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# UNIT 24 MEDIEVAL RELIGIOUS MOVEMENTS I — BHAKTI AND SUFISM

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## 24.0 OBJECTIVES

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After studying this unit you will understand

- two religious movements that were found to prevail in India during the medieval period
- Hindism and its basic tenets in a very general way
- the **bhakti** and **Sufi** traditions and what they evoked
- the interaction and interchange between **Sufism** and the **Bhakti** tradition.

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## 24.1 INTRODUCTION

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We have examined various religions in the previous Block 5 in our units on religions pluralism. In these units we have also covered units on Hinduism (Unit 19) and Islam (Unit 22). These units form an essential backdrop to our present unit on **Bhakti** and **Sufism** which are medieval religious movements.

We begin by introducing the structure of the unit and describing the background of the development of **Bhakti** and **Sufism**. We then go on to examine the **Bhakti** Tradition, including the three paths of **Bhakti** and the two pillars of **Bhakti**. We then turn to the **bhakti** tradition in the South and then examine the **bhakti** tradition in the North. Our next section (24.4) compares **Sufism** and **Bhakti**.

This section includes the growth of medieval mysticism, **Sufi-bhakti** interaction and **Bhakti-Sufi** teachings. We therefore provide an adequate picture of the **bhakti** and **sufi** movements in medieval times.

Let us now also introduce the necessary background of these medieval religious movements. Thus **Bhakti** emphasizes a personal devotion for one god. It may be pointed out that the Alvar **bhakti** saints of South India composed their devotional

poetry between 5th and 9th century AD. They were worshippers of Krishna. They approached him with a love based on parental, filial, friendly and devotional attitudes. The **acharyas** who followed the **Alvars** had an intellectual approach treated dependence on god as logical rather than emotional.

Vallabha formed a sect based on Sri Krishna-Radha in the 16th century AD. Krishna-Bhakti was also given much attention by Sri Chaitanya (AD 1485-1533) who was a contemporary of Vallabha. However Sri Chaitanya's worship was of the ecstatic kind and popularization of the chanting of Hari (Sri Krishna), as a way to spiritual liberation. Namdeva (end of 14th century AD) and Ramananda were further important **Bhakti** Saints. The North Indian school was popularized by the disciples of Ramananda such as Kabir who used local language for preaching. Mirabai herself was initiated by Ravidas as disciple of Ramananda.

Let us now turn to **Sufism**, which is a discipline which aims at the personal experience of the unity of God. **Sufism** began around the 8th century with Saints such as Hadrat Habib Ajami (AD 738). Some scholars feel that **Sufism** is not against the Islami law. In fact the process of **Sufism** is closely interwoven in the Islami law. **Sufism** can be explained from the viewpoint of three basic religious attitudes found in the Quran. These are the attitudes of **Islam**, **Iman** and **Ihsan**.

The attitude of Islam is that of submission to the will of Allah and the teachings of the Quran. Iman designates a further penetration into the religion and strong faith in its teachings. Ihsan is the highest stage of spiritual ascent. These are the three stages of religiosity in Islam.

We may point out in our introduction that the Sufi and the Bhakti movements coalesce in various areas. Let us now turn first to the Bhakti tradition.

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## 24.2 THE BHAKTI TRADITION

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In medieval India it was caste structures that governed the lives of men and the networks of relations that they could enter into. The structure of social divisions that arose thus was, as mentioned, a rigid, inflexible and unequal one that created extremes of inequality, privileges and disprivileges between men and social groups. Although this was an extremely unfair system, little could be done or said against it as it was supported by Hindu religious ideology, particularly the notions of high and pure birth and occupation as against the low and impure. In other words, Hinduism was as much a social system as it was a religion, and provided an ideological framework on the basis of which Hindu society arose.

In other words. **Hinduism was both religion and social framework and governed the lives of Hindus.** To be a Hindu meant that one's life was governed by factors such as being born in a caste, being subject to one's actions or **karma**, to be a part of **Brahman** and aim at achieving **moksha** or Liberation of one's soul or salvation. Further, it must be remembered that Hinduism was not a revealed religion that had just a single text. With every phase in the development of Hinduism came new scriptures and texts. Thus we have the **Veda**, the **Upanishad**, the **Purana** and the **Bhagavad Gita**. Even though we have stressed that the caste system was a system that formed the basis of life in Hindu India and was rigid and unchangeable, there nevertheless occurred many anti-caste movements in the course of the development of the religion. We already mentioned in Block 5 (Unit 20 : ESO-05). Buddhism and Jainism in the 6th century B.C. that spoke up against caste divisions and social inequality. This struggle was carried forward and saw its culmination in the rise of the medieval movement of **bhakti** or 'selfless' devotion to a single God, with which this unit is primarily concerned.

Hinduism was greatly criticised and faced many movements against it (see Unit 19 on Hinduism in Block 5 of this course ESO-05 which will provide a background). Of these, the **bhakti** movement has great significance. This is so because even though the **bhakti** movement was against some of the tenets of Hinduism, much of what is a part of Hinduism in later ages developed as an outcome of the bhakti tradition. This tradition was widespread, in fact from North to South India. We will outline its development in the South and North separately.

### 24.2.1 Paths and Pillars of Bhakti

From a modern historical standpoint the development of **bhakti** is the coming together of considerably earlier theistic tendencies in three major religious traditions of ancient India:

- i) the sacrificial cult of the invading Aryans and the recitation of the Brahmana priests that become the foundation of the Vedas;
- ii) the practice of bodily mortification and groups known as Sramanas probably continuing traditions of earlier inhabitants of India but soon adapted by some of the Aryans; and
- iii) the pre Aryan cults of spirits and village goddesses inhabiting trees and rocks and protecting special people or special groups.

