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IDEOLOGY AND LITERARY PROCESS: BHAKTI AND SUFI LITERATURE IN INDIA

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the parallel development of Bhakti and Sufi literary traditions in medieval India and considers their relationship to the ideological, linguistic, and literary processes of the period. It focuses on the historical conditions in which devotional and mystical communities expanded, the literary forms associated with them, and the role of vernacular languages in making religious and philosophical ideas accessible to wider audiences. Particular attention is given to the interaction of Bhakti and Sufi thought, the reworking of epic and devotional traditions, the development of Braj, Awadhi, and Dakhini as literary media, and the continuing significance of works associated with poets such as Surdas and Tulsidas. The article argues that Bhakti and Sufi literature should be understood not simply as religious writing but as an important part of the social and literary history of medieval India, where devotional ideas, vernacular expression, and cultural exchange contributed to durable literary traditions.

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Ideology and Literary Process: Bhakti and Sufi Literature in India

Literature reflects the intellectual, spiritual, and social formations of its period. In medieval India, Bhakti and Sufi traditions became influential modes of religious expression and literary production, although modern scholarship cautions against treating either tradition as a single, uniform movement (Hawley, 2015; Schimmel, 1975). Their poets and teachers articulated religious, ethical, and philosophical ideas through literary forms that circulated across linguistic and social boundaries. This article examines the socio-political and spiritual context of medieval North India, the devotional and mystical traditions that developed within it, and their influence on literary production. Particular attention is given to ideological affinities, vernacularization, genre formation, and literary exchange. From this perspective, the importance of Bhakti and Sufi literature lies not only in its devotional themes but also in its contribution to the development of Braj, Awadhi, and Dakhini literary cultures and to shared forms of cultural expression across Hindu and Islamic contexts (Behl, 2012; Khodjaeva & Mukhibova, 2020; Snell, 1991).

Historical and Socio-Political Context

Medieval North India was marked by political transition, regional competition, religious diversity, and substantial social inequality. Hindu, Islamic, Buddhist, Jain, and, from the late fifteenth century, Sikh traditions coexisted in different regions, while political authority remained divided among competing states. During the fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries, the Lodi dynasty ruled the Delhi Sultanate. Sikandar Lodi reigned from 1489 to 1517 and was succeeded by Ibrahim Lodi, whose defeat by Babur at the First Battle of Panipat in 1526 ended Lodi rule and opened a new phase of Mughal political consolidation (Chandra, 2005). These political changes did not produce a single cultural pattern; rather,

courts, religious communities, pilgrimage centers, and regional literary networks continued to interact in complex ways.

The expansion of Mughal power created a new political framework for North Indian society, but the literary growth of the period cannot be attributed to imperial policy alone. Caste hierarchy, regional devotional communities, temple and Sufi institutions, courtly patronage, and expanding vernacular audiences all shaped literary production. Bhakti traditions responded in different ways to ritual authority and social hierarchy, while Sufi communities offered parallel vocabularies of devotion, discipline, love, and spiritual guidance. The convergence of these traditions was therefore cultural and literary as well as religious, and it developed unevenly across regions and communities (Hawley, 2015; Schimmel, 1975).

Bhakti and the Literary Process

Bhakti was promoted by a wide range of teachers and poet-saints rather than by a single founder. Ramanuja was especially important to the development of South Indian Vaishnava theology, while Ramananda, Vallabhacharya, Chaitanya, Nimbarka, and other teachers became influential in later North Indian devotional traditions. Their teachings differed in theology and practice, but many emphasized personal devotion, the accessibility of divine grace, and forms of religious expression that could reach beyond elite Sanskrit learning. This emphasis helped create conditions in which devotional poetry became a major vehicle for religious and ethical reflection (Hawley, 2015; Muhammad, 1971).

The Sanskrit term bhakti broadly denotes participation, devotion, or loving attachment to a deity. In medieval devotional traditions, it came to signify an intensely personal relationship between devotee and divine. Bhakti poetry often challenged the sufficiency of ritual status and emphasized devotion as a meaningful path to spiritual fulfillment. Although ideas of social equality were expressed differently by different poets and communities, the use of vernacular languages enabled devotional literature to reach audiences beyond learned religious elites. This wider circulation was one of the most important literary consequences of the Bhakti traditions (Mishra, 2010; Hawley, 2015).

