

Sufism in India: Notes for IAS Exam

Sufism is an important concept that influenced religion in India in the medieval ages. There are many Sufi saints whose Dargahs still attract people from all over the country irrespective of their religious affiliation. In this article, you can read a short note on the important points in Sufism for the [IAS exam](#).

Sufism is a mystical form of Islam, a school of practice that focuses on the spiritual search for God and shuns materialism. It is a form of Islamic mysticism which stresses asceticism. There is a lot of emphasis on love and devotion towards God. There are many schools of Sufism all over the world and in India too. Most of them trace their lineage to early Islamic history, from the time of Prophet Muhammad himself.

The term 'Sufi' is probably derived from the Arabic word 'suf' which means 'one who wears wool'. This is because woollen clothes were generally associated with ascetics. Another possible origin of the word is 'safa' which means purity in Arabic. The other terms for the Sufi are Wali, Faqir and Darwesh.

Sufism in India

Islam entered India in the 7th century CE in the form of merchants from Saudi Arabia who traded with the western coastal regions of India. After that in the north, the religion entered Multan and Sind when the regions were captured by Muhammad Bin Qasim in the 8th century CE. Sufism, however, gained prominence in the 10th and 11th centuries during the reign of the [Delhi Sultanate](#).

In India, Sufism adopted many native Indian concepts such as yogic postures, music and dance. Sufism found adherents among both Muslims and Hindus.

There were two broad Sufi orders:

1. Bashara - Those who obeyed Islamic laws.
2. Beshara - Those who were more liberal.

The Beshara was also called 'mast kalandar'. They comprised wandering monks who were also called Baba. They did not leave any written accounts.

- Sufism was a liberal reform movement within Islam. It had its origin in Persia and spread into India in the 11th century. Most of the Sufis (mystics) were persons of deep devotion who disliked the display of wealth and degeneration of morals following the establishment of the Islamic empire. They laid great emphasis on love as the bond between God and the individual soul. Love of God meant love of humanity and therefore, Sufis believed service to humanity was tantamount to service to God. In Sufism, self-discipline was considered an essential condition to gain knowledge of God by a sense of perception. While the orthodox Muslims emphasise

external conduct, the Sufis lay stress on inner purity. The orthodox Muslims believe in the blind observance of rituals, the Sufis consider love and devotion as the only means of attaining salvation. Sufism also laid stress on meditation, good actions, repentance for sins, prayers, pilgrimage, fasting, charity and controlling of passion by ascetic practices.

- By the 12th century, the Sufis were organised in 12 orders or Silsilas. A Silsila was generally led by a prominent mystic who lived in a Khanqah or hospice along with his disciples. The link between the teacher or pir or murshid and his disciples or murids was a vital part of the Sufi system. Every pir nominated a successor or wali to carry on his work. Gradually, the Khanqahs emerged as important centres of learning and preaching. Many Sufis enjoyed the sama or musical congregation in their Khanqahs. In fact, qawwali developed during this period.
- The four most popular Silsilas were the Chistis, Suhrawardis, Qadriyas and Naqshbandis.

The Chisti Silsila

- The Chisti order was established in India by Khwaja Muin-ud-din Chisti (also known as Gharib Nawaz) around c.1192 CE. After staying in Lahore and Delhi, he finally shifted to Ajmer which was an important political centre and already had a sizeable Muslim population.
- His fame grew more after his death in c. 1235 CE, when his grave was visited by the then Sultan Muhammad Tughlaq, after which the mosque and dome were erected by Mahmud Khalji of Malwa in the 15th century. After the support of the Mughal Emperor Akbar, the patronage of the dargah reached unprecedented heights. Qutub ud din Bhakhtiyar Kaki established the Chisti presence in Delhi under the patronage of Sultanate ruler Iltutmish.
- Apart from Muin-ud din Chisti, the other important Chistis were:
 1. Farid-ud-din Ganj-i-Shakar (c.1175 - 1265 CE) - also known as Baba Farid. He confined his activities to Hansi and Ajodhan (in modern Haryana and the Punjab respectively). His outlook was so broad and humane that some of his verses are later found quoted in the Adi Granth of the Sikhs.
 2. Nizamuddin Auliya (c. 1238 - 1325 CE).
 3. Nasiruddin Chiragh - i - Dehlavi.
 4. Sheikh Burhanuddin Gharib - He established the Chisti order in the 13th century in the Deccan.
 5. Muhammad Banda Nawaz (Deccan city of Bijapur region).
- The Chistis led a simple, austere life and conversed with people in Hindawi, their local dialect. They were hardly interested in effecting conversions, though later on, many families and groups attributed their conversions to the “good wishes” of these saints. These Sufi saints made themselves popular by adopting musical recitations called sama, to create a mood of nearness to God. Nizamuddin Auliya adopted yogic breathing exercises, so much so that the yogis called him a Sidh or “perfect”. The Chistis preferred to remain aloof from state politics and shunned the company of rulers and nobles.