Those who worship Vishnu as the Supreme deity are known as **Vaishnavas**; likewise those who accord the Supreme place to Shiva are known as **Saivas**; and those who are devotees of the Goddess of Power are known as **Saktas**. Each sect is subdivided into lineages of teachers and teachings. The major forms of **bhakti** are divided according to the various mood of the devotees. Raw emotion or bhava is transformed in drama to a refined mood or **rasa**. Each combination of **bhava** or **rasa** uses a particular human relationship, or devotional stances such as servant to master or child to parent or friend to friend, parent to child and beloved to lover. While **bhakti** stresses passionate attachment it is in striking contrast with Yoga which stresses detachment. Yet many forms of **bhakti** do talk of detachment such as that taught in the **Bhagavad Gita**. The bhakti movements stand religiously between the extreme ascetic paths and popular Hindu religiosity. Bhakti generally shares the ascetic concern for **moksa** — release from finite existence and realization of transcendent beatitude. What is primary is communion with the lord.

A few **bhaktas** make the total commitment of time and style of life characteristic of Hindu 'renouncers' spending whole days in chanting and singing the praise of their Lord. **Bhakti** shares with popular Hinduism the basic ritual of **puja**, worship



Kabir Das a prominent Bhakti saint.

of the diety in image form with fruit, flower and vegetables which are returned after worship as **prasada** that is material substance filled with the Lord's grace. Such puja may take place in the home shrine or local temple. The worship could be for any spiritual or mundane purpose. There are also distinctive **bhakti** rituals — communal singing of hymns and chants, performance of dramas, dances and chants and recital of heroic deeds of Vishnu.

These three paths of **Bhakti** that Lord Krishna offered to Arjuna were:

- i) the path of knowledge or **jnana**;
- ii) the path of action or **karma** and
- iii) the path of devotion or **bhakti**

The Sanskrit term **bhakti** is most often translated as "devotion" and **bhaktimarg** as "path of devotion". **Bhakti is the divine-human relationship as experienced from the human side.** There are at least three major forms of **bhakti** that is Vaisnavas, Saivas, and worshippers of the great power (Sakti). Each sect is divided into many subjects. Bhakti is between popular religion and asceticism. **Bhakti** shares the concern for **moksa**, that is release from the bondages of life on earth. The ritual of **puja** is very important. There are other rituals too — communal singing of hymns and chants; recitations of epics; recounting of sacred lore.

It is this last path of devotion that forms the basis of a religious tradition that survives and proliferates today even across international boundaries. The basic teaching of this tradition was the idea of 'loving devotion' by concentrating upon the image of a single God and without any thought for oneself, as being the way of liberation of ones soul. Any God could be the focus of one's devotion. This God was then seen as ones personal God or **ishta deva**. **Ishta deva** is a deity that the worshipper chooses as a personal diety and accords it personal devotion. The most often chosen God for ones devotion we find, has been Krishna and most of the bhakti tradition has evolved around him. It is particularly his character as the incarnation of Vishnu and his relationship to the Gopis and Radha in particular, which are of central importance here. Gopis is the name given to the ladies who were worshippers of Krishna and with whom he played many of his divine games (**lila**). In fact, the love that the Gopis had for Krishna has been regarded as the best example of the devotion of the individual for God. The idea of 'self abandonment' or the forgetting of everything in the presence of one's God, is also seen as an important part of the **bhakta** or devotee's devotion to God.

This particular form of relationship between the God and devotee has been called **viraha bhakti**. **Viraha bhakti** is the name given to exclusive personal devotion to Sri Krishna where feeling of separation or longing is felt for the deity by the devotee. The devotion to Krishna and the **bhakti** cult that arose around him became prominent in South India around the 8th century. We now turn to the pillars of **bhakti**.

The two main pillars of the bhakti tradition are 'love' and 'meditation'. The 'love' is for God, and it is ecstatic in nature as well as symbolising a feeling of bliss or happiness that is unparalleled; and an intimacy or closeness with God like that with ones beloved. The idea that is being conveyed here is to be lost in the love of God as though He were a beloved. At the same time the relationship that arises here may be one of dependence upon the God. On the other hand, as far as the aspect of meditation is concerned, there are two kinds of meditation in **bhakti**. These are:

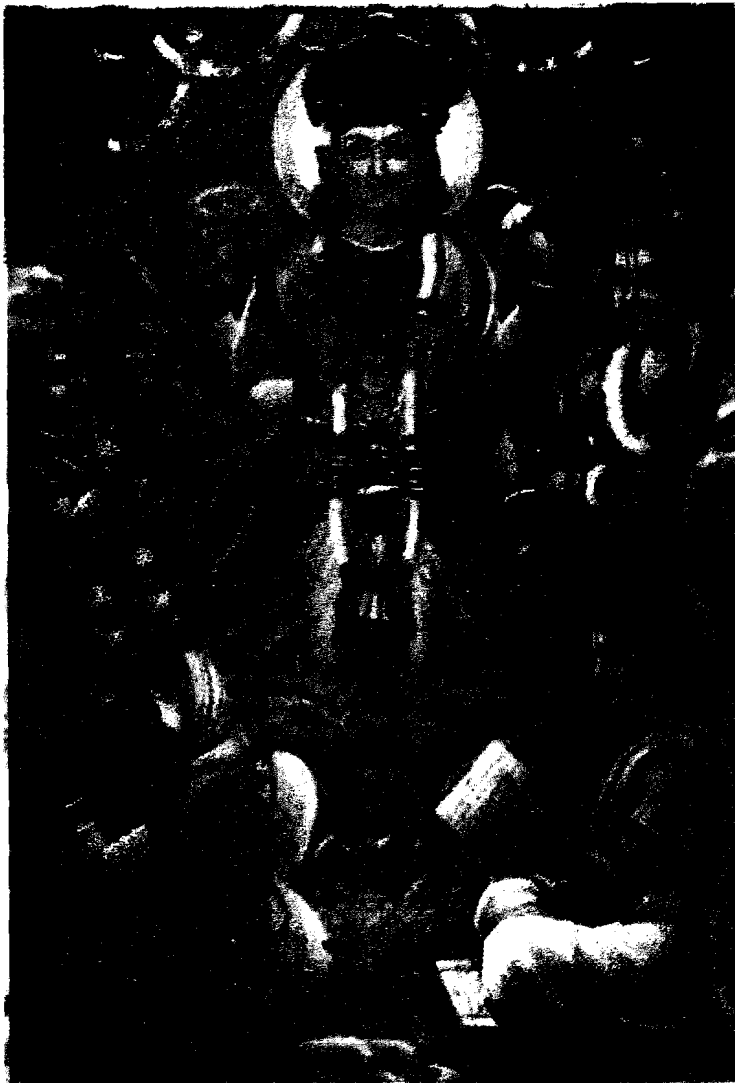
- i) **saguna bhakti**, where one meditates on God as a separate being, through disciplined practice;

