by peace, harmony, and mutual respect. The enduring legacy of the Bhakti-Sufi movements serves as a testament to the transformative power of spiritual wisdom to build an inclusive and interconnected society.

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- ³ *Sant* is the Indian version of "saint," but its meaning extends beyond the Christian connotation of sainthood. The term is closely associated with the Sufi-Bhakti movement, particularly during the medieval period, and applies to spiritual leaders within Kabirpanthi, Sikhism, and Sufism. *Sants* are revered not for institutional religious authority, but for their emphasis on personal devotion, moral integrity, and spiritual wisdom that transcends religious boundaries.
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- ⁵ Prabhasakshi. "Kashmir में Abdul Qayoom Shah की Art Exhibition Cum Workshop को मिली शानदार प्रतिक्रिया," YouTube video, published July 14, 2023, YouTube, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CBgeXoUqoVo&t=246s>, accessed October 15, 2024.
- ⁶ Kumar, Rajeev. "Discovering the Soul of Kashmir," *U-Talk Magazine*, Second Issue, 2023, pp. 4-49, <https://uara.in/u-talk-magazine-second-issue/>, accessed October 15, 2024.
- ⁷ Pollock, Sheldon. "India in the Vernacular Millennium: Literary Culture and Polity, 1000-1500," *Daedalus*, vol. 127, no. 3, 1998, pp. 41-74.
- ⁸ Agrawal, Purushottam. *Kabir: The Life and Work of the Early Modern Poet-Philosopher Kabir*, Westland Non-Fiction: Mumbai, 2021, p. 149.
- ⁹ Agrawal, Purushottam. *Kabir: The Life and Work of the Early Modern Poet-Philosopher Kabir*, Westland Non-Fiction: Mumbai, 2021, p. 44.
- ¹⁰ Pollock, Sheldon. "India in the Vernacular Millennium: Literary Culture and Polity, 1000-1500," *Daedalus*, vol. 127, no. 3, 1998, p. 54.
- ¹¹ Pillai, P. Govinda. *The Bhakti Movement: Renaissance or Revivalism?* Taylor & Francis: New York, 2023, p. 5.
- ¹² Pollock, Sheldon. "India in the Vernacular Millennium: Literary Culture and Polity, 1000-1500," *Daedalus*, vol. 127, no. 3, 1998, p. 54.
- ¹³ Agrawal, Purushottam. *Kabir, Kabir*, Westland Non-Fiction: Mumbai, 2021, p. 142.
- ¹⁴ Pillai, P. Govinda. *The Bhakti Movement: Renaissance or Revivalism?* Taylor & Francis: New York, 2023, p. 158.
- ¹⁵ Lawrence, Bruce B. *Islamicate Cosmopolitan Spirit*, Wiley Blackwell: NJ, 2021, p. 22.
- ¹⁶ Agrawal, Purushottam. *Kabir, Kabir*, Westland Non-Fiction: Mumbai, 2021, p. 126.

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- ¹⁷ Salvatore, Armando. "Sufi Articulations of Civility, Globality, and Sovereignty." *Journal of Religious and Political Practice*, vol. 4, no. 2, 2018, p. 168, DOI:10.1080/20566093.2018.1439808.
- ¹⁸ Salvatore, Armando. "Sufi Articulations of Civility, Globality, and Sovereignty." *Journal of Religious and Political Practice*, vol. 4, no. 2, 2018, p. 157, DOI:10.1080/20566093.2018.1439808.
- ¹⁹ Lawrence, Bruce B., and Ali Altaf Mian, editors. *The Bruce B. Lawrence Reader: Islam Beyond Borders*, Duke University Press: Durham, 2021, p. 395.
- ²⁰ These *gunas* "- *rajas*, *tamas* and *sattva*" exist in all beings in varying degrees, according to ancient Indian philosophy, particularly in the Sankhya system and the Bhagavad Gītā. Spiritual practices aim to cultivate *satva* while balancing and transforming *rajas* and *tamas* to attain higher consciousness and spiritual growth. In the guru tradition, the guru is worshipped as a living embodiment of divine energy. Hindus believe that they do not worship idols; rather, they worship only those idols that are ritually infused with life, a process known as *pranpratistha*.
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- ²⁴ Tareen, SherAli. *Perilous Intimacies: Debating Hindu-Muslim Friendship After Empire*, Columbia University Press: New York, 2023, p. 3.
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- ²⁷ Lawrence, Bruce B. *Islamicate Cosmopolitan Spirit*, Wiley Blackwell: NJ, 2021, p. 23.
- ²⁸ Lawrence, Bruce B. *Who is Allah?* Edinburgh University Press: Edinburgh, 2015, p. 40.
- ²⁹ Lawrence, Bruce B. *Islamicate Cosmopolitan Spirit*, Wiley Blackwell: NJ, 2021, p. 46.
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³² Agrawal, Purushottam. *Kabir: The Life and Work of the Early Modern Poet-Philosopher Kabir*, Westland Non-Fiction: Mumbai, 2021, p. 121.

³³ Dhyani, Dhaynanad. *Manas Adhyatam Chintan*, Sahaj Yog Satsang Ashram, Sarang Arts: Jaynagar, 2022, p. 48.

³⁴ Hess, Linda. *Bodies of Song: Kabir Oral Traditions and Performative Worlds in North India*, Oxford University Press: New York, 2015, p. 16.

³⁵ Kumar, Rajeev. "Abdul Qayoom Shah: M. F Hussain of Kashmir," *U-Talk Magazine*, Second Issue, 2023, pp. 33-34, <https://uara.in/u-talk-magazine-second-issue/>, accessed October 15, 2024.