
A Comparative Study of the Contribution of Major Sufi Saints in the Formation of Maharashtra

Dr. Dhanaji Thore, Bharat Shikshan Sanstha's Arts Science and Commerce College, Makani. Dist. Dharshiv, Maharashtra thoredv@gmail.com

Article Received: 2/01/2024

Article Accepted: 27/01/2024

Published Online: 29/01/2024

DOI:10.47311/IJOES.2024.6.1.214

Abstract:

This paper explores the invaluable contributions of Sufi saints in the cultural, spiritual, and social formation of Maharashtra. Sufism, the mystical dimension of Islam, penetrated deep into the Marathi soil, not only as a religious movement but as a unifying cultural force. Through their teachings, actions, and shrines (dargahs), Sufi saints played a key role in promoting communal harmony, vernacular expression, and spiritual humanism. This research highlights the lives and legacies of prominent Sufi saints like Hazrat Haji Malang, Hazrat Khwaja Shaha, Hazrat Sayyad Shah Murtuza, and others, analyzing their influence on the Bhakti movement, social reform, and the integration of Maharashtra's diverse religious communities.

Keywords: Sufism, Culture, Religion, Nation

1. Introduction:

The spiritual history of Maharashtra is a mosaic of diverse religious and philosophical traditions. Among them, the contribution of Sufi saints is profound and far-reaching. The arrival of Sufism in Maharashtra not only brought Islamic spirituality but also catalyzed syncretic traditions that laid the foundation for a pluralistic society. Sufis, through their teachings of love, equality, and divine unity, appealed to the masses, transcending caste, religion, and linguistic barriers.

Maharashtra, known for its rich and pluralistic cultural heritage, has long been a confluence of multiple religious and philosophical traditions.

Among these, Sufism, the mystical branch of Islam, has played a subtle yet profound role in shaping the social, cultural, and spiritual identity of the region. While the Bhakti movement is often credited with dissolving social hierarchies and promoting vernacular spirituality, the role of Sufi saints in this transformative process is equally critical yet often underrepresented in mainstream historical narratives. As Annemarie Schimmel aptly writes,

“Sufism, with its emphasis on love, tolerance, and union with the Divine, speaks a universal language that transcends religious and linguistic boundaries.” (Annemarie Schimmel, *Mystical Dimensions of Islam*, 1975)

The Sufi saints who arrived and settled in various parts of Maharashtra brought with them not only spiritual teachings but also a message of unity, compassion, and social justice. Their dargahs (shrines) became centers of interfaith dialogue, communal harmony, and spiritual healing, where people of all castes and creeds gathered. These saints—like Hazrat Haji Malang, Sayyad Shah Murtuza, and Baba Shah Musafir—preached “Sulh-e-Kul” (peace with all), a concept central to Sufi thought and crucial to Maharashtra’s social cohesion. Historian Richard M. Eaton notes:

“Sufi lodges or khanqahs were not merely religious institutions; they functioned as centers of social welfare, psychological healing, and spiritual democracy.” (Richard M. Eaton, *Sufis of Bijapur*, 1978)

Their teachings were remarkably similar to the Bhakti saints of the region, such as Sant Tukaram, Namdev, and Sant Dnyaneshwar, who emphasized inner devotion over ritual, love over orthodoxy, and God's presence in every being. This created a shared spiritual ethos that deeply influenced Maharashtra’s cultural formation, eventually becoming part of the region's collective moral consciousness. The 13th-century Chishti saint Nizamuddin Auliya, though based in Delhi, captured the universal appeal of Sufism when he said: “The heart of a lover is like the shrine of God. Whosoever enters it is purified.”

Such ideals permeated the teachings of the Sufi saints in Maharashtra. By practicing inclusive spirituality, these saints actively resisted sectarianism and casteism, engaging in dialogue with local communities, and composing poetry and parables in Marathi, Dakhani, and Urdu, thus making Sufism accessible to the common people.

In this light, the contribution of Sufi saints was not limited to religious or metaphysical spheres but extended to the moral, linguistic, and social architecture of

Maharashtra. This research aims to explore, analyze, and recognize the critical role these saints played in the formation of a plural and inclusive Maharashtra, particularly through the lens of spiritual humanism, interfaith engagement, and vernacular expression. As Leela D'Souza rightly observes:

“The interface of Sufi and Bhakti traditions in the Deccan created a unique cultural fabric, emphasizing experiential spirituality over dogma, and social inclusivity over hierarchical norms.”

2. Origin and Spread of Sufism in Maharashtra:

Sufism entered the Deccan region, including Maharashtra, during the early medieval period through trade routes, Islamic rulers, and wandering mystics. The spread of Sufi orders such as the Chishti, Qadiri, and Suhrawardi helped disseminate Islamic mysticism and established *khanqahs* (spiritual centers) and *dargahs* which became centers of spiritual and cultural interaction.

