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Mysticism across Boundaries: Vernacular Devotional Expressions in Indian Spiritual Traditions

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Abstract

The Bhakti, Sufi, and Sant traditions of medieval India collectively represent a profound spiritual and cultural movement that redefined mysticism through the use of vernacular languages. Rejecting the exclusivity of Sanskrit, Arabic, and Persian, these traditions articulated devotional and mystical experiences in regional tongues, thereby democratizing spiritual knowledge and fostering social inclusivity. This paper examines the role of vernacular devotional expressions in shaping mysticism as a trans-boundary spiritual discourse within Indian spiritual traditions. Concentrating on the Bhakti, Sufi, and Sant movements of medieval India, the study explores how the articulation of mystical experience in regional languages enabled sacred knowledge to move across religious, social, and linguistic boundaries. By conducting a comparative examination of foundational devotional writings by Amir Khusro, Bulleh Shah, Kabir, and Mirabai, the research contends that vernacular mysticism served as a means of spiritual democratization and as a cultural activity that promoted interfaith dialogue and societal unity. By prioritizing personal experience above established teachings, these traditions contributed to the formation of an inclusive spiritual ethos that continuous to impact India's varied cultural heritage.

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1. Introduction

Across different religious traditions, mysticism primarily emphasizes personal experiential engagement with the divine rather than mediated theological doctrines. (Underhill 3). Unlike institutional religion, this often emphasizes doctrine, ritual, and authority, mysticism privileges inward realization, emotional intimacy, and ethical transformation (Zaehner 5).

In the Indian subcontinent, mysticism acquired a distinctive social and cultural dimension during the medieval period through its articulation in vernacular languages. Prior to this period, religious knowledge was largely mediated through elite languages-Sanskrit in Brahmanical Hinduism and Arabic or Persian in Islamic theological traditions (Pollock 19). The Bhakti, Sufi, and Sant movements disrupted this linguistic hierarchy by deliberately employing regional and spoken languages, thereby transforming mysticism into a shared spiritual language accessible to diverse communities (Hawley and Juergensmeyer 7).

This paper argues that vernacular devotional expressions enabled mysticism to transcend religious and social boundaries, creating a trans-communal spiritual discourse that fostered cultural unity in medieval India.

2. Theoretical Framework: Linguistics, Spirituality, and Transcending Boundaries

Language functions not only as a neutral tool for communication but also as a carrier of power, identity, and cultural supremacy. (Bakhtin 271). This shift from classical to vernacular languages in religious rites signifies a redistribution of spiritual authority from institutional elites to ordinary practitioners. Vernacular mysticism serves as a form of cultural resistance that alters the manner in which individuals engage with the sacred. (Pollock 23).

Mysticism expressed in the indigenous language transforms abstract metaphysical concepts into concrete, emotionally resonant experiences. Theological complexity is replaced by metaphor, song, and commonplace imagery, enabling

mystical concepts to be shared orally and collectively (Ramanujan 137). The linguistic accessibility facilitates the bridging of gaps-religious, cast, and regional-by grounding spirituality in shared human experiences rather than in adherence to doctrines (Radhakrishnan 96).

3. Methodology

This research employs a qualitative comparative approach based on literary and cultural evaluation.

The methodological framework includes:

- Close reading of primary devotional texts in translation (Mirabai, Kabir, Bulleh Shah, Amir Khusro);
- Comparative thematic analysis across Bhakti, Sufi, and Sant traditions;
- Socio-historical contextualization of vernacular devotional practices;
- Critical engagement with secondary scholarship on mysticism, language, and Indian religiosity.

The emphasis continues to be on language as a mediating element in mystical expression rather than on doctrinal differences.

4. Literature Review: Indigenous Mysticism in Academic Discourse

Researchers of Indian devotional traditions have continually highlighted the transformative societal impact of vernacular spirituality. Radhakrishnan characterizes Indian mysticism as experiential instead of dogmatic, valuing realization more than belief. (95) Charlotte Vaudeville emphasizes the Bhakti movement's embrace of inclusive language as a critique to caste hierarchy (112). Annemarie Schimmel emphasizes the flexibility of Sufi mysticism in regional environment, especially via poetry and music. (15)

The Kabir scholarship foregrounds his profound non-sectarian belief and linguistic mixture, frequently referred as *Sant Bhasha* (Hess 18). However, the majority of the research investigates these practices in isolation. Comparative researches that foreground vernacular language as the shared medium throughout traditions are still relatively under examined. This paper tackles these lacunas.

