Chapter 6: Bhakti-Sufi Traditions

Exercises — Exercises

Q1 Explain with examples what historians mean by the integration of cults.

By the integration of cults, historians mean the process by which a wide range of local gods and goddesses were absorbed into the larger Puranic Brahmanical framework, while Brahmanas in turn accepted and reworked popular beliefs. Two processes worked together: the dissemination of Brahmanical ideas through simple Sanskrit Puranic verse meant to be accessible even to women and Shudras, and the acceptance and reworking of the beliefs and practices of these social categories. This was a continuous dialogue between what sociologists call the “great” Sanskritic Puranic tradition and the “little” local traditions. A striking example is Puri in Orissa, where by the twelfth century the local deity Jagannatha—whose wooden image was, and still is, carved by local tribal specialists—was recognised as a form of Vishnu. Similarly, local goddesses worshipped simply as a stone smeared with ochre were incorporated as wives of principal male deities, being identified with Lakshmi or Parvati. Thus divergent beliefs gradually came to be classified as Hindu.

Q2 To what extent do you think the architecture of mosques in the subcontinent reflects a combination of universal ideals and local traditions?

The architecture of mosques in the subcontinent reflects a strong combination of universal Islamic ideals and local traditions. Certain features are universal—every mosque is oriented towards Mecca, which is evident in the placement of the mihrab (prayer niche) and the minbar (pulpit). These express the shared faith that connects Muslims everywhere. At the same time, there are several features that show clear regional variation, especially in roofs and building materials, which were drawn from local traditions and resources. For instance, a thirteenth-century mosque in Kerala has a shikhara-like roof resembling that of a temple; the Atiya mosque in Mymensingh district, Bangladesh (1609), was built with brick; and the Shah Hamadan mosque in Srinagar (1395), on the banks of the Jhelum, is a fine example of Kashmiri wooden architecture with a spire, carved eaves and papier mache decoration. This complex blend of a universal faith with local customs is best exemplified in mosque architecture, showing that the universal ideals were adopted while local styles continued to shape form and material.

Q3 What were the similarities and differences between the be-shari‘a and ba-shari‘a sufi traditions?

Both the be-shari'a and ba-shari'a traditions belonged to Sufism, the mystical strand within Islam that sought salvation through intense devotion and love for God rather than mere dogmatic scholarship. The crucial difference lay in their attitude towards the shari'a, the law governing the Muslim community. The ba-shari'a sufis complied with the shari'a; they functioned within its framework while pursuing mystical devotion, and often organised themselves around khanqahs and silsilas. The be-shari'a sufis, by contrast, were mystics who initiated movements based on a radical interpretation of sufi ideals. Many of them scorned the khanqah and took to mendicancy, observing celibacy, ignoring rituals and practising extreme forms of asceticism. Because of their deliberate defiance of the shari'a they were called be-shari'a, and they were known by different names such as Qalandars, Madaris, Malangs and Haidaris. Thus, while both pursued the sufi path, they differed sharply in their observance of Islamic law.

Q4 Discuss the ways in which the Alvars, Nayanars and Virashaivas expressed critiques of the caste system.

The Alvars (devotees of Vishnu) and Nayanars (devotees of Shiva) of Tamil Nadu are seen by some historians as having initiated a movement of protest against the caste system and the dominance of Brahmanas, or at least an attempt to reform it. This is suggested by the fact that bhaktas came from diverse social backgrounds, ranging from Brahmanas to artisans, cultivators and even castes considered "untouchable". Their devotion was treated as supremely important—the Alvars' anthology, the Nalayira Divyaprabandham, was described as the "Tamil Veda", claiming it was as significant as the Sanskrit Vedas cherished by Brahmanas. The Virashaivas or Lingayats of Karnataka, led by Basavanna in the twelfth century, went further. They strongly challenged the idea of caste and the "pollution" attributed to certain groups by Brahmanas, and questioned the theory of rebirth. This won them followers among those marginalised within the Brahmanical social order, and they also encouraged practices disapproved in the Dharmashastras, such as post-puberty marriage and widow remarriage.

Q5 Describe the major teachings of either Kabir or Baba Guru Nanak, and the ways in which these have been transmitted.

Baba Guru Nanak (1469–1539) was born in a Hindu merchant family at Nankana Sahib near the river Ravi in the predominantly Muslim Punjab. His teachings, spelt out in his hymns, advocated a form of nirguna bhakti—the worship of a God without attributes. He firmly repudiated external religious practices, rejecting sacrifices, ritual baths, image worship, austerities and the scriptures of both Hindus and Muslims. For him the Absolute, or "rab", had no gender or form, and he proposed a simple way to connect with the Divine by remembering and repeating the Divine Name. He expressed his ideas through hymns called "shabad" in Punjabi, singing them in various ragas while his attendant Mardana played the rabab. He organised his followers into a community with rules for congregational worship (sangat) and appointed his disciple Angad to succeed him as guru. His compositions were transmitted through this line of preceptors: the fifth guru, Arjan, compiled them with the hymns of his successors and other saints in the Adi Granth Sahib, which later became the Guru Granth Sahib under Guru Gobind Singh.