The Suhrawardi Silsila

- The Suhrawardi order entered India at about the same time as Chistis but its activities were confined largely to the Punjab and Multan.
- This Silsila was founded by Shihabuddin Suhrawardi in Baghdad and was established in India by Bahauddin Zakariya.
- Unlike the Chistis, the Suhrawardis accepted maintenance grants from the Sultans and took an active part in politics.
- Suhrawardis believed that a Sufi should possess the three attributes of property, knowledge and hal (mystical enlightenment). They, however, did not support excessive austerities and self-mortification. They advocated a combination of ilm (scholarship) with mysticism.

The Naqshbandi Silsila

- This Silsila was established in India by Khwaja Bahauddin Naqshbandi. It was later propagated by his successors, Shiekh Baqi Billah and Sheikh Ahmad Sirhindi (1563 - 1624). They practised silent meditation of the heart, so were called “silent Sufis”.
- The Sufis of this silsila believed that the relationship between man and God was that of the slave and the master, unlike Chistis who believed it to be a relation between a lover and beloved.
- Sufis observed the Shariah law in its purest form and denounced all biddats (innovations in religion). They were against the liberal policies of Akbar like granting high status to many non-Muslims, abolishment of jizya and the ban on cow slaughter. They also were against sama (religious music) and the practice of pilgrimage to the tombs of saints.
- After the death of Sirhindi, the order was represented by two important mystics, each having a different approach. Conservative approach under the leadership of Shah Waliullah and liberal approach under the leadership of Mirza Mazhar Jan-i-Jahan.

The Qadri Silsila

- Sheikh Abdul Qadir and his sons, Sheikh Niamatullah, Mukhdum Muhammad Jilani and Miyan Mir established the Qadri silsila during the Mughal rule and this order was popular in Punjab. Another famous saint of this order was Shah Badakhshani. The Mughal princess Jahanara and her brother Dara were disciples of this silsila.
- Qadris believed in the concept of Wahdat-al-Wajood meaning “Unity of Existence” or “Unity of Being”, i.e. God and his creation are one and similar. The saints of this silsila dismissed orthodox elements.

Impact of Sufism

The liberal and unorthodox elements of Sufism had a profound impact on medieval Bhakti saints. In the later period, the Sufi doctrines influenced the religious perspective of the rulers along with reminding

them of their moral obligations. For example, the Mughal Emperor, Akbar's religious outlook and religious policies were shaped a lot under Sufism.

1. Sufism influenced both rural and urban regions and had a deep political, cultural and social influence on the masses. Spiritual bliss became the ultimate aim and the people could raise their voice against all forms of orthodoxy, falsehood, religious formalism and hypocrisy. In a world torn by strife and conflict, the Sufis tried to bring peace and harmony.
2. The most important contribution of Sufism is that it helped to develop a bond of solidarity and brotherhood between Hindu and Muslim communities. The Sufi saints are revered not only by Muslims but also by a huge number of Hindus and their tombs have become a common place of pilgrimage for both communities.

Important Sufi Terms in India

- Sufi, Pir, Murshid - Saint
 - Murid - Followers
 - Khanqah - Place where Sufis lived, hospices
 - Khalifa - Disciples
 - Zikr - Recitation of God's name
 - Tauba - Repentance
 - Fanaa - Spiritual merging with the Almighty
 - Urs - Death
 - Sama - Musical gathering
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