

**SAINTS OF THE SOIL:****SUFI-BHAKTI THOUGHT IN REGIONAL FOLK TRADITIONS****Ashwathamma K.<sup>1</sup> & Syed Bilal I.<sup>2</sup>**<sup>1</sup>Head of the Department of Kannada, Al-Ameen Arts, Science & Commerce College, Bengaluru.<sup>2</sup>Assistant Professor, Department of English, Al-Ameen Arts, Science & Commerce College, Bengaluru.**DOI: <https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.18789670>****ABSTRACT:**

Saints of the Soil: Sufi-Bhakti Thought in Regional Folk Traditions examines the immanent presence of mystical spirituality in folk literature in India in terms of the works and traditions of Amir Khusro, Baba Bulleh Shah, Kabir Das, Meera Bai, Shishunala Shariff, and Peer Saheb Hyderabadadi. The Sufi and Bhakti poems written in the regional language had formed a people's philosophy that opposed dogmatic faiths, caste distinction, and authority in general. This paper investigates the way in which these Sufi-Bhakti poet-saints have been able to articulate metaphysical ideas of *ishq*, *bhakti* or divine love, realization of the Self, and spiritual equality in terms of folk idioms and folk songs for mass audiences. The Hindavi poems of Amir Khusro, Punjabi kaafis of Baba Bulleh Shah, dohe of Kabir Das, devotional melodies of Meera Bai, Kannada vacanas of Shishunala Shariff, folk poems of Shishunala Shariff, and Deccani Urdu kalams of Peer Saheb Hyderabadadi demonstrate that these poets were inspired by a shared normative principle of Sufi-Bhakti philosophy that transcends communal, sectarian, and religious boundaries.

**KEYWORDS:**

Sufi-Bhakti tradition, Regional folk literature, Mystical spirituality.

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## Introduction

The Sufi and Bhakti movements are two major spiritual and literary traditions in India. They express mystical ideas using everyday languages and folk forms that are easy to understand for ordinary people. These movements arose in reaction to strict religious rules, caste systems, and ritual practices. They focus on divine love (ishq and bhakti), personal realization, and equality in spirituality. The poet-saints within these movements conveyed complex metaphysical thoughts through songs, couplets, and performances that draw on local cultures. They changed spiritual discussions into lived experiences for the community.

This paper looks at the works of Amir Khusro, Baba Bulleh Shah, Meera Bai, Kabir Das, Shishunala Shariff, and Peer Saheb Hyderabad. It explores how Sufi-Bhakti ideas are rooted in local folk traditions. Amir Khusro's Hindavi piece "Sakal Ban Phool Rahi Sarson," linked with Basant Panchami, combines seasonal images with mystical meanings. It reflects Sufi joy and unity with the divine through nature. Baba Bulleh Shah's Punjabi poem "Charka" uses the spinning wheel as a metaphor to express spiritual discipline, selflessness, and love for the Beloved. This resonates with both Sufi and Bhakti principles.

Meera Bai's "Saanson Ki Mala Pe" reveals a deep, personal connection with the divine, where constant remembrance becomes a spiritual practice that goes beyond social and gender barriers. Kabir Das's poem "Moko Kahan Dhundhe Re Bande" questions outward religious practices and emphasizes the divine presence within people. This idea is central to both Sufi and Bhakti beliefs. These works highlight inner spiritual understanding over ritual formalities.

The blended spirit of the Deccan region shines in Shishunala Shariff's Kannada folk poem "Kodagana Koli Nungitha," which uses allegory and informal language to express metaphysical ideas. This tradition continues in the Deccani Urdu "Kalam-e-Peer" of Peer Saheb Hyderabad. It carries on the Sufi-Bhakti spiritual

legacy through oral performances and music that reach a wide audience.

By examining these local poetic styles, this study suggests that Sufi–Bhakti literature serves as a unifying spiritual conversation rooted in folk culture. Despite differences in language, region, and religion, these poet–saints share a philosophical vision that goes beyond sectarian divides. This sustains a diverse and inclusive spiritual outlook within India’s cultural history.

Amir Khusro’s Sakal Ban Phool Rahi Sarson: Folk Imagery and Mystical Celebration

Sakal Ban

Sakal ban phool rahi sarson,

Sakal ban phool rahi.....

Ambva phutay, tesu phulay, koyal bolay daar daar,

Aur gori karat shringar,

Malaniyan gadhwa lay aayin karson,

Sakal ban phool rahi.....

Tarah tarah kay phool lagaaye,

Lay gadhwa haathan mein aaye.

