

## Forgotten Footprints of Faith A Systematic Literature Review of Female Sufis in South Asia

Sadia Noreen \*<sup>1</sup>

\*<sup>1</sup>Institute of Islamic Studies and Shariah, Muslim Youth (MY) University, Islamabad, Pakistan

### ARTICLE INFO

#### Keywords

Women Sufis, South Asia, Spirituality, Shrines, Awareness, Undocumented roles.

#### \*Correspondence Author

sadiadsb1999@gmail.com

DOI: [10.21015/vfast-tir.v13i1.2162](https://doi.org/10.21015/vfast-tir.v13i1.2162)

#### Article History

Received

May 29, 2025

Accepted

June 21, 2025

Published

June 30, 2025

### ABSTRACT

Despite their significant contribution, the role of women in Sufi tradition of South Asia has largely been ignored in the extant literature. This paper which conducted systematic literature review of the study is composed of about 25 articles, books and other materials illuminates the subject on the role of women in Sufism in South Asia. The results indicate that the female Sufis played their role in numerous fields such as gender-free spirituality, shrine culture and religious consciousness. The results also indicate that most of the work done by female Sufis are unrecorded in a way that limits a proper judgment on how the Sufi culture in South Asia owed itself to the contribution of female Sufis. The female figure has been either demarginalized or unrepresented in South Asian religious traditions, particularly, in traditions formed on the basis of Islamic mysticism. This study sheds more light on the significance of the sacred and cultural roles that women have been playing to perpetuate and model Sufi practices. By reviewing a significant amount of an academic literature, one can see that their impact is very wide and significant. However, due to less documentation and identifications in history, a lot of that contribution is shadowed or ignored. Thus, this review underlines the necessity of additional studies, preservation, and representation of women and their position in Sufi customs, especially in the situation of the country of the South Asian region with its multicultural background and rich background.

## Introduction

The so-called mystical aspect of Islam Sufism has never lost its significance as one of the bright components of religious and cultural life in South Asia. Being based on spiritual self-analysis, individual piety, and affection towards the Divine, Sufism crosses the limits of orthodoxy and therefore is exceptionally comprehensive to ordinary citizens. The greatest value about this tradition as noted is that it has contributed to the diffusion of Islam in the Indian sub-continent. This aspect is especially because of the Sufi saints who preached extremely humanistic teachings with compassion and inclusions in history have been known to contribute heavily towards the swift spread of the Islamic faith in South Asia and not through military dominance and conversions by the sword. The messages of peace, love, tolerance and friendship preached by these saints helped them to win hearts of individuals who belonged to different castes, religions, and spoke different languages.

The dargahs of these Sufi saints are the places of their burial, which still operate as centers of spiritual and cultural life and receive the inflow of people of various ages, gender, cultural background. These are the spaces which provide spiritual relief to people and more importantly these are the areas where social stratification is commonly challenged or lost. That is where the spirit of inclusivity of Sufi practices can actually be observed. Though a significant amount of literature has explored the role of male Sufi saints (Khawaja Moinuddin Chishti, Bahauddin Zakariya, and Shah Abdul Latif Bhittai, to name a few) a little less talked about, but equally important, is a tradition of female involvement in Sufi realm.



Women, especially, have been a long tradition of these devotional landscapes-not as a silent participant or nurse, but as an active participant. They have been disciple, spiritual poets, care-givers, healers and themselves even Sufi saints. The teachings and lives of such female mystics as Rabia al-Basri, Bibi Fatima Sam, and Mai Sahib Kaur have all had a history of spiritual sanction and sanctity in their particular areas. Nevertheless, they, in spite of their very valuable contributions, do not preclude the fact that the predominant theme of Sufi historiography remains oriented largely towards men. This gender perception has resulted in such a state whereby the names, histories, and spiritual legacy of the women Sufis are little-known, or have simply been forgotten.

This takes us to a very important and urgent question, why has the role of female Sufis been deliberately addressed or sidelined in historical and scholarly discourse? Is such shunning intentional or a part of cultural prejudice in which the efforts of women in religious areas are underestimated by chance? Or maybe it is rooted in the gendered organizations of society which have not captured or stored the female voices and most notably in spiritual or religious movements?

There has been a distinct change in recent past. The role of women in Sufism has come under an increased body of work, which attempts to re-interpret their role. Different researchers have had to bring out the gender issues in the Sufi practices and, also, record the spiritual life and inheritance of female mystics. Still, all these works have been dispersed and published in journals, books and dissertations. There has not been, to our knowledge, a comprehensive and systematic review that brings these insights together in a cohesive manner. The literature on the subject remains fragmented and often lacks a unified analytical framework.

It is in this context that the Systematic Literature Review (SLR) method becomes highly relevant. A systematic literature review is defined as a “methodical and replicable process of identifying, evaluating, and synthesizing the existing body of completed and recorded work produced by researchers, scholars, and practitioners” (Tranfield, Denyer, Smart, 2003). Unlike traditional narrative reviews, which may be influenced by the individual perspectives of the authors, a systematic review follows a transparent and rigorous process. This makes it ideal for examining understudied or marginalized topics like that of female Sufis in South Asia.

Therefore, the aim of this study is to systematically survey the available literature on female Sufis in South Asia. By doing so, the study seeks to map out what is currently known about this topic, identify key thematic trends, and pinpoint critical gaps that require further scholarly attention. The purpose is not merely to document but to offer a structured and analytical overview of how female Sufis have shaped, and continue to shape, the mystical and cultural traditions of South Asia.