- ii) **nirguna bhakti**, where God and self are merged into one and little distinction is made between self and God.

### 24.2.2 The Bhakti Tradition : South

The Krishna cult arose in South India around the 8th century. We now trace here, the development of the **bhakti** tradition in the South. The 8th century saw the rise, in the Tamil country, of persons who called themselves the Alvars .e. men who have intimate and intuitive knowledge of God. They claimed to have an intensely personal relationship with God. They rejected the caste system by recruiting saints to their movement, from all divisions of society and refusing to use Sanskrit as a language, as it was Brahmanic in nature. An important saint here was **Nam'alvar** who spoke of the oneness of God and the individual soul. He also stressed that unleashed passionate spirituality among people was the only way to show one's devotion to the **ishtadeva**. There were also other followers such as **Yamunacharya** and **Nathamuni**, through whose efforts, the bhakti movement spread and developed. Besides the Alvars, the Southern **bhakti** movement also found expression in the work of **Ramanuja** in the 13th century. He primarily made the contribution of stressing, devotion to a personal deity and saw the Bhagvad Gita as a major work in the **bhakti** of Krishna. He represented the **saguna** tradition.

Unit 25 on Veerashaivism deals with aspects of Veerashaivism and **Bhakti**. We would like to mention aspects of it in this unit. In all there were 12 Alvars and a



Lord Vishnu with adoring devotees.

major form of their contribution to the **Bhakti** tradition was in the hymns that focused on the divine lord as the recipient of one's devotion. Other than the rise of the **Krishna bhakti** in South India, we also find a major tradition arising around the worship of Siva as the main deity or **ishta deva**. It was in the 12th century that we find the rise of this tradition in the form of a left handed sect of Vira Saivas or Lingayats. The founder of this sect was **Basava**, a Brahmin prime minister of the principality of Kalyan. This tradition denounced both the caste system and image worship. Very interestingly, even though the founder was a Brahmin, this movement was anti-Brahmin. The Lingayats were identified by the wearing of an image of the **lingam**, enclosed in either silver or brass, around the neck. This **lingam** was worn by all Lingayats irrespective of sex, age or caste. The wearing of the **lingam** was symbolic of the oneness of all who worshipped Siva as the **ishta deva**. **This was a tradition that clearly rejected the idea of inequality that Hinduism professed between men.** It was open to all castes and social divisions and recognised all as equal in the worship of the Siva **lingam**. Once again, like the Alvars, much of this **bhakti** tradition was in the form of lyrics and hymns and 'sayings' or **vacana**, in the Kannada language. These were essentially **bhakti** poems of personal devotion to a God and clearly rejected the great tradition of Vedic religion. These mocked orthodox beliefs and recitations and questioned the classical belief systems, social customs, Vedic rituals and so on.

#### Activity 1

Talk to several Hindus from the North and the South of India about the **Bhakti Tradition**. Record what they say about the similarities and differences between the two types of Bhakti traditions. Write down your findings in two to five pages of your notebook and discuss them, if possible, with other students at the Study Centre.

To put it simply then, Veerashaivism or Lingayatism was a protest movement that through the method of **bhakti** and selfless abandonment, lashed out against the orthodox and polytheistic nature of Hinduism. It stressed the oneness not just of God and devotee, as in the Krishna cult but also of oneness of the devotee with the people. Thus we have the famous legend about a **Saiva** saint called Ghantakarna, who realising the supremacy of Siva as the sublime God, offered his body to Siva. This is the supreme sacrifice, to offer oneself in toto to a deity. That is to lay down one's life at his feet. Thus, the legend goes, Ghantakarna's body became the threshold of a temple to Siva, his limbs became the frames of the door, and his head, the bell of the temple. Such was the extent of a devout **bhakta's bhakti**. The main



A Hindu prayer room decorated with pictures of various deities on the wall.

reason for the popularity of this tradition of **bhakti** in the South was the social change it signified in terms of social upliftment of the low and poorer divisions of society in all spheres of life. Further, since central to the **bhakti** tradition in South India was the use of devotional songs in the language of the people, it reached out to a larger population and contributed to the unity of the people on various social and cultural levels.

### 24.2.3 The Bhakti Tradition : North

From the South of India we find that the **bhakti** tradition spread to Central and North India. Each added its own local traditional beliefs and devotional forms to both the Vaishnava and Saiva **bhakti** traditions. Thus we find in Central India, particularly in the Marathi belt, Krishna **bhakti** finding a stronghold. Its most famous saint here was Tukaram (1598-1649). He and his followers worshipped Krishna in the form of 'Vitobha' or 'Vithala'. The main theme here was that of seeking liberation within oneself, by becoming one or merging with the Lord. It was around the 15th century that a spiritual descendent of Alvars, Vallabhacharya (1479-1531) went further North and gave life to the Krishna cult in the Mathura region. This survives even today as probably the most vital centre of Krishna **bhakti**. The three major figures associated with **bhakti** in this period are Surdas (1485-1563) who spoke of losing oneself in Krishna; Mirabai (1500-1550) who abandoned her position as Queen of Mewar for her **bhakti** to Krishna as 'Girdhar Gopal'.