Nizamuddin kay darwazay par,

Aawan keh gaye aashiq rang,

Aur beet gaye barson.

Sakal ban phool rahi sarson.

**Translation:**

The yellow mustard is blooming in every field,

Mango buds are clicking open, other flowers too;

The koyal chirps from branch to branch,

And the maiden tries her make-up,  
 The gardener-girls have brought bouquets.  
 Colourful flowers of all kinds,  
 In hands everyone's bringing;  
 But Aashiq-rang (the lover), who had promised to come  
 To Nizamuddin's house in spring,  
 Hasn't turned up – it's been years.  
 The yellow mustard is blooming in every field.

Amir Khusro's Hindavi composition Sakal Ban Phool Rahi Sarson is one of the earliest and most influential examples of Sufi poetry expressed in a regional folk style. Closely linked to the spring festival of Basant Panchami, the poem celebrates nature's blooming while also reflecting the Sufi experience of spiritual renewal and divine joy. Written in a simple, lyrical Hindavi style, the poem showcases Khusro's skill in blending mystical ideas with seasonal and cultural imagery that resonates with everyday people.

The repeated line, "Sakal ban phool rahi sarson" (the entire forest is blooming with mustard flowers), creates a feeling of abundance, fertility, and celebration. Images of flowering trees, singing cuckoos, and women embellishing themselves root the poem in the natural rhythms of rural life. Yet, beneath this pastoral image, there is a deeper spiritual meaning. In Sufi thought, spring often symbolizes the awakening of the soul in the presence of the Beloved, while nature's blooming reflects the inner enlightenment of the seeker.

The poem reaches its spiritual core when the imagery shifts to Nizamuddin Auliya's dargah: "Nizamuddin kay darwazay par / Aawan keh gaye aashiq rang." The threshold of the beloved Sufi master becomes the center of devotion, where lovers arrive filled with divine love (ishq). The phrase "aur beet gaye barson" suggests

the timeless nature of spiritual experience, where years fade away in the joy of union and remembrance.

By using folk language, musical repetition, and a performative rhythm, Khusro turns Sufi philosophy into a shared and engaging experience. Sakal Ban Phool Rahi Sarson is not just a seasonal song; it acts as a spiritual allegory that weaves Sufi devotion into everyday culture. The poem illustrates the fundamental Sufi-Bhakti idea of expressing deep metaphysical truths in accessible language, highlighting Khusro's lasting impact as a poet who linked elite mysticism with popular tradition.

Baba Bulleh Shah's Charka: Metaphor of Inner Discipline and Divine Love

Laam le chal charkhe nu, moorkha oye  
 Le chal wich koi mat phatoor howay  
 Takla sidq yaqeen di maal pa k  
 Manka pawan da je shaoor howay  
 Ohdy naa di koi khareed kr k  
 Watt pooniyen je razi ghafoor howy  
 Ohdi yaad wich kat'di raie har dammm  
 Khawree kehri v tand manzoor howay  
 Ve mahiya tere dekhan nu,  
 Chuk charkha gali de vich panwa,  
 Ve loka paane main kat di,  
 Tang teriya yaad de panwa.  
 Charkhe di oo kar de ole,  
 Yaad teri da tumba bole.  
 Ve nimma nimma geet ched ke,

Tand kat'di hullare khaanwaan  
 Vasan ni de rahe saure peke,  
 Mainu tere pain pulekhe,  
 Ve hoon mainu das mahiya,  
 Tere baaju kidhar main jaiyaan.

**Translation:**

Take the spinning wheel, O fool, and carry it along;  
 Take it along, without letting it get broken.  
 Wrap yourself with the fabric of truth and belief,  
 The one with a pure mind is the one who understands it.  
 You can't buy the finished product,  
 Only through spinning the cotton with patience will you  
 please Him,

In every moment, there is a burning desire to remember Him,  
 Even this hard path seems pleasant this way.

O beloved, to see you,

I pick up the spinning wheel and take it to the street.

O beloved, people think I'm just spinning cotton,

but I'm spinning memories of you.

The wheel keeps spinning, turning over memories.

The memory of your name keeps calling.

Even as soft, soft songs are sung,

I keep spinning the thread, weaving my thoughts of you.

Baba Bulleh Shah's Punjabi poem Charka holds a central place in Sufi devotional literature because it effectively uses everyday imagery to express complex spiritual ideas. Rooted in the

folk culture of Punjab, the poem features the spinning wheel (charka), which is linked to domestic work and women's daily lives. This serves as a strong metaphor for inner spiritual discipline and the constant remembrance of the divine. Through this familiar symbol, Bulleh Shah conveys key Sufi concepts such as the annihilation of the ego (fana), devotion to the Beloved, and the transformative power of love (ishq).