In total, 25 studies were selected and included in this review. These sources span academic journal articles, book chapters, and other scholarly documents that deal either directly or indirectly with the subject. The review is designed to address four major contributions:

**Integration of Fragmented Scholarship:** The first key contribution of this study is its role in gathering approximately 25 distinct scholarly works and synthesizing their findings. These studies, though scattered, collectively provide valuable insights into the presence and contributions of female Sufis across different regions such as Punjab, Sindh, Bengal, and Deccan. By bringing them together, the study offers a clearer, more cohesive picture of the topic.

**Understanding the True Role of Female Sufis:** The second objective is to explore and evaluate the actual role played by female Sufis in spreading Islam throughout South Asia. While male Sufis are widely credited for converting large numbers of people through their message of love and peace, female Sufis too were deeply influential. They established grounds where spiritual wisdom was taught, engaged in social reform, and influenced generations through their teachings of mysticism; combining it with living as role models. This paper tries to emphasize such contributions that are usually ignored.

**Historical Marginalization:** The third contribution is to find out the reasons behind the marginalization of the role of female Sufis in the literature. This involves looking at the cultural, social and probably

patriarchal prejudices that might have led to their sidelining. Raising the question of the construction of religious memory and historical narratives, the study refers to the institutionalized erasure or trivialization of women roles in the spiritual traditions.

Scooping into the Contemporary Relevance: Lastly, the research examines the contemporary relevance of female Sufis in South Asia. It discusses how their shrines are still pulling followers, and how their life is all being redefined in the current feminist, spiritual, and cultural narratives. In regions where religious extremism and gender inequality are rising, the inclusive and empowering teachings of female mystics offer a counter-narrative that promotes peace, equality, and spiritual fulfillment.

Taken together, these contributions make the present study both timely and original. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first systematic literature review focused on female Sufis in South Asia. It seeks not only to contribute to academic knowledge but also to promote a more inclusive understanding of Sufi history—one that acknowledges the vital roles women have played and continue to play.

In conclusion, while the history of Sufism in South Asia is rich and well-documented, it remains incomplete without the voices and legacies of its female practitioners. This review is a small but meaningful step toward rectifying that imbalance. It is not only by bringing these forgotten people into the light that we get their place in history, but we also understand the inclusive and transformative character of Sufism itself.

## Methodology

### Design:

This study was designed mainly due to the fragmented and weak structure of current literature in the field of study of how women participated in Sufism in South Asia. A highly dispersed and varied state of the studies related to the topic was one of the primary obstacles to overcome at the first stage. The literature referring to this theme was not concentrated in one field but rotated among history, anthropology, religious studies and gender studies, thus, the procedure of finding the relevant information was not simple but rather complex and multidimensional.

In order to deal with this difficulty, a systematically and methodically approach in the searching strategy was followed. The main intention was to find the studies that present themselves not only as potentially relevant regarding the subject of study but also credible academically. Such scholarly sources were consequently limited to the search within well-noted academic databases like Scopus, Web of Science, and Google scholar. The choice of these platforms was preconditioned by their extensive presentation of peer-reviewed studies and research assistance in both current and leading studies in various fields.

To inform identification of literature, a well thought set of search terms were devised. These were important concepts and phrases that these terms incorporated and that were bound to produce the relevant results. Namely, the words women or females were combined with such terms as Sufism or Sufi saints, pirs, dargah or shrine, mystics. Along with it, to limit the scope to specifically considered region, region specific identifiers were also provided, namely, South Asia, India, Pakistan, Bangladesh and Sri Lanka. This was combined through the Boolean operators to limit the results obtained in the searches and also to ensure that topically matched studies retrieved were geographically relevant as well.

Various searches were implemented in order to make them comprehensive. At every stage, screening of results was done to determine the relevance on basis of titles, abstracts and keywords. Duplicates were deleted and only studies that directly addressed the subject matter were put under consideration. Full texts of the articles either used or retrieved to support the study were scanned and read in detail to ensure they meet the objectives of the study. This method of repetitious, scrupulousness helped to

create a strong body of work in the form of 25 chosen articles, which reflected the variety of academic opinion regarding the place of women in Sufi traditions in South Asia.

## **Inclusion Criteria:**

In order to support the scholarly integrity of the systematic review as well as to justify the relevance and significance of the research, a series of inclusion criteria were established. All of the mentioned criteria were used in the process of screening and selecting the identified studies, regardless of the study or research design. These became the guide to accessing the appropriateness of a given source to be included in the final review.

On the one hand, the research demanded that all sources should be directly or primarily devoted to the study of Sufism (particularly, with attention paid to the gender aspects of this mystical movement). The works that included just a mention of Sufism or women without any explicit discussion of one or another theme were omitted. Prominence of a Sufi way of thinking and their practice especially with reference to the aspects of the role of women was believed to be a basic prerequisite of selection.

Second was geographical relevance, which was a very crucial factor. Only the studies placed in or focused on the South Asian context were taken into consideration. This contained studies in India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Nepal, and other areas of the sub-continent. This study focused on South Asia, in particular, because of the unique historical and cultural connection Sufi traditions had with the South Asian region and also the cross-border spiritual heritage, which spilled national life in the region.