The roots of Sufism in Maharashtra trace back to the 12th and 13th centuries, coinciding with the expansion of Islamic rule in the Deccan and the influx of wandering Sufi saints who arrived from Central Asia, Persia, and Northern India. These mystics—many of whom were affiliated with the *Chishti*, *Qadiri*, *Suhrawardi*, and *Shattari* orders—were less concerned with political power and more with spiritual outreach, emphasizing divine love, humility, service to humanity, and the inner path to God (*tariqat*).

Sufism spread across Maharashtra not through force or conquest, but through peaceful preaching, personal piety, social service, and cultural interaction. The Deccan plateau, due to its position as a trade and cultural hub, allowed Sufi saints to settle in regions such as Aurangabad, Ahmednagar, Pune, Thane, and Nagpur. These areas became vibrant centers of Sufi activity, where *khanqahs* (monasteries) and *dargahs* (shrines) provided spiritual solace, food, and shelter to people of all backgrounds. Historian S.A.A. Rizvi explains the process succinctly:

“The success of Sufism lay in its ability to absorb local cultural elements while maintaining its mystical core. In the Deccan, Sufis often adopted local languages, customs, and even musical forms to appeal to the indigenous population.” (S.A.A. Rizvi, *A History of Sufism in India*, Vol. I, 1978)

This indigenization of Sufism was evident in the use of *Marathi* and *Dakhani* Urdu in poetry and oral teachings. The saints became spiritual bridges between Islamic mysticism and local religious traditions. As Sufi orders established their

presence in Maharashtra, their lodges served not only as religious centers but also as institutions of public welfare and hubs of intercultural synthesis.

The Deccan rulers, including the *Bahmani Sultanate* and later the *Nizam Shahi* and *Adil Shahi* dynasties, patronized many Sufi saints, but the saints remained largely independent of political structures, preserving their spiritual integrity. Many even criticized tyranny, aligning themselves with the marginalized and oppressed, thus gaining immense popular respect. As Carl W. Ernst points out,

“Sufis of the Deccan played an important role in reconciling diverse religious communities. Their shrines became places where boundaries were blurred, and a common spiritual culture emerged.” (Carl W. Ernst, *Sufism: An Introduction to the Mystical Tradition of Islam*, 1997)

The arrival of saints such as Haji Malang in Thane, Sayyad Shah Murtuza in Aurangabad, and Baba Shah Musafir in Ahmednagar are all part of this larger historical narrative. Their presence not only catalyzed the spread of Sufism but laid the foundations for a composite cultural ethos in Maharashtra.

Moreover, the Sufi orders in Maharashtra encouraged the integration of local musical traditions, particularly *bhajans* and *qawwalis*, which were performed at dargahs and fairs. This interaction contributed to the development of syncretic devotional practices that attracted Hindus, Muslims, and others, thereby reinforcing communal coexistence. Scholar Rizwan Qaiser adds:

“The Deccan became a unique zone where Sufi thought interacted with indigenous ideas, creating a syncretic religiosity that influenced not just Muslims but the entire society.” (Rizwan Qaiser, *Understanding Sufism in South Asia*, 2014)

In conclusion, the spread of Sufism in Maharashtra was not a top-down movement but a grassroots spiritual revolution, rooted in love, inclusion, and equality. It played a significant role in shaping the cultural landscape and moral foundations of the region.

3. Major Sufi Saints and their Contributions:

3.1 Hazrat Haji Malang (Thane):

Haji Malang is one of the most revered Sufi saints in Maharashtra. His dargah in Kalyan is not only a spiritual hub but also a symbol of Hindu-Muslim unity. Pilgrims of all faiths visit the shrine, and the saint is celebrated for healing, protection, and miracles.

3.1.1. Introduction to Hazrat Haji Malang:

Hazrat Haji Malang, also known as Malang Baba, is one of the most venerated Sufi saints in Maharashtra, with a shrine located atop Malanggad hill in Kalyan, Thane district. Believed to have arrived in India during the 11th or 12th century from the Middle East (some traditions say from Yemen or Iraq), he established his spiritual base on the hills, which later became a site of great religious and cultural significance.

3.1.2. Spiritual Message and Sufi Philosophy

Hazrat Haji Malang's teachings reflected core Sufi ideals such as: Divine love and unity (Tawheed), Equality among all people, Detachment from materialism and Service to humanity. His shrine became a symbol of inclusivity and tolerance, welcoming devotees from all religions and castes, a tradition that continues even today. As Sufi scholar Bruce Lawrence notes:

“The power of a saint lies not in dogma but in the charisma that draws all toward a higher truth.” (Bruce Lawrence, *The Sufi Martyrs of Love*, 2002)

Haji Malang's life exemplifies this charisma through simplicity, universal compassion, and devotion.