In Charka, spinning symbolizes the spiritual practice of self-purification. The wheel's repetitive motion reflects the cyclical nature of remembrance (zikr), suggesting that spiritual realization comes from sustained inner effort rather than outward rituals. By highlighting a simple domestic object, Bulleh Shah challenges traditional ideas of sacredness. He emphasizes that divine truth can be found in the ordinary rhythms of daily life.

The poem also critiques external signs of religious identity, stressing genuine sincerity over formal practices. Bulleh Shah repeatedly encourages seekers to let go of pride, social status, and rigid beliefs in favor of love-centered devotion. This focus closely relates to Bhakti ideals, specifically the rejection of caste and sectarian divisions in the quest for spiritual truth. Thus, Charka serves as a shared ethical and mystical text that resonates with various religious communities.

Musically performed as a kaafi, Charka has survived through oral transmission, devotional singing, and folk performance, making it accessible to many audiences. Its ongoing presence in Punjabi cultural memory shows how folk traditions act as living stores of Sufi-Bhakti thought. Through Charka, Bulleh Shah illustrates how philosophical ideas can connect seamlessly with everyday expression, reinforcing the Sufi-Bhakti vision of spiritual equality, inner realization, and universal love.

Meera Bai's Saanson Ki Mala Pe: Devotional Repetition and Inner Communion

Saanson Ki Mala Pe Simru Main Pi Ka Naam,  
 Apne Man Ki Main Janun, Aur Pi Ke Man Ki Ram,  
 Jivan Ka Shringar Hai Pritam, Maang Ka Sindur,  
 Maang Ka Sindoor,  
 Pritam Ki Nazron Se Girakar, Jina Hai Kis Kaam,  
 Prem Ke Rang Mein Aisi Dubi, Ban Gaya Ek Hi Rup,  
 Ban Gaya Ek Hi Rup  
 Pritam Ka Kuch Dosh Nahi Hai Woh To Hai Nirdosh,  
 Woh To Hai Nirdosh,  
 Apne Aap Se Baat Karke, Ho Gayi Main Badnaam  
 Prem Piyala Jab Se Piya Hai, Ji Ka Hai Ye Haal,  
 Ji Ka Hai Ye Haal,  
 Angaron Pe Neend Aa Jae, Kanton Pe Aram  
 Saanson Ki Mala Pe Simru Main Pi Ka Naam,  
 Apne Man Ki Mein Jaanu, Aur Pi Ke Man Ki Ram.

**Translation:**

On the rosary of my breath, I remember my Beloved's name.  
 I know the feelings of my own heart,  
 and my Beloved knows the truth of mine.  
 My Beloved is the adornment of my life,  
 the vermilion in the parting of my hair.  
 Cast aside from the gaze of the Beloved,  
 what purpose does life then serve?  
 So deeply am I dyed in the color of love  
 that I have become one single form.

My Beloved bears no fault—  
He is entirely without blame.  
Speaking only with my own self,  
I have come to be called mad by the world.  
Ever since I drank the cup of love,  
this is the state of my soul:  
sleep comes easily upon burning embers,  
and thorns offer the comfort of rest.  
On the rosary of my breath, I remember my Beloved's name.  
I know the feelings of my own heart,  
and my Beloved knows the truth of mine.

Meera Bai's devotional composition, Saanson Ki Mala Pe, expresses Bhakti spirituality in a deeply personal way. Rooted in the Vaishnava Bhakti tradition, the poem emphasizes the practice of constant remembrance of the divine through the metaphor of a garland of breaths. This suggests that each inhalation and exhalation is an act of devotion. Meera turns everyday bodily experiences into a continuous spiritual practice, highlighting intimacy, surrender, and unwavering love for the divine beloved.

The poem shows Meera Bai's rejection of external religious authority and social limitations. She favors a direct relationship with God. By centering devotion on the rhythm of breath, Saanson Ki Mala Pe blurs the line between the sacred and the ordinary. This inward focus resembles Sufi practices of zikr, where repetitive remembrance leads to spiritual awakening, showing the shared beliefs between Bhakti and Sufi traditions.

Meera's voice in the poem is filled with emotional depth and personal longing. She presents divine love as both supportive and transformative. Her devotion goes beyond gender norms and societal

expectations, claiming spiritual power through song and self-expression. In doing this, Meera Bai challenges patriarchal structures. She affirms the Bhakti belief that devotion alone, not social status or ritual purity, allows access to the divine.