Bhakti traditions developed over many centuries and in multiple regions. South Indian devotional traditions associated with the Alvars and Nayanars predated the major North Indian efflorescence, while between the fourteenth and seventeenth centuries North India produced a particularly rich body of devotional poetry. The sixteenth century, including the reign of Akbar (1556–1605), was especially significant for the circulation and institutionalization of several Vaishnava communities. It is therefore more accurate to understand Bhakti as a network of regional traditions and literary communities than as a single movement progressing uniformly from south to north (Hawley, 2015).

Bhakti did not introduce an entirely new religious idea into India. Rather, it developed within older Hindu devotional and theological traditions and took different forms in relation to Shaiva, Vaishnava, and other religious communities. In North Indian literary history, Bhakti is often discussed in relation to critiques of ritualism, caste hierarchy, and sectarian exclusivity. These critiques, however, were neither identical nor equally radical across all poets. The literary value of Bhakti lies partly in this diversity: poets used devotional language to address theology, love, ethics, social experience, and the relationship between the individual and the divine (Mishra, 2010; Muhammad, 1971).

A common distinction in North Indian Bhakti literature is between nirguna and saguna devotion. Nirguna traditions emphasize a formless or attributeless divine, whereas saguna traditions focus on devotion to a deity with identifiable attributes and form. Saguna Vaishnava poetry is often further associated with Rama-centered and Krishna-centered traditions. These categories are useful for literary analysis, but they should not be treated as rigid boundaries, because medieval poets frequently drew on shared devotional vocabularies and overlapping philosophical ideas (Hawley, 2015).

The literary heritage of Krishna Bhakti is especially prominent in Braj. The Pushtimarg tradition founded by Vallabhacharya and developed by his successors became associated with a group of Krishna-devotee poets known as the *Ashtachhap*, or “eight seals.” Their poetry elaborated episodes from Krishna’s

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life, especially childhood, pastoral play, love, separation, and divine grace. Surdas became the best-known poet associated with this literary world, and the Sur tradition contributed substantially to the prestige of Braj as a language of devotional poetry (Snell, 1991).

Rama Bhakti is closely associated with Tulsidas and the *Ramcharitmanas*, composed in Awadhi. Tulsidas's retelling of the Rama story became one of the most influential works of North Indian devotional literature, combining epic narrative, theology, ethical instruction, and poetic artistry. Its continuing reception demonstrates how vernacular retellings of Sanskritic narratives could acquire independent authority and become central works within later literary and religious traditions (Tsvetkov, 1987).

The growth of Bhakti literature also contributed to the refinement and wider circulation of existing poetic forms. Doha and chaupai became especially important, alongside other meters and stanzaic forms used across regional traditions. Rather than creating an entirely separate poetic system, Bhakti poets adapted inherited Sanskritic, Apabhramsha, and vernacular conventions to new devotional purposes. This interaction between inherited poetics and vernacular creativity is one reason medieval devotional literature became so influential in the history of Hindi literary expression (Snell, 1991).

Bhakti traditions also contributed to the development of prose. The varta genre, associated especially with Vaishnava communities, records the lives, teachings, and exemplary conduct of devotees. Works such as *Chaurasi Vaishnavan ki Varta* ("Lives of Eighty-Four Vaishnavas") and *Do Sau Bavan Vaishnavan ki Varta* ("Lives of 252 Vaishnavas") illustrate the growth of hagiographic prose in Braj. These narratives are important not only as religious documents but also as sources for the study of community formation, vernacular prose, and the social world of devotional practice.

Mughal-period political consolidation coincided with an important phase in the development of vernacular literary cultures. The relationship between empire and Bhakti literature, however, was indirect and varied by region. Courtly patronage, temple institutions, religious networks, and local audiences all shaped literary production. Scholarship on Mughal-era Hindi literature shows that Braj and other vernaculars circulated in both devotional and courtly settings, making the literary culture of the period more diverse than a simple opposition between religious and imperial traditions would suggest (Busch, 2011).