All of us are familiar with the **bhakti** of Mirabai. It is believed that such was the intensity of her devotion that Krishna absorbed her soul into his own. Finally we have the significant role played in this period by Chaitanya (1485-1533). Chaitanya played a major role in the establishment of Mathura as a **bhakti** centre. he professed that the highest knowledge of all was the knowledge of devotion to Krishna and the greatest of sorrows was separation or **viraha** from Krishna. Further, he taught that the longing that Radha and the Gopis had for Krishna should be duplicated in the soul of every devotee in his search for oneness with Krishna. Although the movement now was open to all social groups and castes it could not totally do away with the caste system.

#### Box 24.01

Chaitanya was born in 1485 in a Brahmin family in Bengal. When Bengal had been under Muslim control for almost 300 years. Hindu religion under Muslim retreated into an orthodox pattern of living and worship. Chaitanya learned Sanskrit as a matter of course in his childhood. When he grew up he became a schoolmaster and disapproved of **bhakti**. He was not interested in religion. However he could not ignore the fact that all his eight elder brothers and sisters had died before him. His meeting with the ascetic Isvara Puri also changed his life at the shrine in Gaya. He began having mystic visions that he could not fully describe in words. Isvara Puri initiated Chaitanya into a mantra and Chaitanya became a worshipper of Krishna.

Even so we find today in Mathura and specifically Virindaban, how the lives of the people are totally tied up to their worship of Krishna (at home and in the temple), as a child or as the young lover of the Gopis. In this small town near Mathura, the people wake when Krishna awakes in the temple, they eat when he eats, they sleep when he sleeps, and their every moment is devoted to thoughts of Krishna to the extent that they even greet each other with a "Radhe-Radhe". So totally enwrapped are their lives with that of God. It is this form of Northern **bhakti** that represents the best example of **Saguna bhakti**.

The **bhakti** movement reached further North-east from here and was carried to Assam in the 16th century where the Metheis, a local tribe, are Vaishnavites.

Besides the Vaishnava tradition coming North we also find that the Siva **bhakti** tradition also found a foothold in North India, particularly in Kashmir. Its greatest follower and proponent was Abhinavagupta and later one of the Kashmiri women saints, Lalla. Although Siva **bhakti** found many followers here, they found the renderings of the tradition difficult to follow, even so their numbers did not diminish and 'Shivaratri' is one of the most celebrated occasions in Kashmir. It may once again be noted, why the **bhakti** tradition became so popular in North India. Against the strict and orthodox character of Hinduism that stressed the inequality of men before God and thus did not allow all men and women equal access to the divine and to religion, the **bhakti** tradition offered an alternative. It was an alternative path of worship through devotion, open to all sections of society and offering all of them equality before God and in the access to the divine. Since it used local idioms, language and songs, it reached out to a far larger population and appealed to all sections of society. It celebrated the relationship of the individual to God, as a very personal relationship and rejected the Vedic form of worship through intermediaries. Moreover, its rejection of the caste system and the inequalities subscribed by it, were openings that a large section of society were looking for. **Bhakti** thus offered a way of relating to the divine that was personalised, unique and fulfilling.

**Check Your Progress 1**

- 1) What were the basic teachings of Hinduism that the **bhakti** tradition protested against? Answer in 5-10 lines.

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- 2) What is **bhakti**? How was it an alternative to the prevalent religious trend? Answer using 5-10 lines.

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3) Briefly describe the three types of bhakti: **viraha**, **saguna** and **nirguna**. Answer using 10 lines.

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### 24.3 SUFISM

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Having examined the basic teachings of **bhakti** and how it created a new path for devotion or religious worship, we now proceed to consider the influence of Islam on the Indian subcontinent, and the consequence that it had for the **bhakti** tradition in particular. As an offshoot of this influence we have the role of the **Sufi** movement in India.

Islam as a world religion confronted Hinduism in full force rather than getting absorbed into it. Historically, we find that the beginning of the 10th century there were Muslim invasions. This is the time when Mahmud of Ghazni invaded the Indian subcontinent 17 times. In early 16th century, the Moghuls invaded India. It was in the later half of the 17 century that the Hindus launched a counter offensive. It was particularly in the struggle by the Maratha King Shivaji, that the moral power of Hinduism received impetus and the **bhakti** tradition resurged as a response to the impact of Islam. The Indian tradition tried to find a response within its own spiritual condition since the Muslim ruler discriminated against the Hindu who were their subjects. Further, with tis contact between the two different social and cultural traditions, interaction and synthesis began particularly on the level of social custom, tradition and practice of the Hindus and the Muslims. At the same time we find that the Islamic, mystic and ecstatic, tradition of Sufism greatly influenced the **bhakti** saints. To understand the nature of this influence let us briefly consider what **Sufism** was about.

#### 24.3.1 What is Sufism?

In the beginning **Sufism** developed in Mesopotamia, Arabia, Iran and modern Afghanistan. It was formalized by the end of the 8th century. Right from the beginning there was a hiatus between the **ulemas** and the mystics. The latter claimed to be delving into the interior of religion, which depended on the heart. The **Sufi** and **bhakti** traditions are characterised by adherence to religious text, governmental authority and opposed to external ritualism of prayer. The **Sufis** aim for a direct relationship with God and thus their basic features incorporate strands from various sources including Hinduism.