Thirdly, although only recent studies were given the accent, representing the present academic belief and gender-based studies, some historical research was also considered. All these earlier sources offered the important background and context, which can be viewed into how perceptions and role of female Sufis have been constructed and changed through history. Moreover, history studies provided first-hand reports in certain cases or initial records (of great importance in explaining the origin of the female spiritual mastership in Sufism).

To this effect, few theoretically intensive studies that were not based in South Asia were also taken into consideration. In spite of the fact that these studies did not relate directly to the South Asian situation, they contained solid theoretical or theoretical frameworks which can be used in explaining the South Asian case. These works assisted to expand the review on the analytical depth and the level of comparisons.

Finally, preference was given to those peer-reviewed journal articles, which tend to maintain high quality and academic standards and provide validated, high-quality scholarship. Although it is known that not much research has been conducted with regard to this niche subject, the review also took into account relevant books, chapters in books, and other academic literature including doctoral dissertations, proceedings of conferences and research monographs. These expanded parameters made the research to be able to deal with literature in a more detailed and wholesome manner.

In general, entry criteria were initially designed such that academic rigor is in balance with subject matter relevancy. They helped to include a wide yet concentrated circle of sources that might be used to represent a comprehensive picture on the role of women in Sufism in South Asia together. These criteria keep the review credible and give a significant input on the cognizance on what is historically marginalized and rich in spiritual context.

## Data Extraction and Synthesis:

Data extraction and synthesis were performed in such a systematic and structured way that the integrity, as well as depth of analysis, can be ensured. Once the list of 25 various sources was completed, data analysis Librarians would follow, as they were intended to identify and isolate the most pertinent information that could relate to the topic of female Sufis roles and representations in South Asia. Because of the interdisciplinary character of the question, which lies in the interrelation of historical, theological, gender studies, and ethnographic approaches, particular attention was paid to reflecting the multidimensional aspects of women involvement with Sufism.

From each source, the following categories of data were meticulously extracted:

- (a) **Historical accounts of female Sufis:** This includes documented biographies, hagiographies, and references to female spiritual figures found in both primary and secondary sources. These accounts help trace the presence and activities of women in Sufi traditions from the medieval period to the present.
- (b) **Theological or spiritual discussions of gender by Sufis:** This entails analysis of spiritual texts, commentaries, and discourses that reflect on **gendered interpretations** within Sufism. Such materials often reveal how Sufi thinkers conceptualized femininity, spiritual equality, or distinctions between male and female seekers.
- (c) **Ethnographic observations of women's roles in Sufi practices:** Ethnographic data includes **field-based accounts** that describe women's roles in rituals, gatherings, shrine maintenance, devotional singing (*qawwālī*), healing practices, and spiritual mentorship. These contemporary insights provide a grounded understanding of **lived Sufi experiences**.
- (d) **Analysis of how gender norms influenced or constrained women's participation:** This includes critical discussions on societal, religious, and institutional factors that either enabled or restricted women's involvement in Sufi spaces. Themes like **patriarchy**, **modesty norms**, **spiritual succession**, and **public versus private spirituality** emerged prominently.

Each source was subjected to a qualitative coding process. This involved carefully reading and annotating the texts, followed by manual coding of recurrent themes, metaphors, and narratives. Open coding was used to make appear categories that were not anticipated and use of axial coding to make the data fit around themes. Distinctions were also made on these codes into larger groups in the identification of patterns, trends in themes and diverging opinions in the literature.

The synthesis procedure was focused at integrating information rather than content summarisation. Instead of evaluating every research purely on its own, the links were made between the sources, so as to see how the similar issues were treated by various authors, and what their differences had been. This allowed comparison to be made along geographical lines (e.g., India vs. Pakistan) and historical periods (e.g. medieval vs. modern) and across disciplinary methods (e.g. anthropological vs. theological).

The analytical exercise has served to show that female Sufi agency took different forms in different contexts, i.e. either within the limits of orthodox religion, or by confronting dominant patriarchal systems. The role of visibility and invisibility was also manifested seeing that some women were memorialized as saints to the extent of having their shrines whereas others were spiritually involved yet socially disguised.

Below is a list of the selected studies used in this research. These works provide the range of the early foundational taking into consideration the recent ethnographic fieldwork, hence providing both historical and contemporary significance:

All these studies combined created the analytical and empirical background of this systemic literature review and provided a deep and complex understanding of the so-called ignored efforts of women in

**Table 1:** Key Studies on Women in Sufism in South Asia

No.	Author(s)	Year	Title
1	Khan & Bano [15]	2020	<i>Women and Sufism in South Asia</i>
2	Aftab [2]	2022	<i>Sufi Women of South Asia</i>
3	Abbas [1]	2002	<i>Female Voice in Sufi Ritual</i>
4	Callan [6]	2008	<i>Female Saints in Sylhet</i>
5	Kasmani [14]	2016	<i>Women [un]-like Women</i>
6	Pemberton [21]	2006	<i>Women Pirs and Succession</i>
7	Flueckiger [9]	2006	<i>Amma's Healing Room</i>
8	Schimmel [23]	2003	<i>My Soul is a Woman</i>
9	Shaikh [24]	2012	<i>Sufi Narratives of Intimacy</i>
10	McGilvray [18]	2014	<i>Sufi Shaykh in Sri Lanka</i>
11	Ghadially [10]	2005	<i>Devotional Empowerment</i>
12	Cornell [7]	1999	<i>Early Sufi Women</i>
13	Baried & Hannase [4]	2022	<i>Sufis and Women</i>

the Sufi tradition of South Asia. Relying on the sources that refer to the wide variety of disciplines, such as history, theology, anthropology, and gender studies, this review gives the multidimensional picture of the role and representation of female Sufis.