Q6 Discuss the major beliefs and practices that characterised Sufism.

Sufism emerged in the early centuries of Islam when a group of religious-minded people turned to asceticism and mysticism in protest against the growing materialism of the Caliphate as a religious and political institution. The sufis were critical of the dogmatic definitions and scholastic methods of interpreting the Qur'an and sunna adopted by theologians. Instead, they laid emphasis on seeking salvation through intense devotion and love for God by following His commands and the example of the Prophet Muhammad, whom they regarded as a perfect human being. They thus sought an interpretation of the Qur'an on the basis of their personal experience.

By the eleventh century Sufism had evolved into a well-developed movement with its own literature on Quranic studies and sufi practices. Institutionally, the sufis organised communities around the hospice or khanqah, controlled by a teaching master known as shaikh, pir or murshid. He enrolled disciples (murids), appointed a successor (khalifa), and established rules for spiritual conduct. From the twelfth century sufi silsilas, or spiritual chains linking master and disciple back to the Prophet, began to crystallise. Through this unbroken genealogy, spiritual power and blessings were believed to pass to devotees, and initiation involved an oath of allegiance, wearing a patched garment and shaving the hair.

When a shaikh died, his tomb-shrine or dargah became a centre of devotion. This encouraged the practice of pilgrimage, or ziyarat, to his grave, especially on his death anniversary (urs), which was seen as the union of his soul with God. People believed that in death the saints were united with God and were closer to Him, so they sought their blessings for material and spiritual benefit, giving rise to the cult of the shaikh revered as wali. Devotional practices also included zikr (reciting the Divine Names) and sama', the performance of mystical music and dance by qawwals to evoke divine ecstasy.

Q7 Examine how and why rulers tried to establish connections with the traditions of the Nayanars and the sufis.

Rulers tried to establish connections with the traditions of the Nayanars and the sufis because both commanded immense popular devotion, and association with them brought kings prestige, legitimacy and the support of their subjects.

In the Tamil region, both Nayanars and Alvars were revered by the Vellala peasants, so rulers tried to win their support. The powerful Chola kings (ninth to thirteenth centuries) supported Brahmanical and bhakti traditions by making land grants and building temples for Vishnu and Shiva. Some of the most magnificent Shiva temples—at Chidambaram, Thanjavur and Gangaikondacholapuram—were constructed under Chola patronage, along with spectacular bronze images of Shiva that recreated the visions of the Nayanars. The Chola kings claimed divine support and proclaimed their own power by building these temples in the language of the people, introduced the singing of Tamil Shaiva hymns in temples, and collected these hymns into the Tevaram. Inscriptional evidence of around 945 shows that Parantaka I had consecrated metal images of Appar, Sambandar and Sundarar in a Shiva temple, which were carried in processions.

With the sufis, kings did not merely wish to demonstrate association; they required legitimation. When the Turks set up the Delhi Sultanate, they resisted the ulama's insistence on imposing the shari'a as state law because most of their subjects were non-Muslims. Instead they sought out the sufis, who derived their authority directly from God. It was believed the auliya could intercede with God to improve people's conditions, which is why kings often wanted their tombs built near sufi shrines. The Chishti shrine at Ajmer illustrates this: Muhammad bin Tughlaq was the first Sultan to visit it, and Akbar went there fourteen times to seek blessings, offered a huge cauldron (degh) in 1568, and had a mosque built in its compound. The dargah of Shaikh Salim Chishti at Fatehpur Sikri symbolised the bond between the Chishtis and the Mughal state.

Q8 Analyse, with illustrations, why bhakti and sufi thinkers adopted a variety of languages in which to express their opinions.

Bhakti and sufi thinkers adopted a variety of languages because their aim was to reach ordinary people directly, rather than to confine spiritual knowledge to a learned elite. Most poet-saints expressed themselves orally in the regional languages used by common people, and their compositions were often set to music so that they could be easily sung and remembered.

Among the early bhakti saints, the Alvars and Nayanars sang hymns in Tamil in praise of Vishnu and Shiva as they travelled from place to place. The Virashaivas of Karnataka composed vachanas in Kannada, while bhakti in Maharashtra found expression in Marathi abhangs. In the north, Baba Guru Nanak conveyed his message through shabad in Punjabi, the language of his region, and Kabir's verses survive in several languages and dialects, including the special sant bhasha of nirguna poets and the riddle-like ulatbansi. Mirabai's bhajans were transmitted orally in the languages of Gujarat and Rajasthan.