5. Vernacular Devotion in the Bhakti Tradition

The Bhakti movement emphasized *bhava*-intense emotional devotion-as the primary means of spiritual realization (Hawley 32). Bhakti saints composed in regional languages to address communities excluded from Sanskrit learning.

5.1 Mirabai: Mystical Love and Defiant Devotion

Mirabai's Braj bhajans articulate an intensely personal relationship with Krishna:

“Mere to Giridhar Gopal, doosro na koi”

(*I belong only to Giridhara; there is no other*) (Mirabai qtd. in Hawley 67).

Her mystical devotion challenges social norms, particularly patriarchal and caste-based constraints. In another verse, she declares:

“Log kahe Meera bhayi jogan,
Main to mohan ke rang rachi”

(*People say Meera has gone mad; I am dyed in the color of my beloved*) (qtd. in Vaudeville 119).

The vernacular idiom transforms mystical union into an accessible emotional experience, reinforcing Bhakti's inclusive ethos.

6. Sufi Tradition: Vernacular Mysticism and Syncretic Expression

Sufi mysticism emphasizes divine love (*ishq*) and annihilation of the ego (*fana*) as pathways to truth (Schimmel 6). In India, Sufi poets adopted vernacular languages to reach wider audiences.

6.1 Amir Khusro: Early Vernacular Sufi Expression

Amir Khusro's Hindavi verse illustrates mystical surrender:

“Prem ki gali ati sankri, ja mein do na samay”

(*The lane of love is very narrow; there is no room for two*) (Khusro qtd. in Schimmel 108).

The simplicity of the vernacular conveys a profound metaphysical idea without theological abstraction.

6.2 Bulleh Shah: Mysticism beyond Religious Identity

Bulleh Shah's Punjabi *kafis* reject religious categorization:

“Na main momin vich maseetan,
Na main vich kufar diyan reetan”

(*I am not among the believers in mosques, nor among the infidels in their rites*) (Bulleh Shah qtd. in Malik 54).

His famous refrain-

“Bullah ki jaana main kaun”

(*Bullah, I do not know who I am*)-captures the Sufi emphasis on self-negation and inner realization (Schimmel 140).

7. Sant Tradition: Kabir and Radical Vernacular Mysticism

The Sant tradition synthesizes Bhakti and Sufi ideas while rejecting religious orthodoxy. Kabir's poetry exemplifies radical vernacular mysticism.

7.1 Kabir's Critique of Ritual and Authority

Kabir challenges ritualism through sharp metaphor:

“Pahan puje hari mile, to main puju pahad”

(*If worshipping stone brings God, I would worship a mountain*) (Kabir qtd. in Hess 73).

He affirms divine unity across religious traditions:

“Kahat Kabir suno bhai sadho, Ram Rahim ek hai”

(*Kabir says, listen seeker-Ram and Rahim are one*) (qtd. in Hawley 154).

Kabir's vernacular language dismantles sectarian boundaries, foregrounding experiential spirituality.

8. Comparative Discussion: Mysticism across Boundaries

The comparative analysis of Bhakti, Sufi, and Sant traditions reveals that vernacular mysticism operates not merely as a devotional mode but as a theoretical site of boundary negotiation within Indian spiritual culture. These traditions collectively articulate what may be described as a *trans-*

sectarian mystical epistemology, wherein spiritual truth is grounded in experiential immediacy rather than scriptural authority or institutional mediation. Indian philosophical thought has long emphasized such experiential knowledge, privileging realization over dogma (Radhakrishnan 94–97).

8.1 Mysticism as Experiential Epistemology

Across traditions, mysticism privileges *anubhava* (direct experience) over *shastra* (textual doctrine). This experiential perspective corresponds with wider philosophical interpretations of mysticism as a knowledge framework based on inner awareness instead of doctrinal conviction (King 21). The Bhakti focus on *bhava*, the Sufi quest of *fana* (ego annihilation), and the Sant commitment to inner truth all converge in a shared epistemological assertion: the divine can be attained through personal experience instead of ritual adherence (Das 58).