Ritu Dewan has pointed out that as a consequence of the 12th century Mongal invasion many Sufis took shelter in India, especially in Multan, Punjab, and Sindh. One of the greatest Sufi mystics Maulana Jalaluddin Rumi (1207-1273) was very influenced by Indian folklore and even wrote a poem dedicated to the

**flute of Krishna.** He founded the Maulavi Sufi order in which music and dance were spiritual methods. Soami ji Maharaj founder of the Radha Soami sect was much influenced by Rumi who he often quoted in his discourses. Guru Nanak too was inspired by Rumi. Rumi and Baba Farid's compositions (1173-1265) have been included in the Granth Sahib together with those of Kabir.

Guru Nanak was called guru of the Hindus and pir of the Mussalmans. By the end of the 16th century the **Bhakti** movement had covered the entire north India resulting in an intermingling of Hindu mysticism with Sufism. Kabir's following verse illustrates this:

The Mussalmans accept the Tarifat  
The Hindus, the Vedas and Puranas  
but for me the books of both religions are useless  
(Kabir, 1440-1518).

Sufis were also against external ritualism in religion. Prayers and fasting were held to be inferior to works of charity. And Jihad not external war but a fight against the lower self of man. Some Sufis like Shah Abdul Latif and Sachal Sarmast called upon people to "strike the Mullahs".

In Bengal the influence of Chaitanya was felt on a popular level, specially on the Baul movement. Muslim Bauls followed the Sufi tradition and Hindu Bauls the Vaishnavite. Both of these traditions expressed themselves saying:

You have been to Gaya,  
Bcnares and Vrindavan,  
and have travelled through  
many rivers and forests and  
other places of pilgrimáge  
But away have you seen in all  
these anything of Him of Whom  
you have heard?

Sufi literature of Rumi and Hafiz (d. 1389) influenced Raja RamMohan Roy and Devendranath Tagore, and Rabindranath Tagore. Sufi literature remains fresh today though long years have passed since it was first penned:

Is there one God in the **peepul** tree and  
another in the **babool**?  
If Islam was created by Allah  
then who created Kufir  
If Ka'ba be the House of God  
Why find fault with the temple?  
The same light burns bright  
within the temple and the mosque.  
(Sufi Bhai Dalpatram 1768-1842)

Thus we see that there was a commingling of the Bhakti and Sufi movements.

Sufism, specialises in the spiritual dimension of Islam. It believes in revelation as a source of contact with the sacred and attempts to get a personal experience of the unity of God. This leads to a realization that God alone is to be adored. This is basic to Sufism. While orthodox priests of Islam feel that this desire to merge in the unity of God is anti-Islam the Sufis do not feel this is so. In fact they feel it is closely related to Islamic doctrine. The two are interdependent. An analogy given to clarify the relationship is that of the kernel of the walnut and the shell. Neither can possibly do without the other.

Another example is that Islamic doctrine is like the circumference of a circle at the centre of the centre of which lies the ultimate Reality (Haququat). Sufism is a mediator between Islamic doctrine and Ultimate Reality.

Sufism can be explained through three basic religious attitudes of

- 1) **Islam**
- 2) **Iman**
- 3) **Ihsan**

**Islam** is the attitude of submission to the will of Allah.

**Iman** designates a firm faith in the teachings of the Islam.

**Ihsan** is to adore Allah though one may not see him. Sufism is the spiritual progress of a devotee from the initial stage of **Islam** to the ultimate stage of **Ihsan**.

As **Islam** in India, it came to enfold in its cloak, the system of monasticism and a defined way of community life. The **Sufi** mystic however was in no way forced to live a defined and organised life. By the 9th century, these **Sufis** who had come to form a brotherhood and a definite way of community life, also began wearing a particular kind of coarse woollen garment known as **sufi** and thus came to be called **sufis**. **Sufis**, though Muslim, are considered to be pantheistic mystics. This was a basic difference with orthodox Islam but in common with the bhakti school of the Hindus.

The **Sufis** followed the Quran, and sought to reveal their purpose in life through their sayings, actions and the path that they followed. This path was often shared by different mystics and came to be called **tariqah** or **sufism**. The path of 'unselfishness' through either renouncing the world and ones possessions and desires or by adopting an attitude of patience, humility and charity, towards God, were essential to being a **sufi**. The **sufis** also had a special method of their own for producing the state of mind in which they would have revelations. They called this **dhikr**.

Its simplest form is the continual repetition of the name of Allah with intense concentration on the thought of God, and losing one's individuality in this. If we examine these teachings closely we can see how the idea of **dhikr** which was central to Sufi thought is similar to the idea in **bhakti** tradition of concentrating on the **ishta deva**, in one's quest for liberation particularly in the **saguna** tradition. Thus, **Sufism** mainly professed mysticism and upon this the **Sufis** built the basic theological doctrines of their religious movement. A major practice devised by the **Sufis** for stimulating religious emotion was listening to music and song or **sama**. These songs are capable of sending one into a trance. The subject of the songs was love, which was often erotic. One could not clearly distinguish whether the love being talked about here was human love or the love for the deity. Once again this is similar to the love in the **bhakti** tradition between the **bhakta** and the God as was expressed for Krishna by the Gopis.

We find, many attempts were made to define the **Sufi** in different ways. *In general it was however agreed that the Sufi had metaphysical, social and philanthropic characteristics.* Further, the **Sufi** doctrine we find was moulded by different influences such as the developments in Muhammadan monotheistic ideas or the influence of Greek and Indian philosophies. Moreover, we can also include here, political, social and intellectual conditions that favoured the growth of mysticism. The **Sufis** were very strict about accepting disciples or **murid**. Slowly however, as

followers flocked to them, many Sufis became recognised as teachers of **Shaikhs** and **Pirs** and 'orders' arose within **Sufism**. The four major orders that arose were the (a) Qudiri (b) Suhrawardi (c) Chisti and (d) Naqshbandi. By the 13th century, **Sufism** had become a movement in its own right in India.

### 24.3.2 The Spread of Sufism in India

**Sufism** mainly flowed into Indian from Arabia, Mesopotamia, and Iran. We have accounts of the various saints of different orders spreading **Sufi** teachings in different parts of India: To name a few, we have the well-known Shaikh Muinuddin Chisti who had established himself in Ajmer and Shaikh Nizamuddin Auliya whose teachings and followers spread all over India.