Historically, a number of studies reveal the life of female saints, mystics, and spiritual leaders whose efforts were important, but which have been generally avoided in the history of Sufi. These works attempt to reconstruct the biographical narratives of women Sufis who operated within different temporal and spatial contexts, thereby providing a broader timeline of female spiritual presence in South Asian Islam.

In terms of theological and spiritual discourse, numerous sources examined the ways in which classical and contemporary Sufi teachings have discussed gender. These include interpretations of divine love, spiritual intimacy, embodiment, and the metaphysical roles of women in the Sufi path. Other of these studies also emphasize the way that women, both as seekers and as saints, have been made proxies of divine union in poetic and mystical writings which question normative patriarchal interpretation of spiritual authority.

In an ethnographic perspective, ethnographic accounts of being a woman within modern day Sufi context have been offered in details by other scholars that are based on their time in the fields. Among them are women who frequent shrines, engage in devotional meetings, who are spiritual healers or custodians of holiness. As per these studies, we realize that institutional Sufism may well be the domain of men, but the realities on ground are in way more participatory and inclusive spiritual world.

Of equal significance are the incisive gender studies that question the structural and social power that in the past pushed women into silence or limited their perceptibility in the Sufi tradition. These writings cover the issue on the conflict between spiritual inclusion and social exclusion by indicating that the position of women has been glorified in an actual sense but brought to ruin in words. They reveal gendered power relations which were present in shrines cultures, leadership succession and the historic memory, and promote a more gender sensitive historical act of South Asian Sufism historiography.

This all-embracing review of various opinions will not only unite the ad hoc research on female Sufis but give new paths to future studies as well. It results in the need to integrate the gender-sensitive methodology towards the Sufi studies and the re-reading of both the canonical books and oral history in the form of an inclusive optic. The results point out that Sufism in South Asia cannot be complete without the acknowledgment of the spiritual agency, power, and embodied devotion of women. Re-discovering and re-focusing these silenced voices, this review will help to build a more comprehensive and balanced picture of the Sufi tradition.

The following is the list of studies that were further included in this review. These other sources even increase the range of the literature through regional, thematic, and methodological diversity to add to the synthesis.

**Table 2:** Studies on Women in Sufism in South Asia (Continued)

No.	Author(s)	Year	Title
14	Laskar [16]	2022	<i>Islam and Sufism in South Asia</i>
15	Ghazanfar & Hamid [11]	2022	<i>Hagiographical Silence</i>
16	Gupta [12]	2025	<i>Ajmer's Dargah</i>
17	Werbner [26]	2010	<i>Pilgrimage and Nation Building</i>
18	Manzoor & Shah [17]	2018	<i>Women Sufis in Sindh</i>
19	Hegland [13]	2018	<i>Gender and Religion</i>
20	Pemberton [20]	2004	<i>Women Mystics</i>
21	Flueckiger [8]	1997	<i>Two Castes</i>
22	Smith et al. [25]	2023	<i>Murshida Fatwa</i>
23	Al Masud et al. [3]	2017	<i>Sufism in Bangladesh</i>
24	Burak-Adli et al. [5]	2023	<i>Genderless Souls</i>
25	Purewal & Kalra [22]	2010	<i>Vernacular Religion</i>
26	Milad & Taheri [19]	2021	<i>Divine Feminine</i>

## Thematic Analysis

**0.1 Historical Marginalization and Emergent Narratives of Female Sufis** Among the most common and most visible themes that can be found due to this review is the historical marginalization of female Sufis by the written and remembered spiritual traditions of South Asia. What was becoming more apparent through the reviewed literature was the fact that female Sufis have been marginalized or disregarded in nearly all times of Islamic history, including the medieval, the colonial, and even the modern times. This is not because it is not participated in or contributed to, but is a complicated overlap of historiographical obscurity, cultural taboos and patriarchal systems that have actively determined the recording of religious history and popular recollection.

There are, however, rare and significant exceptions to this erasure. For instance, 'Abd al-Ḥaqq Dihlawī's 17th-century Persian compilation *Akhbār al-Akhyār* includes a brief section dedicated to female Sufi figures. This reference albeit narrow goes on to prove that some scholars of that period knew of the existence of women of spiritual values. On a similar note, the biographical anthology compiled by Amir Khurd in the 14th century (*Siyar al-Awliyā* (Khurd, 1884)) mentions few of the women who were pious and active in the spiritual life of their own sex, but many of these women are mentioned in association with the saints or teachers of the opposite gender.

The limited and mostly tokenicity levels of women in such texts brought about the need of this study to explore the reasoning behind this discriminatory approach. The other unifying explanation recurrent in the literature is that the praise given the women by the female writers was not well received or applauded back in the pre-modern Islamic society. These compliments seemed to be improper or as those that might act to compromise modesty that should be observed by women. Consequently, the spiritual accomplishments of women tended to be effaced, or their very presence veiled by the reduction of them to associated individuals, wives, daughters or sisters, of great male saints. Otherwise, they were represented not as individual spiritual agents but symbolically. Such literary and cultural formations led to a systematic eclipse of Muslim female spiritual authority in Sufi historiography.