The lyrical simplicity and musical quality of Saanson Ki Mala Pe have helped it remain alive in oral and performative traditions. Sung in various regions and languages, the poem continues to connect with different audiences, reinforcing its place as a living text in India's devotional culture. Meera Bai's work shows how Bhakti poetry, like Sufi poetry, conveys complex spiritual ideas through simple folk forms. It maintains a shared spiritual vision based on love, remembrance, and inner realization.

Kabir Das's Moko Kahan Dhundhe Re Bande: The Immanence of the Divine

Moko kahan dhoonde re bande,  
 Main to tere paas mein.  
 Na main deval, na main masjid,  
 Na Kaabe Kailaas mein.  
 Na main moorti, na main pooja,  
 Na hi jap upvaas mein.  
 Na main ved, na main pathan-paathan,  
 Na hi yog-abhyas mein.  
 Khoji hoy to turant hi milihon,  
 Pal bhar ki talaash mein.  
 Kahe Kabir suno bhaiya saadho,  
 Main to hoon vishvaas mein.

**Translation:**

Where do you search for me, O man,

I am near you.

Neither in the pilgrimage, nor in the idol, nor in the solitary abode.

Neither in the temple, nor in the mosque, nor in Kaaba Kailash.

Neither am I in chanting, nor in penance, nor in fasting.

Neither do I reside in the ritual, nor in yoga or renunciation.

Neither in the soul, nor in the body, nor in the universe or sky.

Neither am I in the whirlpool of the Trikuti, nor in the breath of all the breaths.

If you search for me, you will find me immediately in just a moment's search.

Kabir says, listen brother Sadhu, I am in faith.

Kabir Das's poem Moko Kahan Dhundhe Re Bande stands as a powerful articulation of the Bhakti critique of externalized religion and ritualistic practice. Written in a direct and accessible vernacular, the poem challenges the seeker's tendency to search for the divine in temples, mosques, pilgrimages, and scriptures, instead asserting the immediate presence of God within the human self. Through this radical inward turn, Kabir foregrounds a central tenet shared by both Bhakti and Sufi philosophies: the immanence of the divine.

The poem employs a didactic yet compassionate tone, addressing the seeker (bande) and urging self-awareness as the path to spiritual realization. Kabir rejects sectarian distinctions and institutional authority, emphasizing lived experience over formal doctrine. This perspective resonates strongly with Sufi teachings, particularly the concept of haqiqat, or inner truth, which can only be realized through self-knowledge and love rather than external conformity.

Kabir's insistence that the divine dwells "within you" dismantles hierarchical notions of sacred space and religious mediation. By locating spiritual truth in the embodied self, the poem democratizes access to the divine, affirming spiritual equality across caste, creed, and social status. This egalitarian vision aligns Kabir with the broader Sufi-Bhakti ethos that resists orthodoxy and privileges direct spiritual experience.

Stylistically, Moko Kahan Dhundhe Re Bande exemplifies Kabir's use of paradox, rhetorical questioning, and colloquial expression to communicate complex metaphysical ideas in simple terms. The poem's oral quality and rhythmic cadence have enabled its wide circulation through singing, recitation, and folk performance, ensuring its continued relevance across generations. As a living text within India's devotional culture, Kabir's poem reinforces the Sufi-Bhakti conviction that true spiritual realization lies not in external observance but in inner awakening and self-realization.

Shishunala Shariff's Kodagana Koli Nungitha: Allegory and Syncretic Mysticism in Kannada Folk Tradition

Kodagana koli nungitha

Nodavva tangi

Kodagana koli nungitha..

Aadu aaneya nungi

Gode sunnaava nungi

Aadalu banda paataradavala maddali nungitha tangi

Kodagana koli nungitha

Nodavva tangi

Kodagana koli nungitha

Ollu vanakeya nungi

Kallu gootava nungi

Mellalu banda mudukiyanne nellu nungitha tangi  
 Yetthu jatthagi nungi  
 Battha baanava nungi  
 Mukkuta tiruvo anna nanna meli nungitha tangi  
 Kodagana koli nungitha  
 Nodavva tangi  
 Kodagana koli nungitha  
 Gudda gaviyannu nungi  
 Gaviyu iruveya nungi  
 Govinda guruvina paadave nanne nungitha tangi  
 Kodagana koli nungitha.