As far as the spread of **Sufism** in India is concerned, its character changed to adapt to the Hindu environment. Thus, the metaphysical aspect was avoided and personal instruction of disciples was undertaken. Not all Sufis however took disciples. Those who did were called **Shaikhs**. The **Shaikh** besides being a teacher was regarded as a protector, friend, companion and benefactor or **Wali**. The teacher was also believed to possess supernatural powers or **Karamah**. The **Shaikh** or **pir** was regarded as the spiritual guide of the disciple or **murid**. We find that most of the people who came to the Sufi saints, desired to use their spiritual powers to cure an illness or fulfil a wish. Even today we find that of the many devout who may visit the resting place of a pir, i.e. his **dargah**, come there to seek the fulfilment of a wish or a blessing.

There were as mentioned earlier four main orders among the Sufis. Each of these we find different from the other in the emphasis of its teachings and the extent to which it spread in India. All four orders however regarded the **Sharia** as the spiritual guide. All four believed that a **Sufi** should have no worldly possessions. Each order had over time found devout disciples who in turn had reached the stature of being capable of having their own disciples and were known as **Khalifahs**. These **Khalifahs** played important roles in the spread of their order's teachings.

Of the four orders, the Suhrawardis, were the most orthodox and played a leading role in the spread of **Sufism** in the North-West of India. They believed that to be



Sufism is an eclectic faith and borrows ideas and ways of worship from both Hinduism and Islam; for example Sai Baba of

able to perform their functions better, they had to maintain good relations with the political authority of the time.

Of these orders, it is however the Chisti Sufis who are best known. They spread all over the country and their principal Shaikh Nizamuddin, settled in Delhi and gave the order its expansive character. The Chistis consistently maintained that the political authority was an influence to be avoided. By the time Nizamuddin died in 1325 and his successor Nasiruddin took over, in 1356, a spiritual empire had begun to form. It reached its peak in the personality of Shaikh Nizamuddin Auliya. By this time the Chisti order had spread to Bihar and Bengal and had an even older order in Rajasthan that began with Khwaja Muinuddin Chisti in Ajmer in the 1190s. The expansion of this order into the Deccan was carried out by Shaikh Gesu-daraz.

#### Box 24.02

**Sufism** is one of the creative manifestations of **Islam**. It is a mystic sect which developed out of Islam. **Sufism seeks mystical union**. Many **Sufi** saints who were responsible for developing **sufism** include **Hasan al-Basvi, Ibrahim Ibn Adham Rabiati Adawiyah, Dhu al nun al Misri**. Each of these saints developed **Sufism** in their own way. For example Al-Hallaj was initiated into **sufism** while still a teenager. He lived in relative seclusion (for twenty years) and was trained by many masters. His basic teaching was moral reforms and intense Union with the Beloved. In mystical ecstasy he cried out loud: "Ana-al-Hagg!" ("I am the Divine Truth"). Al-Hallaj was decapitated and burnt by his detractors but he died with dignity and grace believing it to be the will of God (Encyclopaedia of Religion).

*It is imported to note that because of the presence of differences between the order and individualistic approach of many of the Shaikhs, a single Muslim unified community of disciples could not be formed. Instead, each order had its devout disciples who together formed a united brotherhood. Overtime, Sufism lost its spiritual intensity and became missionary in character. By the end of the 14th century, Hinduism had evoked a response in the Sufis. The devotional character of Hindi songs and the language, had brought the Sufis and Hindu closer. An intermixing of the two people on a cultural level had begun to take place. In fact we find that a common ground had opened up in which the mutual acceptance of the aesthetic values of the Hindus and Muslims had come to be accepted by each other. This interchange of cultures will be discussed in the following section that specifically deals with the meeting of Sufism and the bhakti tradition.*

## 24.4 SUFISM AND BHAKTI : A COMPARISON

Having outlined what the tradition of **Sufism** entailed let us now consider the role of **Sufism** in the **bhakti** tradition. You may have already noticed that much of what the **Sufis** taught was very similar to the **bhakti** teaching of concentrating upon a God and the significance of sacred music and song. This interaction between the two (as mentioned earlier in sub-section 24.3.1) it is believed to have led to the creation of a medieval mysticism which was independent of sectarian or orthodox practices and **disclaimed particularly caste practices and atrocities**. The first **Sufi** teacher who came to India was, as mentioned earlier, Khwaja Muinuddin Chisti, who arrived in Delhi in 1193 and settled in Pushkar in Ajmer. He had both Hindu and Muslim followers. We are all familiar with the 'Urs' at his **dargah** in Ajmer, to which flocks of followers come, treating it as a major pilgrimage centre even today. *As mentioned, these Sufis, were Islamic mystics who sought the path of salvation through an ardent and passionate love for God.* The teachings of the **Sufis** greatly influenced not only followers but many saints of the **bhakti** tradition who came to combine in themselves, **sufi** and **bhakti** teachings. The two

most significant figures here from the 15th/16th century, were Kabir and Guru Nanak. We will briefly consider their role in the development of medieval mysticism.

### 24.4.1 Growth of Medieval Mysticism

An important role in the growth of medieval mysticism was played by Ramananda (1370-1440) who himself was a follower of Ramanuja. Ramananda challenged caste divisions, questioned traditional ceremonies and accepted the Hindu philosophy of divisions, questioned traditional ceremonies and accepted the Hindu philosophy of **jnana** or knowledge, meditation or **yoga** and devotion or **bhakti**. He had many disciples of which twelve were the more important and came from low castes. The most famous of these disciples was Kabir, the son of a Muslim weaver. It is believed that though, he early in his life abandoned the Muslim faith, he retained the strict monotheism of **Islam** and an aversion to the caste system. He saw religion as a personal concern and stressed relationship between man, God and his teacher or **guru**. He combined in him, elements of both the **Sufi** and **bhakti** traditions, claiming that both Allah and Rama were the same thing.