By expressing such experience in indigenous languages, these traditions render spiritual wisdom accessible to all. Employing the native language connect sacred discourse with everyday life, enabling mystical insight to arise from ordinary emotional, ethical, and social circumstances. Vernacular mysticism consequently redefines spirituality into something participatory instead of hierarchical (Hawley 112).

8.2 Language as a Liminal and Mediating Space

From a theoretical perspective, vernacular language functions as a liminal space—a threshold between religious traditions, social identities, and cultural practices. Victor Turner's concept of liminality demonstrates how these spaces facilitate transformation and *communitas* beyond rigid social frameworks (Turner 130). In contrast to classical languages that uphold orthodoxy and exclusivity, vernaculars promote hybridity, fluidity, and cross-fertilization. Bhakti poetry employs regional metaphors, Sufi verse integrates indigenous imagery, and Sant writings consciously blend various linguistic styles.

The linguistic blend enables mystical discourse to extend beyond traditional religious groups. The native languages serve as a collective spiritual medium through which concept of divine affection, moral integrity, and individual awakening are expressed beyond boundaries. According to Bakhtin, vernacular language inherently challenges monologic authority by embracing diverse voices and interpretations (Bakhtin 272). In this regard, vernacular mysticism can be viewed as a cultural approach to inclusion, able of maintain pluralism while preserving uniqueness.

8.3 Critique of Institutional Religion and Power Structures

A crucial shared aspect of these traditions is their ongoing criticism of religious authority. Bhakti saints confront caste structure, Sufi poets oppose strict legalism, and Sant figures like Kabir openly critique both Hindu and Islamic traditions. This critique cannot be separated from their choices of language. By renouncing elite languages, vernacular mystics symbolically and literally strip spiritual authority from institutions.

From a discourse-theoretical perspective, language serves as a domain of influence. The transition from classical to vernacular idioms redistributes interpretive authority and undermine dominant religious framework (Foucault 131). Vernacular devotion transforms mysticism into a counter-discourse-challenging ritualism, priesthood, and dogma while endorsing ethical behavior and internal devotion.

8.4 Communal Transmission and Social Cohesion

Vernacular devotional expressions are deeply embedded in oral and performative traditions—singing, recitation, and collective listening. These activities promote collective engagement and reciprocal emotional experience. Mysticism transcends personal contemplation and transform into a collective spiritual practice that unites group (Eaton 45).

This collective aspect demonstrates how mysticism transcending boundaries fosters social cohesion. Songs, symbols, and narratives exchanged foster interreligious understanding and compassion. Annemarie Schimmel observes that mystical poetry serves as an emotional bridge, enabling abstract spiritual truths to be accessed through sentiment and cadence (Schimmel 7). Consequently, vernacular mysticism serves as a unifying spiritual element for spiritual and social dimension.

8.5 Towards a Trans-Boundary Model of Indian Mysticism

Taken together, these theoretical dimensions suggest that Bhakti, Sufi, and Sant traditions collectively articulate a trans-boundary model of mysticism—one that resists rigid categorization while affirming spiritual plurality. Vernacular devotional expression becomes the enabling condition through which mysticism transcends religious demarcations and emerges as a shared ethical and experiential horizon.

Such a model challenges modern frameworks that treat religious traditions as isolated systems. Instead, it foregrounds interaction, circulation, and mutual influence as central to the formation of Indian spiritual culture, reinforcing the view that Indian mysticism is best understood as relational and dialogic rather than sectarian (Pollock 18).

Conclusion

Mysticism articulated through vernacular devotional expressions marks a transformative phase in Indian spiritual history, wherein sacred experience moved decisively across religious, social, and linguistic boundaries. By privileging lived spiritual engagement over institutional authority, the Bhakti, Sufi, and Sant traditions reconfigured access to the divine, unsettled entrenched hierarchies, and cultivated a shared spiritual ethos grounded in inclusivity. The enduring resonance of these traditions underscores vernacular mysticism as a trans-boundary model of spirituality that continues to illuminate the pluralistic foundations of Indian spiritual culture.

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