Although these traditional narratives have historically marginalized female Sufis, today scholarship has started to break them by identifying and recounting the lives and work of female Sufis. An outstanding case in point is a full-fledged work by Aftab (2022) that showed 141 instances of women living in various historic occasions and that could be safely referred to as Sufi women in their right. These women belonged to diverse social, geographical and cultural groups, and held diverse spiritual roles in their lives; they were shrine custodians, healer, teacher, and also writers of mystic poetry. The analysis shows that the saints whom they worshipped as women were the case study, and not an isolated one at that, but in fact recurrent over the ages such as the colonial and post-colonial times in South Asia.

Among the essential conclusions of the work done by Aftab is the following one: due to them, such female Sufis existed and worked in virtually every period of history, yet they were hyper-localized. A large number of their names, stories and shrines remain unknown even to the scholars of a certain country, much less the international scholarly world. It is an indication of a gap between actual spiritual practices and professional history. Essentially, the Sufi saints who are women were the local deities but carefully written out in the history of the religion.

Likewise, the Cornell (1999) translation of the 10 th century Arabic text *Dhikr an-Nisw* will also provide a valuable insight into the early works of women in the Sufi movements. In this book—which has so frequently been ignored in our studies—the spiritual experiences and the spiritual attainments of several women mystics during the earliest centuries of the growth of Islamic mysticism are recorded. The translation and commentary of Cornell imply that women participated on an intellectual, ritual and communal level in early Sufism and that a concept of mysticism being strictly the domain of men in its early stages.

Collectively, the findings highlights strong a trend of a selective historical memory, where female characters have generally been edited out or reduced to minimalism regardless of their real existence and action. The new bodies of literature that have emerged in current academic work are an attempt to redress this void to restore the presence and spiritual power of women in Sufi culture. They only capture names, biographies but on such studies they also seek to comprehend the gendered links of spiritual leadership, popular worship and cultural memory. They highlight the systematic holes in the conventional history and endorse a more comprehensive and representative historiography that would give justice to the work of both men and women.

This is a theme of historical marginalization, hence a core concern in the literature that has been vital in steering the direction of analysis of this review. The shift towards silence to recognition, omission to documentation and local memory to scholarly recognition is a big step forward in the way female Sufi figures are currently being approached in the study of the subject. It also preconditions the additional thematic research issues on how gender still remains influential in defining Sufi space, leadership and rituals in both ancient and contemporary South Asia.

**0.2 Female Spiritual Authority** Through the literature, it is obvious that actual spiritual power in Sufism is closely connected with gender relations. Historically, Sufi traditions in South Asia have been male dominated with respect to formal leadership both in terms of the leadership structures and the presentation of sainthood. The women who have become leaders of Sufi orders have rarely been accepted and treated as equals to the men who hold the same positions. Female leadership in the public religious discourse has been made invisible by the fact that the Sufi silsilas (lineages of Sufi spirituals) have very few institutional roles of women.

Nonetheless, even though there is no official power, it was reported in the literature that there are avenues that were traditionally accessible to women as restricted sources of spiritual appreciation and admiration. These paths were most likely to be based on kinship ties, charisma. At other times women who had been immediate descendants of male saints or close kinsfolk occasionally got some portion of spiritual power and status. They were associated with loved men- fathers, husband or brothers- and this served as the cultural approval of their presence to the sacred places.

Of these women, few of them developed personal charisma commonly known as *baraka* or spiritual grace or blessing that attracts followers. This charisma was not part of an institution but was rather founded on personal piety, perceived wisdom and a sense of spiritual presence as realized by the community. These incredible women even emerged as spiritual figures in their right not to mention the fact that their roles were limited in a cultural context.

An excellent case in point is the shrine at Hazrat Bibib Pak Daman, Lahore which is of very great importance to the believers. It is believed that this shrine was a group of holy women, who are believed to belong to the family of the Prophet and moved to South Asia. The shrine has over the years been a place of intense devotion and especially in the women. It is worth noting that it was traditionally maintained

by female custodians and they practiced and passed on spiritual rituals there. This case demonstrates that although female spiritual power was not usually institutionalized, it might still be expressed through localized devotion, hereditary sacred responsibilities and community acknowledgment.

**0.3 Spirituality and Gender in Sufi Thought and Experience** Another characteristic feature of Sufi discourse in South Asia that has been pointed out by the systematic literature review is the gender-transcendence of spirituality. A significant part of the literature that addresses spiritual practices, mystic poetry and philosophical teachings of Sufism uses a language that is not overtly gendered. Rather, Sufi thinking tends to be centred onto the inner path of the soul, which is not gendered but is seen as a universal experience of humans.

Most of the poetic and philosophical traditions focus on such things as purity of heart, divine love, self-annihilation (*fanā*), and union with the Divine (*baqā*), and these are all explained in the terms applicable to both men and women. The spirit (*rūh*) of Sufi cosmology is typically said to be genderless, which is seen to have a metaphysical structure where the divine relation is not restricted by physical differences.

This strategy means that women are able to achieve the same level of spiritualities as men and can be equally able to reach mystical realization. Although society may restrict the external involvement of women in the formal Sufi orders, the theological aspects of Sufism do not distinguish between the two sexes in the journey of attaining God. This egalitarianism, despite not always being applied socially, is a powerful and progressive attribute of Sufi spirituality within the South Asian environment.