Since he was trying to reach out to the common people he used the dialect or its variant as the language of communication. He stressed the importance of both material and spiritual things in one's life. He had both Hindu and Muslim followers and was non-sectarian. It is possible however that his Hindu followers are greater in number. Much of Kabir's life and work is derived from reconstructing its course from the **dohas** or **sakhis** rendered by him. These were essentially rhymed poems, set to music. There is much debate however about how many of these **dohas** were written by Kabir himself and how many of his followers or the Kabir **panthis**. Thus, there is doubt about the legitimacy of some of the sayings that are attributed to Kabir. Many it is believed are those of his devotees. These **dohas**, it is believed were very often included by the **Sufi** saints into their **sama**.

Important among Kabir's followers was Dadu (1544-1608) who also belonged to a Muslim family. He made the important contribution of seeking a unification of faiths, and founded the **Brahma-Sampradaya** where God would be worshipped without ritual or orthodoxy. As a mystic he contributed to the idea of the beauty of the world to be discovered not by becoming a recluse or an ascetic but by living a full life and enjoying what it had to offer.

#### Activity 2

Find out from some of your Muslim friends about the **Sufi** orders and their belief patterns. Ascertain from them whether **Sufis** are non Muslims or a different type of Muslim. Who have been the famous **Sufis**? If possible try to visit one or more of their commemoration sites where their graves are. Write down your findings and experiences in two to five pages of your notebook and discuss the same if possible with fellow students in the Study Centre.

At the same time as Kabir we have, the contribution of Guru Nanak of Punjab (1469-1538). There is greater certainty about his dates and origins than those of Kabir. Like Kabir, he too was a monotheist and was greatly opposed to the caste system. His disciples, the Sikhs, were organised into a close knit community. His teachings and writings and those of the subsequent Gurus were compiled together by the fifth Guru, Arjun, into the sacred book of the Sikhs, the **Adi-Grantha**. The Sikhs represented a **bhakti** sect, where their **bhakti** was sung in the form of the **Gurbani**. Guru Nanak's religious renderings we find, also incorporated the best of **sufi** influence and much of his teachings reflect the union of **bhakti** and **sufi** practices.

## 24.4.2 Sufi-Bhakti Interaction

This interaction of the Sufi and bhakti traditions occurred to give to the lives of Kabir and Nanak a peculiar flavour. Kabir was linked to the **Sufis**, not just in terms of the mystical nature of his renderings but also on the level or organization of thought. In the **Khazinat al-asfiya**, by Ghulam Sarvar Lahori, we find that Kabir is identified, rightly or wrongly as a **Sufi** and related to the Chistis. Scholars have argued in recent times that this, however, presents a chronological error. In these writings, he is believed to have visited many **Sufi** centres and is even believed to have debated with **Sufi** saints. None however denies the significant position that his **dohas** had come to occupy. Guru Nanak too it is believed had encounters with **Sufi** teachers or **Shaikhs** of which a single encounter, with a **Shaikh** Ibrahim, of Pakpattan near Multan is considered authentic by scholars.

On most fronts, however, the available documentation on contact between **Sufi** mystics and the Hindu **sants** or saints, are contradicted. The most convincing field for the consideration of an inter-change between the **Sufis** and the **sants** can be found in the themes of their poetry and devotional songs particularly the attitude of the two traditions towards the “love relationship” between disciple, God and teacher which is central to both traditions. Thus, both traditions shared the nature of the pain and suffering of the devotees in their relationship to the divine. This suffering, which we earlier called **viraha**, in ones love for the God as beloved, is found in Kabir’s writings too. Scholars compare this **bhakti** notion of **viraha** to the **Sufi** notion of **ishq** which is expressed not through **viraha** but **dard**. It leads to an experience that is called **atish** which is similar to the experience of **agni** or burning of one’s soul in **viraha**. The ideas in Kabir’s **dohas** about love, separation and suffering are found revealed in the lyrics of **Sufi** poetry as well (see sub-section 24.3.1), as we can see. Both, Kabir’s **nirguna** bhakti and the **Sufi** tradition, also speak of the idea of how without Lord and devotee, there can be no devotion. There is in fact another sphere of the **bhakti** tradition where the **Sufi** influence is seen. This is in the context of hagiographic writing about the **bhakti** saints. Here the influence of the **Sufi** tradition is revealed in the style of writing. This tradition of biographic writing about the lives of saints had existed in the **Sufi** tradition from the 15th century and before.

## 24.4.3 Bhakti-Sufi Teachings

It is important to remember that the relationship between the **Sufi** and **bhakti** saints was reciprocal and the **Sufis** too were influenced by the **bhakti** tradition. Thus, besides this major similarity in terms of the method of devotion and its expression, we find that the **Sufi** tradition also produced its saints such as the Shah Karim and Shah Inayet from the 17th century in whose teachings little distinction was made between the divine as Allah or Rama or Hari, similar to what Kabir sought to say, and revealing the influence of the **bhakti** tradition.

In the section above, we have tried to point out how medieval mysticism revealed a certain sycretism between the Hindu and Muslim traditions of **bhakti** and **Sufism**. The two reveal a major similarity in the nature of devotion and openness to all sections of society which made both, relatively more egalitarian. The influence of **Sufi** thought on the lives of Kabir and Nanak is seen very clearly. Guru Nanak on many of his journeys is believed to have been wearing **Sufi** robes. In fact so significant was his attempt at bringing the **bhakti** of **gurbani** and **sufi** teachings together, that when he died, **his last rites were performed according to the customs of both the movements Sufi and Bhakti**; and two different religious structures mark his resting place. Kabir’s life was also devoted to teachings about salvation, liberation, true love and suffering in ones devotion to the Lord. We also saw how there were major similarities between Kabir’s or the **bhakti** traditions

notions of **viraha** and **agni** and the **Sufi** ideas of **ishq**, **dard** and **atish**. Further both **Kabir** and **Nanak** though mystical, were also concerned with the inequities represented by caste society and Hindu orthodoxy in general and spoke up against it.