Sufi Traditions and Literary Exchange

Indian Sufi literature developed within the wider history of Islamic mysticism and the institutional growth of Sufi orders. These traditions reached the subcontinent through Persianate networks linking Central Asia, Khurasan, Afghanistan, and India. Sufi communities adapted to local cultural environments while retaining distinctive practices of spiritual discipline, master-disciple transmission, remembrance, and devotional love (Schimmel, 1975).

Several Sufi orders became influential in South Asia, including the Chishti and Naqshbandi traditions. The Chishti order, which originated in the wider Khurasan-Afghanistan region, became especially prominent in the Indian subcontinent. Sufi ideas were transmitted through khanqahs, oral teaching, poetry, music, and hagiography. In literary terms, the presence of Sufi communities helped create a rich Indo-Islamic tradition in which Persianate mystical concepts interacted with regional languages, narrative conventions, and Indian symbolic worlds (Behl, 2012; Schimmel, 1975).

The Chishti tradition spread through major centers in North India and developed several branches and lineages. Its appeal extended beyond narrowly defined social or ethnic boundaries, and Sufi shrines frequently became spaces of interaction among different communities. By the early modern period, khanqahs and shrine networks were established across Punjab, Uttar Pradesh, Sindh, the Deccan, and other regions. Such institutions contributed to the circulation of devotional vocabulary, stories, music, and ethical ideals across a broad social landscape (Schimmel, 1975).

Contact between Bhakti and Sufi communities did not erase theological differences, but it encouraged forms of cultural and literary exchange. Shared themes included divine love, longing, the

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authority of the spiritual guide, criticism of empty ritual, and the search for an inward relationship with the divine. Indo-Islamic literary traditions also incorporated Indian narrative motifs, aesthetic categories, and regional linguistic forms. Such interaction is particularly visible in the Sufi romance tradition, where Islamic mystical interpretation and Indian literary conventions were brought into sustained dialogue (Behl, 2012; Sharma, 1977).

A substantial body of Sufi literature emerged in Indian languages between the fourteenth and seventeenth centuries. Important works include Mirigavati, Padmavat, Madhumalati, Chandayan, and other romances in which love narratives are interpreted through mystical and ethical frameworks. These texts demonstrate the creative integration of Persianate Sufi concepts with Indian storytelling traditions and regional literary languages. Sufi literary culture also employed established Persian and Arabic poetic forms such as the ghazal, rubai, qit'a, and masnavi, while adapting them to South Asian contexts (Behl, 2012; Lal, 1977; Schimmel, 1975).

Bhakti literary culture was similarly diverse. Works associated with Surdas, Nanddas, Kumbhandas, Kabir, Tulsidas, Mirabai, and other poets represent different theological, linguistic, and poetic traditions. Rather than forming a homogeneous corpus, they demonstrate the range of literary strategies through which devotional communities represented divine love, ethical reflection, social critique, and sacred biography. This diversity is essential to understanding the broader literary process of medieval North India (Hawley, 2015; Snell, 1991).

Vernacular Languages and Literary Culture

Language is central to the significance of both Bhakti and Sufi literature. Krishna-centered devotional poetry became strongly associated with Braj, Rama-centered literature with Awadhi, and several Indo-Muslim literary traditions with forms of Hindavi and Dakhini. These languages should not be understood merely as “folk” alternatives to Sanskrit or Persian; they became sophisticated literary media capable of expressing theology, aesthetics, narrative, and complex emotional states (Behl, 2012; Snell, 1991).

Braj is a Western Hindi variety that became one of the most important literary languages of early modern North India. From roughly the sixteenth through the eighteenth centuries, Braj was used well beyond its core spoken region and acquired considerable prestige as a language of poetry, devotion, aesthetics, and courtly culture. Its literary history therefore cannot be reduced to the history of a local dialect (Busch, 2011; Satendra, 1978; Snell, 1991).

Historically, Braj was associated with the region around Mathura and with neighboring areas of present-day Uttar Pradesh, Rajasthan, Haryana, and Madhya Pradesh. Yet literary Braj circulated much more widely than the boundaries of everyday speech. Its mobility across courts, temples, devotional communities, and manuscript networks helped establish it as a transregional literary language in the Mughal period (Busch, 2011; Snell, 1991).