These gender-neutral spiritual principles can provide an important critique of the male-dominated standards of spiritual doctrines that have long marginalized the role of women in church. They bring about interpretative opportunities in which the spiritual success of women could be glorified in the metaphysical expression of the Sufi, without the restrictions of the gender hierarchy.

**0.4 Theological and Mystical Perspectives** Another fascinating theme emerging from the review is the conscious and common use of female imagery and metaphors by male Sufis in both theological texts and mystic poetry. Such gender reversal in spiritual expression is a special literary and symbolic tactic in Sufi tradition. Many male mystics have assumed a female voice to articulate their longing for the Divine, representing themselves as the female beloved in search of the male beloved (God).

A particularly illustrative case is the Punjab Sufi poet Bullhe Shah is particularly graphic when he wrote verses in the location of a woman, symbolizing the weakness of the seeker, his passion and submission to the Divine. It is not an accident in this literary device, but a mythological tradition of mysticism that the contact between the soul and the Divine is symbolically expressed in a romantic or erotic desire, sometimes in the form of feminine imagery.

Scholar Schimmel (2003) has categorically noted that in the mystical literature of Sufism, the soul is frequently symbolized as female, while God or the spiritual guide (*murshid*) is portrayed in masculine terms. This metaphorical gendering of spiritual dynamics serves to express emotional intensity, dependency, and devotion, and is a core feature of Sufi poetic aesthetics.

However, despite this rich symbolic use of femininity, the actual representation and presence of female Sufis in the real world remains rare. In the literature, it is reiterated that despite the voice of the female poet giving the male poets a way of explaining their spiritual experience, women seldom had a place of a visible or authoritative position in the formal Sufi institutions. This paradox explains the opposition between assuming the symbolic feminine through religious literature and curbing the actual women within the frameworks of Sufi practice and acknowledgment.

However, this trend is some essential cases that are highlighted in the review. An example here is Lalleshwari (1320-1392), a mystic poet of Kashmir in Hindu Shaivite traditions, whose writing had major impacts among Sufi saints in South Asia. Her poems related to the concepts of spiritual union with God, inner realization, which echoed the ideas behind Sufi, and transcended religious boundaries, displaying the unity of spiritual traditions across the region.

The classic work expression of the Chishti Sufi ideals was the *Mu'nis al-Arwah* (Companion of Spirits) by Jahan Ara Begum, the daughter of emperor Shah Jahan, which was written during the period of the Mughals. Not only can her works testify to her scholarly interest in the Sufi doctrine, her female voice in the propagation of mystical knowledge, though being a unique contribution to the history of the Islamic intellectual tradition, can be considered one of the most precious ones.

More so, numerous poetic traditions in South Asia, most of those with their origins in the vernaculars, still use feminine metaphoric images of the soul, which points to a long-standing symbolic veneration of the feminine in spiritual language. Although abstract, these metaphors highlight the fact that gender roles can be reconsidered within the Sufi thinking, although this has not been fully put into practice.

**0.5 Gendered Spiritual Experiences** A common and distinctive theme in the literature is that the hints at the motivation of women who took a Sufi spiritual journey seem to vary in significant aspects with those of men. Unlike the conventional narratives that portray male Sufis as driven by theological exploration, mystical knowledge, or a desire for divine union through structured spiritual practices, the ethnographic accounts suggest that women's initiation into Sufi paths often emerges from relational, emotional, and service-oriented contexts.

Several ethnographic studies reviewed in this literature support the idea that women are more likely to adopt Sufism as a way to serve others or to strengthen existing social and familial networks. In this scenario, the Sufi way is not only a search at the metaphysical level but also an instrument to provide care, cope with social adversity, or manage household and emotional issues. Spirituality in many women is deeply embedded in care giving, healing and welfare of the community so there seems to be no distinction between religious commitment and calling upon social responsibility.

Flueckiger (2006) makes an essential contribution to this theme through ethnographic study of Hyderabad, India, a life account of a woman Sufi identified as Amma. Spirituality in the context of Amma was viewed in terms of her lived experiences, which were experiences of gender and caste and both of which she viewed as being unavoidable social constraints. Amma clearly considered gender-similar to caste-to be a boundary which, according to her, is impossible to beat, however, she did succeed in exerting substantial spiritual power in her organization. She was an extremely spiritual individual whose ministry was based on compassion, healing and emotional support, as opposed to scholastic affirmation and the elevation of spiritual status.

This pattern is echoed in Aftab (2022), who contrasts the performance of male and female saints in Sufi hagiographies and popular lore. While male saints are often remembered for performing dramatic miracles, engaging in intellectual or theological debates, or founding spiritual orders, female saints are remembered more often for their quiet miracles of compassion—such as feeding the poor, healing illnesses, and interceding for infertile women seeking children. These accounts reinforce the idea that female Sufi spirituality has historically been oriented toward service, empathy, and relational transformation, reflecting a gendered experience of the sacred.

**0.6 Women as Devotees and Caretakers** Among all the roles that women occupy in the Sufi landscape of South Asia, the most common and socially accepted one is that of a pilgrim and devotee. This position has remained unchanged in the various historical eras and geographical areas. The women attend the Sufi shrines on a regular basis; occasionally, as a one-time visitor and in most occasions, as a long-term worshiper who eventually acquires a lifestyle and rituals of Sufi shrine community.