Shishunala Shariff's Kodagana Koli Nungitha occupies a distinctive place in Kannada folk and devotional literature for its use of allegorical narrative and colloquial expression to communicate profound metaphysical ideas. Rooted in the cultural and spiritual milieu of nineteenth-century Karnataka, the poem reflects a synthesis of Sufi and Bhakti philosophical traditions, articulated through a vernacular idiom accessible to rural and marginalized communities. Shariff's poetry exemplifies how mystical thought is embedded in everyday language and folk imagination.

The poem employs symbolic imagery drawn from daily life to convey spiritual truths, using allegory as a pedagogical tool rather than abstract philosophical discourse. Through familiar references and narrative simplicity, Kodagana Koli Nungitha guides the listener toward introspection and self-realization. The allegorical framework allows Shariff to address complex themes such as the illusory nature of the ego, the impermanence of worldly attachments, and the necessity of inner awakening—concepts central to both Sufi metaphysics and Bhakti devotion.

Shariff's spiritual vision resists rigid religious categorization. Though deeply influenced by Islamic Sufi thought, his poetry embraces Bhakti ideals of devotion, humility, and ethical living, resulting in a distinctly syncretic worldview. This fusion challenges sectarian boundaries and affirms spiritual equality, reinforcing the Sufi-Bhakti commitment to inclusivity and inner truth. By foregrounding moral insight over doctrinal allegiance, Shariff positions spirituality as a lived ethical practice rather than an institutional identity.

The oral and performative nature of Kodagana Koli Nungitha has ensured its transmission across generations through folk singing and communal recitation. Its continued presence in Kannada cultural memory underscores the role of folk traditions as living archives of syncretic spirituality. Through this poem, Shishunala Shariff demonstrates how regional folk literature serves as a vital medium for expressing universal spiritual ideals, contributing to the broader Sufi-Bhakti discourse that transcends linguistic, cultural, and religious divisions.

Peer Saheb Hyderabadi's Kalam-e-Peer: Deccani Urdu and Sufi Metaphysics

Kalam-e-Peer

Yaar meri shakl mein hai, main hoon shakl-e-yaar mein  
 Yaan bhi main deedaar hoon, waan bhi main deedaar mein  
 Bhar gaya bazaar dekho, dono jahan mein yaar ka  
 Yaar khud bazaar mein, bazaar khud hai yaar mein  
 Ho gayi tasdeeq ab hum ko jamaal-e-yaar ki  
 Khud musamma yaar hai, main hoon ism-e-deedaar mein  
 Har rag-o-resha pe mere likha hai usne "ana"  
 Yaar bhi ant ana tha, chhup gaya us ghaar mein  
 Hum ko deta hai sada is ghaar se us yaar ne

Mast ho kar dam–ba–dam kehta “ana” darbaar mein  
 “Peer” kya ab khauf hai dono jahan mein daar ka  
 Khwaahish–e–abdaar hoon, us yaar ke deedaar mein.

**Translation:**

My beloved is in my sight, and I am in the sight of my beloved.

Here I am in the vision, and there too I am in the vision.

The marketplace Is filled—see the presence of my beloved in both worlds.

My beloved himself is in the market, and the market itself is within my beloved.

Now we have witnessed and affirmed the beauty of the beloved.

The beloved himself is the one named with beauty, and I am the one immersed in his vision.

On every vein and fiber of mine, he has written ‘Ana’ (I am).

My beloved too was ‘Anta Ana’ (You are, I am), then hid Himself inside that cave.

From that cave, my beloved keeps calling out to me.

In ecstasy, he chants with every breath, proclaiming ‘I am’ in the divine court.

O Peer, what fear is left now, when in both worlds He guards me?

My desires now rest only in the vision of my beloved.

Peer Saheb Hyderabadī, originally named Hazrat Peer Syed Ameer Shah Quadri, was a prominent Sufi poet whose devotional compositions are collectively known as the Kalam–e–Peer. The honorific title “Peer Saheb” was conferred upon him by his spiritual

mentor (peer), Hazrat Yamni Quadri, signifying his recognized spiritual authority within the Qadiri Sufi tradition. Composed in Deccani Urdu, the *Kalam-e-Peer* articulates core Sufi metaphysical concepts, particularly those associated with *wahdat al-wujud* (the unity of being) and the spiritual states of *fana* (annihilation of the self) and *baqa* (subsistence in the divine). Through the use of accessible vernacular language and folk imagery, Peer Saheb's poetry conveys complex mystical philosophy to a broad audience, embedding Sufi thought within the cultural, linguistic, and performative traditions of the Deccan.

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