The rise of Braj as a major literary medium was closely connected with Krishna devotion, but its development was not limited to Bhakti poetry. Devotional poets, court poets, intellectuals, and prose writers all contributed to its expansion. The Ashtachhap poets played a particularly important role in Krishna-centered literature, while hagiographic prose such as the varta tradition demonstrated Braj’s capacity for sustained narrative. Later courtly literature further extended the language’s aesthetic and intellectual range (Busch, 2011; Snell, 1991).

Lexicographical and philological scholarship has been essential for the study of medieval Braj. Specialized dictionaries and glossaries, including works devoted to Braj vocabulary and the language of Surdas, enable scholars to interpret archaic words, theological terms, idioms, and poetic conventions that are no longer transparent to readers of modern Hindi. Such tools are comparable to the specialized dictionaries used in Uzbek literary studies for reading classical authors such as Alisher Navoi.

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Classical Indian poetics also remained important to vernacular literary practice. Concepts such as rasa, alankara, and dhvani provided critical vocabularies for understanding emotion, ornamentation, suggestion, and aesthetic effect. Braj poets adapted these inherited categories within vernacular compositions, demonstrating that the growth of regional literary languages did not represent a simple rejection of Sanskritic tradition. Rather, vernacular literature often developed through creative reworking of earlier aesthetic systems (Busch, 2011; Snell, 1991).

The Surdas tradition illustrates the literary richness of Braj and the scholarly challenges involved in studying a large, historically transmitted poetic corpus. Dictionaries, concordances, critical editions, and philological studies help clarify the vocabulary and textual history of these works. They also make it possible to investigate wider questions of grammar, lexicology, religious thought, performance, cultural memory, and literary reception (Sazanova, 1973; Snell, 1991).

The poetry associated with the Ashtachhap is especially rich in terminology connected with Krishna theology and lila, or divine play. Different poetic traditions emphasize episodes such as Krishna's childhood, pastoral life, love with Radha and the gopis, separation, and rasa-lila. These thematic categories are not merely narrative labels; they structure devotional emotion and shape the aesthetic experience of Krishna-centered poetry.

For this reason, the study and translation of medieval Bhakti literature require close attention to historical vocabulary, sectarian concepts, genre conventions, and regional language. Explanatory dictionaries and critical editions are therefore indispensable tools. Without this philological foundation, important distinctions in devotional theology and poetic meaning can easily be flattened or mistranslated.

Conclusion

1. Bhakti and Sufi literary traditions developed during a period of political transition and cultural vitality in medieval India. Their growth was shaped by regional religious communities, transregional networks, and changing systems of patronage rather than by a single historical cause. Sufi orders entered and expanded within India through wider Persianate networks, while Bhakti traditions developed through multiple regional lineages and devotional communities.

2. The interaction between Bhakti and Sufi literary cultures contributed to a shared repertoire of themes and forms without eliminating religious difference. Divine love, longing, spiritual guidance, ethical discipline, and the critique of empty ritual appear in different ways across both traditions. Indo-Islamic romance, devotional lyric, hagiography, and epic retelling show how Hindu, Islamic, Sanskritic, Persianate, and vernacular literary resources could coexist and interact (Behl, 2012; Hawley, 2015).

3. Vernacularization was one of the most important features of this literary process. Braj, Awadhi, Dakhini, and related literary varieties enabled poets and religious communities to address audiences beyond the traditional scholarly domains of Sanskrit and Persian. At the same time, these vernaculars developed sophisticated literary conventions of their own and became vehicles for theology, aesthetics, narrative, and cultural memory (Busch, 2011; Snell, 1991).

Indian Bhakti and Sufi literature therefore constitutes a major part of the medieval and early modern literary heritage of South Asia. Its significance lies in the interaction of ideology, language, genre, religious practice, and social experience. Many texts and regional traditions still require sustained philological and comparative study, particularly within Uzbek Indology. Further research that combines literary history, textual scholarship, and comparative religious studies can clarify both the distinctiveness of these traditions and the forms of cultural exchange that connected them.

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