In a socially stratified and patriarchal society, women usually discover a shrine space that provides them with a unique feeling of empowerment and spiritual agency (Ghadially, 2005). Unlike the situation with mosques, where women are usually limited in their entry or entry denied entirely, Sufi shrines have traditionally provided a more open and welcoming spiritual context. This other religious space does not only enable women to be involved in rituals, but also to join the social bonds, to find spiritual comfort and to demonstrate religious devotion.

Besides being the devotees, other women have also assumed the role of shrines caretakers, especially where the male custodians were not around, or had passed away or were not in a position to conduct their duties. Such cases are quite few, but symbolic. These women, also known as female pirs are the ones who assume the role of managing the spiritual and administrative roles of the shrine and hence a religious leadership role that is usually occupied by a man. Their appearance questions the traditional gender boundaries in the shrine culture and shows how the extraordinary conditions can provide the ways leading to female power within the Sufi institutions.

**0.7 Shrines as Social Space for Women**In most sections of rural South Asia, women are in structural exclusion in the life of the society and they are denied access to fundamental rights and space to express themselves. Their families are very close-knit and heavy on the patriarchal side, and they have little chance of expressing individual issues, providing emotional support, or interacting with the community outside of the home.

In this regard, Sufi shrines are essential social areas to women living in the rural and marginalized areas. The process of the visit to a shrine (individual or in groups) provides women with a unique opportunity to travel, leave the house, and communicate with a wide community. In shrines, women express their concerns, complaints, and expectations not only before saints by means of praying but also with other pilgrims and caretakers and create temporary networks of emotional and social support.

According to Callan (2008), as reported by Ghadially (2005), shrines of female saints, especially, are receiving huge numbers of women pilgrims. These are considered spiritual sanctuaries as the worship of a female saint is usually symbolically associated with motherhood, nurturing, and protection. Within these spaces, women pilgrims experience solace, empowerment, and sense of suffering and resilience that makes the shrine more of a therapeutic rather than a religious space.

**0.8 Sufi Ideals and Social Practice**Among the most glaring contradictions that come out in the literature is the gap between the ideals of egalitarianism that Sufism purports to uphold and their social practices with regard to women. On the one hand, Sufi dogma and literature uses the notion of spiritual equality, love, and transcendence of world divisions, such as gender, several times. Metaphysical essence of Sufism frequently gives out a vision of the soul being genderless thus equally able to be attuned to divine love and unification.

But the facts on the ground, which have been proven by historical and ethnographic research, are a more complicated and unequal narrative. As a matter of fact, Sufism is still a male dominated discipline with little or nothing being done to include women; and with regard to leadership or succession, it is almost negligible and highly dependent. Although exceptions do exist, they are frequently hailed as exceptions as opposed to being regarded as part of the general institutional structure of Sufi orders.

Such a contradiction can be described as a kind of "spiritual romanticism", in which Sufism is typically described as liberal or progressive, particularly as contrasted with more conservative religious models, but nevertheless, functions within patriarchal confines. The review suggests that this ideal-versus-practice gap must be acknowledged in any critical engagement with the subject. The spiritual ideals of the Sufism faith are not immune to inclusivity, but until now, the structural realities of gender bias and the cultural norm brings with it perceived restrictions on how the ideals can actually take place on-ground with women.

## Conclusion

The present research is one of the earliest systematic literature review on female Sufis in South Asia, especially since the current literature is rather scarce in this area. Although the scanty but meaningful literature reveals that women possess spiritual potentials and may have been involved in religious activities, the very recognition has scarcely materialized into official institutional stand in the Sufi system

as far as institutions are concerned. Another clear point brought out in the review is that, women have always been part of the mystic tradition in Sufism not only as observers but also as participants, pilgrims, caregivers, and even spiritual actors in some instances. Yet, the existence of women in leadership, particularly concerning power, in the formal sense of the word in shrines or Sufi orders, is rare-reported or mentioned.

This systematic review has tried to recreate those forgotten footprints of faith-lived experiences, contributions, and symbolic representation of female Sufis whose voices have remained marginalized or effaced. Findings indicate that irrespective of structural barriers and finding themselves imprisoned by social and religious norms, women in most parts of South Asia have found to relate themselves meaningfully to Sufism. They have played a diverse range of roles such as bringing up saintly children, patronizing and even supporting Sufi shrines, and representing the ideals of love, service and humility in their daily lives and all of these involve spiritual commitment that are also comparable in nature and intensity to many male counterparts.

Second, female Sufis craft devotional identities and room in the framework of male dominance as reflected by the resilience and creativity of this gender group. Being engaged in acts of service, spiritual healing, and mentorship through informal means, such women have become an important yet overlooked force ensuring the continuity of the Sufi tradition in South Asia.

In proceeding, this review also suggests specific academic focus on some of the following important areas. These include:

Biographical studies of little known or locally born women Sufi;

Ethnography that visits the experiences and place of women in the Sufi shrines and the orders today;

Theoretical approach to the gender discourse of Sufism especially in the perspective of the feminine scholars of the present.

The given research will contribute to the academic interpretation, but also it could have additional applications- they may direct Sufi communities to more inclusive and more equal practices. It is absolutely necessary to acknowledge and validate female (and male) spiritual agency in Sufism both in historical terms and in terms of envisioning the future that would be based on universal maxim of Sufi love, justice and equality.