### Check Your Progress 2

1) What are the main teachings of **Sufism** ? State in 5-7 lines.

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2) Point out in 10 lines some similarities between the **Bhakti** and **Sufi** traditions, which would reveal interaction having taken place between them.

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## 24.5 LET US SUM UP

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In this unit we discussed **Bhakti** and **Sufism**. We began by examining the **Bhakti** tradition, both in the South (from where it began) and the North (to where it spread). We then focused on the **Sufi** tradition and explained what **Sufism** is, and described its spread in India. Finally we made a comparison between **Sufism** and **bhakti**, covering the growth of medieval mysticism, **sufi-bhakti** interaction and **Bhakti-Sufi** teaching. In this way we have clarified **Bhakti** and **Sufism**.

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## 24.6 KEY WORDS

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**Bhakti** : means an act of devotion where one forgets everything except one's worship of the **ishta deva**.

**Ecstatic** : that which makes one feel joyous and may even send one into a trance.



<b>Hagiography</b>	: refers to the writing of a saint's life.
<b>Incarnation</b>	: means to give concrete or visible form to a spiritual notion. It is believed that Vishnu had 10 incarnations each of which appeared at a moment of social crisis. Of these Krishna was one. Some of the others include Varaha, Mohini, Parashurama. The Hindi word for incarnation is <b>avatar</b> .
<b>Ishta Deva</b>	: a personal God to whom one dedicates ones worship in search of salvation.
<b>Lingam</b>	: is the idolic representation of Siva that we find in temples. This Siva <b>lingam</b> is made very small and then kept in a metal container that the Lingayats were around their neck.
<b>Mystic</b>	: that which deals with things of spiritual significance. A person who lives the life of a mystic, seeks to obtain unity with the divine or God through contemplation and selfless devotion.
<b>Polytheistic</b>	: essentially refers to belief in more than one God.
<b>Salvation</b>	: means the saving of the soul or a belief that one can be delivered of one's sins, and reach heaven. It is a religious notion used extensively in Christianity as well.
<b>Selfless</b>	: without thinking of oneself. So 'selfless' devotion' would be devotion where one thinks only of the God and not of oneself and what one will get out of such devotion.
<b>Sufi</b>	: refers to the mystic saints that are a sect in the Islamic tradition.
<b>Syncreticism</b>	: the unification of different schools of thought or sects or beliefs.
<b>Tenets</b>	: refers to basic doctrine, dogmas or principles of a religion.

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## 24.7 FURTHER READINGS

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### Check Your Progress 1

- 1) The basic teaching against which the **bhakti** tradition protested was the Hindu belief in society being divided into many social groups that were unequal in nature and gave rise to the caste system. This inequality meant that these men were unequal even in the eyes of God and were not allowed to worship God as others could. It also lashed out against the orthodox and polytheistic nature of Hinduism.
- 2) **Bhakti** is a reference to the act of devotion or worship of a particular deity without consideration for oneself or any other deity. One is believed to become totally involved in one's worship to a chosen deity. It developed as a movement in the medieval period in India. Lord Krishna and Shiva have been the main deity's around whom the **bhakti** tradition arose. The movement offered an alternative to the orthodox nature of Hinduism. It particularly stressed the idea of the equality of all men in the eyes of God and rejected the unfair nature of the caste system.
- 3) The three types of **bhakti** can be described as follows:
  - i) **Viraha** : The word viraha means separation. The main aspect therefore of **viraha bhakti** is the devotion of the devotee to the God, in the absence of the deity or, the feeling of loss that arises when the God goes away and the devotion that arises out of this. It is called **viraha bhakti** as it is a particular form of deep devotion that arises in the absence of someone.
  - ii) **Saguna** : This is **bhakti** where through disciplined practice the devotee comes to worship God as an entity separate from the devotee and above him. This is possible through the worshipping of a personal deity or **ishta deva**. This form is mostly found in the South of India.
  - iii) **Nirguna** : This is **bhakti** where the aim is to seek union or fusion with the deity whom one is worshipping. This is once again possible only through worship and years of devotion. It is believed that the deity through such devotion becomes so pleased that he absorbs his devotee into his own body. As for example, the texts tell us that Mirabai was absorbed by Lord Krishna into his body. This form of **bhakti** is found mostly in North India.

### Check Your Progress 2

- 1) Sufism is a mystic movement. The **Sufis** are mystic teachers and for centuries have had disciples. **Sufis** follow the Quran and believe in a life of unselfishness and renouncement of worldly possessions. They also believe in an attitude of patience, humility and charity. The basic teachings include the devotion to God or Allah through a concentration on his being and by repeating his name. This is known as **dhikr**. It encourages the listening of music and song to create religious emotion. This is called **sama**.
- 2) If we closely look at the nature of **bhakti** and **Sufi** traditions we find many similarities between them. To begin with in both traditions there is an emphasis on concentrating attention upon a single deity. In **Sufism**, this is called **dhikr** and **ishq** in **bhakti**, it is the idea of the **ishta deva**. Secondly, the notion of **viraha** in **bhakti** can be compared to what the **Sufis** call **dard**. Just as **viraha** leads to experiencing **agni** (fire in the soul) **dard** leads to **atish**. Finally, both the traditions as we see talk about a love between the devotee and the deity and in both cases this lover for the deity resembles the love that one feels for one's beloved and the nature of pain and suffering of the devotee in his relationship to the divine, are found in both traditions. Thus, we can say that these similarities do point to the two traditions having interacted with each other.