The sufis similarly adopted local languages as part of adapting to the Indian environment. In Delhi, those of the Chishti silsila conversed in Hindavi, the language of the people. Baba Farid composed verses in the local language, which were later included in the Guru Granth Sahib. Some sufis composed long masnavis using human love as an allegory for divine love—for example Malik Muhammad Jayasi's Padmavat, built around the romance of Padmini and Ratansen. Around Bijapur, short poems in Dakhani (a variant of Urdu) were composed, including lurinama (lullabies) and shadinama (wedding songs), probably sung by women at household chores; through this medium Islam gradually took root in Deccan villages. The Khojahs even developed ginans in Punjabi, Multani, Sindhi, Gujarati and other tongues to spread Quranic ideas. Thus the variety of languages reflected a shared desire to communicate the experience of the Divine in forms accessible to ordinary men and women.

Q9 Read any five of the sources included in this chapter and discuss the social and religious ideas that are expressed in them.

Five of the chapter's sources together reveal strong critiques of social hierarchy alongside deep religious devotion. In Source 1, the Alvar Tondaradippodi says that Vishnu favours those "servants" who love his feet even if born as outcastes more than the Chaturvedins who lack allegiance to his service—valuing genuine devotion above caste and Vedic learning. Source 2, a verse by the Nayanar Appar, dismisses the "rogues who quote the law books" and asks of what use are one's gotra and kula, urging devotees simply to take refuge in Shiva; it too rejects caste pride in favour of devotion.

Source 4, a vachana of Basavanna, criticises empty ritual: people pour milk on a stone serpent but kill a living one, and offer food to an image that cannot eat while turning away the hungry servant of God—exposing the hollowness of idol-centred worship over compassion. Source 10, a composition attributed to Kabir, attacks the distinction made between gods of different communities, arguing that there cannot be two lords of the world; names like Allah, Ram and Karim are only invented distinctions, just as gold remains gold whether shaped into rings or bangles, and both Hindus and Muslims err by wasting their lives in disputation.

Source 7, Jahanara's account of her 1643 pilgrimage to Ajmer, shows intense sufi devotion: she went barefoot kissing the ground, circumambulated the tomb seven times, rubbed her face in its dust and offered itar and her scarf, treating the dargah as a specially sacred place where the saint intercedes with God. Taken together, these sources express two linked ideas—a questioning of caste, ritualism and communal distinctions, and an affirmation that sincere love and devotion are the true path to the Divine.

Q10 On an outline map of India, plot three major sufi shrines, and three places associated with temples (one each of a form of Vishnu, Shiva and the goddess).

Using the sites named in this chapter, mark the three major sufi shrines at Ajmer in Rajasthan (dargah of Khwaja Muinuddin Chishti), Delhi (shrines of Nizamuddin Auliya, Qutbuddin Bakhtiyar Kaki and Nasiruddin Chiragh-i Dehli), and Fatehpur Sikri near Agra (dargah of Shaikh Salim Chishti); other shrines the chapter mentions—Ajodhan, Multan and Lahore—now lie in Pakistan. For temples, plot Puri in Orissa for the form of Vishnu (the Jagannatha temple), and any one of Chidambaram, Thanjavur or Gangaikondacholapuram in Tamil Nadu for the form of Shiva (the great Chola temples). The chapter does not name a specific goddess temple, so for the goddess mark a well-known Devi shrine from your atlas or your own region and label it clearly, since the aim is to show the spread of devotional sites across the subcontinent.

Q11 Choose any two of the religious teachers/thinkers/saints mentioned in this chapter, and find out more about their lives and teachings. Prepare a report about the area and the times in which they lived, their major ideas, how we know about them, and why you think they are important.

For this project, pick two contrasting figures named in the chapter—for example Kabir (c. fourteenth–fifteenth centuries, the Awadh region of present-day Uttar Pradesh) and Baba Guru Nanak (1469–1539, Punjab)—and prepare a short report on each. For every teacher, describe the area and times they lived in, their major ideas (such as Kabir's nirguna vision of one God beyond Hindu and Muslim labels, or Nanak's rejection of external ritual and his emphasis on remembering the Divine Name), how we know about them (compositions attributed to them, later hagiographies, and compilations like the Kabir Bijak or the Adi Granth Sahib), and explain why you think they remain important today, using only reliable sources and your own words.

Q12 Find out more about practices of pilgrimage associated with the shrines mentioned in this chapter. Are these pilgrimages still undertaken? When are these shrines visited? Who visits these shrines? Why do they do so? What are the activities associated with these pilgrimages?

For this project, choose one or more shrines named in the chapter—such as the dargah of Khwaja Muinuddin Chishti at Ajmer or Nizamuddin Auliya's shrine in Delhi—and investigate the pilgrimage (ziyarat) connected with it. Find out whether such pilgrimages are still undertaken today, when the shrines are visited (for instance on the saint's death anniversary or urs), who visits them and why (people of various creeds and classes come seeking the saint's blessing or barakat), and what activities accompany the visit, such as offering cloth and itar, circumambulating the tomb, and the singing of qawwali by qawwals. Base your account on library books, the chapter's sources and your own observation rather than copying from any single website.