## References

- [1] S. B. Abbas. *The female voice in Sufi ritual*. University of Texas Press, 2002. Devotional practices of Pakistan and India.
- [2] T. Aftab. *Sufi Women of South Asia: Veiled Friends of God*. Brill, 2022.
- [3] A. Al Masud, M. F. Abdullah, and M. R. Amin. The contributions of sufism in promoting religious harmony in bangladesh. *Jurnal Usuluddin*, 45(2):105–122, 2017.
- [4] A. B. Baried and M. Hannase. Sufis and women: The study of women’s sufis in the western world. *Refleksi*, 21(1):43–66, 2022.
- [5] F. Burak-Adli, M. S. Xavier, and F. Piraino. Genderless souls?: Sufi women in sociopolitical contexts. *Culture and Religion*, 24(2):113–134, 2024.
- [6] Amanda Callan. Female saints and the practice of islam in sylhet, bangladesh. *American Ethnologist*, 35(3):396–412, 2008. DOI: [10.1111/j.1548-1425.2008.00042.x](https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1548-1425.2008.00042.x)

- [7] Rkia Elaroui Cornell. *Early Sufi Women: Dhikr an-niswa al-muta'abbidāt as-Şūfiyyāt* (Abu 'Abd al-Rahman al-Sulami). Fons Vitae, Louisville, KY, 1999. ISBN 9781887752062.
- [8] Joyce Burkhalter Flueckiger. "there are only two castes: Men and women": Negotiating gender as a female healer in south asian islam. *Oral Tradition*, 12(1):76–107, 1997.
- [9] Joyce Burkhalter Flueckiger. *In Amma's Healing Room: Gender and Vernacular Islam in South India*. Indiana University Press, 2006. ISBN 9780253346652.
- [10] Rehana Ghadially. Devotional empowerment: Women pilgrims, saints and shrines in a south asian muslim sect. *Asian Journal of Women's Studies*, 11(4):79–101, 2005.
- [11] Aroosa Ghazanfar and Muhammad Muddassir Hamid. Breaking hagiographical silence on sufi women in medieval south asia. *Al-Qanṭara*, 8(4), 2022.
- [12] Anshu Gupta. Women of the empire at ajmer's dargah: Negotiating sacred and civic at a prominent sufi pilgrimage site, 1900–1920. *Gender & History*, 37(1):282–298, 2025.
- [13] Mary Elaine Hegland. Gender and religion in the middle east and south asia: Women's voices rising. In Unknown, editor, *A Social History of Women and Gender in the Modern Middle East*.
- [14] Omar Kasmani. Women [un]-like women: The question of spiritual authority among female fakirs of sehwan sharif. In Michel Boivin and Rémy Delage, editors, *Devotional Islam in Contemporary South Asia: Shrines, Journeys and Wanderers*, pages 47–62. Routledge, 2016.
- [15] Shazia Aqsa Khan and Aroosa Bano. Women and sufism in south asia: A survey of historical trends. *Liberal Arts and Social Sciences International Journal (LASSIJ)*, 4(2):202–214, 2020. DOI: [10.47264/idea.lassij/4.2.16](https://doi.org/10.47264/idea.lassij/4.2.16)
- [16] Sayema Hameed Laskar. Islam and sufism in south asia. *Islamic Studies*, 61(3):331–343, 2022.
- [17] Sobia Manzoor and Naseem Akhtar Shah. The role of women in sufism highlighting the importance of women sufis in sindh: Karachi & thatta. *Pakistan Journal of Gender Studies*, 17(1):219–251, 2018.
- [18] Dennis B. McGilvray. A matrilineal sufi shaykh in sri lanka. *South Asian History and Culture*, 5(2): 239–255, 2014.
- [19] Mahnaz Milad and Zahra Taheri. An inquiry into the nature of the female mystic and the divine feminine in sufi experience. *Religions*, 12(8):610, 2021.
- [20] Kelly Pemberton. Muslim women mystics and female spiritual authority in south asian sufism. *Journal of Ritual Studies*, pages 1–23, 2004.
- [21] Kelly Pemberton. Women pirs, saintly succession, and spiritual guidance in south asian sufism. *The Muslim World*, 96(1):61–87, 2006.
- [22] Navtej K. Purewal and Virinder S. Kalra. Women's 'popular' practices as critique: Vernacular religion in indian and pakistani punjab. In *Women's Studies International Forum*, volume 33, pages 383–389. Pergamon, 2010.
- [23] Annemarie Schimmel. *My Soul is a Woman: The Feminine in Islam*. Continuum (Bloomsbury Academic), 2003. ISBN 9780826415451.

- [24] Sa'diyya Shaikh. *Sufi Narratives of Intimacy: Ibn 'Arabi, Gender, and Sexuality*. University of North Carolina Press, 2012. ISBN 9780807835641.
- [25] Benjamin J. Smith, Siti Hamdi, and Ahmad Muzayyin. Female sufi guides and the murshida fatwa in indonesian sufism: Murshidas in a sufi order in lombok. *Contemporary Islam*, 17(3):363–390, 2023.
- [26] Pnina Werbner. Beyond division: Women, pilgrimage and nation building in south asian sufism. In *Women's Studies International Forum*, volume 33, pages 374–382. Pergamon, 2010.