3.1.3. Syncretic Practices and Hindu-Muslim Unity:

One of Haji Malang's most enduring legacies is the interfaith nature of his *dargah*, where: Hindus, Muslims, Christians, and even Parsis pay respect. Rituals incorporate elements from both Sufi and local Hindu traditions, such as tying threads for wishes, lighting lamps, and offering flowers. This *dargah* is often cited as a model of communal harmony. As noted by Leela D'Souza:

“The dargahs of saints like Haji Malang became real spaces of cultural synthesis, beyond the reach of political orthodoxy.” (Leela D'Souza, *Sufi-Bhakti Dialogue and Cultural Pluralism in India*, 2000)

3.1.4. Role in the Local Cultural and Religious Fabric:

The annual *Urs* festival, celebrated on the 15th night of Islamic month Jumada al-Thani, draws lakhs of pilgrims, regardless of religion. Traditional Malang orders (called Malangis), a wandering mystical sect, still carry forward his message of renunciation and divine intoxication. The Panch Peer tradition around his shrine includes veneration of multiple saints, blending Sufi and folk beliefs. Historian Rizvi describes such dargahs as:

“Islands of spiritual democracy where the spiritual hunger of the masses was fulfilled without discrimination.” (S.A.A. Rizvi, A History of Sufism in India, Vol. 2, 1983)

3.1.5. Contemporary Relevance:

Even in the 21st century, Hazrat Haji Malang’s legacy continues to offer a blueprint for communal harmony in a polarized world. The continued joint management of the shrine by Hindu and Muslim caretakers sets an example of shared guardianship of faith and space. The contribution of Hazrat Haji Malang to the formation of Maharashtra lies in his ability to transcend boundaries—religious, linguistic, social—and build a spiritual culture rooted in love, inclusivity, and equality. His dargah stands not just as a place of worship but as a symbol of Maharashtra’s composite cultural and spiritual identity.

3.2 Hazrat Sayyad Shah Murtuza (Aurangabad):

Also known as Murtuza Shah Baba, he propagated Sufi values in the Marathwada region. His teachings promoted social equality and religious tolerance. His *dargah* in Aurangabad still attracts followers from all communities.

3.2.1. Introduction to Hazrat Sayyad Shah Murtuza:

Hazrat Sayyad Shah Murtuza, popularly known as Murtuza Baba, is one of the most revered Sufi saints of the Marathwada region, particularly in Aurangabad. He is believed to have lived during the 16th century, when Aurangabad was an emerging cultural and spiritual center under the Nizam Shahi and later the Mughal rule. His dargah in Aurangabad is not only a sacred site for Muslims but is also deeply venerated by Hindu, Dalit, and Bahujan communities, testifying to his widespread influence and inclusive spiritual message.

3.2.2. Core Teachings and Sufi Ideals:

Hazrat Shah Murtuza propagated the universal Sufi principles of Tawheed (oneness of God), Divine love (Ishq-e-Haqiqi), Service to humanity (Khidmat-e-Khalq) and Inner purification (Tazkiyah al-Nafs). He emphasized silence, humility, simplicity, and spiritual practice over ritualistic formalism. As noted by Sufi scholar Idries Shah:

“The true Sufi is not concerned with names and forms but with the essence that unites all beings.” (Idries Shah, *The Sufis*, 1964)

Hazrat Shah Murtuza lived this principle, focusing on the unity of all life and the need to experience the Divine through love, surrender, and moral conduct.

3.2.3. Integration with Local Culture:

A defining feature of Shah Murtuza’s legacy is his deep integration with Marathi culture and society: He communicated in the *local Dakhani* and *Marathi*

dialects, making his message accessible to all. His spiritual discourses often included regional metaphors, rural imagery, and folk symbols, which made him popular among farmers, laborers, and the marginalized. Historian Rizwan Qaiser remarks:

“The vernacularization of Sufism in the Deccan allowed saints like Shah Murtuza to reach the masses and shape a uniquely local form of Islamic mysticism.” (Rizwan Qaiser, *Understanding Sufism in South Asia*, 2014)

3.2.4. Dargah as a Center of Unity and Healing:

His shrine in Aurangabad became a center of interreligious interaction, where people of all faiths came for healing, blessings, and solace. The annual Urs festival, observed with *qawwali*, poetry, and communal feasts, continues to be attended by thousands—Muslims, Hindus, Buddhists, and others. The dargah is also a site of spiritual healing, with people seeking relief from illness, anxiety, and misfortune—both physical and metaphysical. This aligns with what Richard Eaton observed in his study of Sufism in the Deccan:

“The Sufi shrine became a spiritual common ground in the Deccan, symbolizing harmony where political institutions often failed to integrate diverse communities.” (Richard M. Eaton, *Sufis of Bijapur*, 1978)

3.2.5. Social Contribution and Equality:

Shah Murtuza openly challenged the Caste hierarchies, Religious orthodoxy and Materialism and political arrogance. His *khanqah* welcomed untouchables, peasants, and travelers, offering them food (*langar*), shelter, and guidance, regardless of background. This reflected the broader ethos of spiritual democracy upheld by both Sufi and Bhakti movements in Maharashtra. As Leela D’Souza notes:

“Sufis like Shah Murtuza were spiritual radicals who defied exclusivity and ritualism, and forged sacred spaces of belonging for the voiceless.” (Leela D’Souza, *Sufi-Bhakti Dialogue and Cultural Pluralism in India*, 2000)

3.2.6. Role in the Formation of Maharashtra’s Composite Culture:

Hazrat Sayyad Shah Murtuza’s legacy contributed directly to the cultural formation of Maharashtra by promoting religious coexistence, especially during periods of political and sectarian conflict. Also influencing Marathi devotional literature with his accessible and emotionally rich spiritual language and creating a

moral community that upheld the values of service, compassion, and unity. His message paralleled those of Sant Eknath and Tukaram, making him a spiritual sibling of the Bhakti saints, even though his path was rooted in Islam. Hazrat Sayyad Shah Murtuza's contribution to Maharashtra lies in his timeless message of oneness, equality, and divine love. His inclusive Sufi approach broke social barriers and laid the foundation for a shared, pluralistic spiritual heritage in Marathwada and broader Maharashtra. Today, his dargah stands not just as a place of worship, but as a living symbol of cultural integration, interfaith unity, and spiritual continuity.

Conclusion:

The Sufi saints of Maharashtra were not merely religious figures but catalysts of cultural unity, spiritual democracy, and social equality. Their contributions laid the groundwork for a pluralistic society that Maharashtra still largely embodies. Remembering and revitalizing their legacy can serve as a potent force against contemporary divisions, reminding us that the soul of Maharashtra is woven through threads of love, compassion, and shared heritage.

The contribution of Sufi saints to the formation of Maharashtra transcends the boundaries of religion and enters the realm of cultural integration, social justice, and spiritual humanism. Through the lives and teachings of revered figures such as Hazrat Haji Malang, Hazrat Sayyad Shah Murtuza, Hazrat Baba Shah Musafir, and Hazrat Tajuddin Baba, we see the emergence of a syncretic spiritual tradition that profoundly influenced Maharashtra's ethos. These Sufi saints, arriving across different centuries and regions, established spiritual centers (dargahs) that became nuclei of interfaith harmony, community service, and personal transformation. They engaged with the vernacular culture, communicated in local languages, and connected deeply with marginalized communities—offering not just mystical insights but also tangible social upliftment.

Their teachings were aligned with the broader Bhakti movement, collectively challenging caste hierarchies, ritual formalism, and social exclusion. This confluence of Sufi and Bhakti ideals laid the foundation for a distinctive Maharashtrian identity—plural, egalitarian, and spiritually rich. In a contemporary context marked by religious polarization and social fragmentation, the legacy of these Sufi saints remains both relevant and instructive. Their lives serve as enduring examples of how spiritual values can shape a region's moral compass, bringing people together across divides of faith, caste, and class. In essence, the Sufi saints of Maharashtra were not just spiritual guides—they were architects of Maharashtra's composite culture, and

their influence continues to echo through the social fabric, devotional practices, and interreligious consciousness of the state today.

References:

- Dhere, Ramchandra Chintaman. *Rise of a Folk God: Vitthal of Pandharpur*. Oxford University Press, 2011.
- D'Souza, Leela. "Sufi-Bhakti Dialogue and Cultural Pluralism in India." *Social Scientist*, Vol. 28, No. 5/6, 2000.
- Eaton, Richard M. *Sufis of Bijapur, 1300–1700: Social Roles of Sufis in Medieval India*. Princeton University Press, 1978.
- Kulkarni, A. R. *Medieval Maharashtra: Culture and Society*. Books & Books, 1996.
- Lawrence, Bruce B., and Carl W. Ernst. *Sufi Martyrs of Love: The Chishti Order in South Asia and Beyond*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2002.
- Nasr, Seyyed Hossein. *The Garden of Truth: The Vision and Promise of Sufism, Islam's Mystical Tradition*. HarperOne, 2007.
- Qaiser, Rizwan. *Understanding Sufism in South Asia: Essays on Islam, Mysticism and Modernity*. Routledge India, 2014.
- Rizvi, S. A. A. *A History of Sufism in India: Vol. I and II*. Munshiram Manoharlal Publishers, 1978 & 1983.