

ANANTAM IAS · OPTIONAL NOTES

History Optional Cultural and Religious Developments (Bhakti and Sufi)

Paper 1 • Unit 19

Kabir, Nanak, Chaitanya and the Chishti and Suhrawardi orders:
50 marks across five questions in four years, and the unit that
appears in every single paper.

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UPSC SYLLABUS

Cultural and religious developments: the Bhakti movement in north India, its social and ideological bases; Kabir, Nanak, Chaitanya, Vallabha, Mirabai and the Maharashtra dharma; Sufi movement and its orders, Chishti and Suhrawardi; Sufi doctrines and practices; regional literatures.

The social and ideological bases of north Indian Bhakti

Explanation before description. Examiners reward a candidate who can say why a devotional movement swept north India in this particular period rather than merely who its saints were.

- Urban artisan and trading groups expanded under the Sultanate, and their members were excluded from Brahmanical ritual status while possessing real economic independence, so a religion of direct access suited them.
- **Kabir was a julaha or weaver, Ravidas a chamar, Namdev a tailor, Sena a barber and Dadu a cotton carder**, and that occupational list is the strongest single evidence for the artisanal base of nirguna Bhakti.
- Persian and Turkish rule removed the political patronage that had underwritten Brahmanical authority, which loosened the hold of orthodoxy without replacing it with anything comparable.
- Sufi presence supplied a working model of a religion organised around a teacher, a personal relationship with God and vernacular expression, and the two movements grew in the same social space.
- Vernacular languages matured in this period, and once a devotional idea could be sung in Braj, Awadhi, Punjabi or Marathi it escaped the Sanskrit-literate class entirely.
- **Irfan Habib** connects the movement to the growth of a monetised urban economy, while **Romila Thapar** stresses the search for identity among groups outside the varna order, and citing either shows reading.
- Caste critique varied greatly in strength, and it is a mistake to treat the whole movement as socially radical, since **saguna Bhakti under Tulsidas and Vallabha accommodated caste** while nirguna Bhakti attacked it.
- Women found unusual space, and **Mirabai, Lal Ded in Kashmir and Akka Mahadevi in Karnataka** all used devotion to justify defiance of household and marital authority.
- Institutional consequence is the point most often missed: Bhakti produced **panths, mathas and eventually the Sikh Khalsa**, so it did not remain formless devotion but generated durable organisation.

KEY TERMS

Nirguna — Devotion to God without form or attributes, characteristic of Kabir, Nanak, Ravidas and Dadu.

Saguna — Devotion to God with form and attributes, characteristic of Tulsidas, Surdas, Mirabai and Chaitanya.

The nirguna saints: Kabir, Nanak and Ravidas

The radical wing. Their common feature is a refusal of every institutional mediator, whether Brahmin, mullah, temple or mosque.

- **Kabir**, fifteenth century, born to a Muslim weaver family in Banaras and associated with Ramananda's lineage, attacked ritual, pilgrimage, idol worship, caste and scriptural authority in both religions with equal force.
- His verse survives in three collections, the **Bijak** of the Kabirpanthis, the **Adi Granth** of the Sikhs and the **Kabir Granthavali** of Rajasthan, and the textual differences between them are a genuine scholarly problem.
- Kabir's idiom is deliberately paradoxical, using **ulatbansi** or upside-down language, and his imagery draws on the loom, the market and the household rather than on courtly Sanskrit convention.
- **Guru Nanak**, 1469 to 1539, taught the oneness of God, rejected caste and ritual, and crucially built **institutions**, the sangat congregation, the pangat of eating together and the langar free kitchen.
- That institution building is what separates Nanak from Kabir in historical effect, since Kabir left a body of verse and Nanak left a community with a succession.
- **Ravidas**, a chamar of Banaras and a contemporary of Kabir, articulated the idea of **Begampura**, a city without sorrow where none is taxed and none is high or low, which is among the earliest utopian visions in Indian literature.
- **Dadu Dayal** in Rajasthan and the Dadupanth, and **Sant Namdev** earlier in Maharashtra, extend the same current geographically.
- Historiographical caution matters here, because the older account of Bhakti as a deliberate movement of Hindu-Muslim reconciliation has been questioned, and **John Stratton Hawley** argues that the idea of a single unified Bhakti movement was substantially constructed in the twentieth century.
- Kabir's own position is better read as a rejection of both establishments than as a synthesis of them, and saying so demonstrates that you have read past the textbook formula.

The saguna saints: Chaitanya, Vallabha, Surdas, Tulsidas and Mirabai

The devotional wing, larger in reach and more socially accommodating. Its literary output is what shaped popular Hinduism into the present.

- **Chaitanya**, 1486 to 1533, made Bengal and Odisha the centre of Krishna devotion, popularised **sankirtan**, collective ecstatic singing and dancing, and admitted people of all castes and both religions to it.
- Gaudiya Vaishnavism after him was systematised by the **six Goswamis of Vrindavan**, and its later institutionalisation reintroduced much of the hierarchy Chaitanya's practice had suspended.
- **Vallabhacharya**, 1479 to 1531, taught **Shuddhadvaita** or pure non-dualism and the **Pushtimarg** path of grace, and his sect became strongly associated with the mercantile communities of Gujarat and Rajasthan.
- **Surdas**, a poet of the Vallabhite Ashtachhap, composed the **Sursagar** in Braj on Krishna's childhood, and his blindness is traditional rather than documented.
- **Tulsidas** wrote the **Ramcharitmanas** in Awadhi in 1574, and its social effect exceeds any other text of the period, though its Rama is a maryada purushottam who upholds rather than subverts the social order.
- **Mirabai**, a Rajput princess of Merta married into the Sisodia house, defied family and caste to worship Krishna as her husband, and her padas circulate in Rajasthani, Braj and Gujarati recensions.

- **Maharashtra dharma** runs from **Jnaneshwar**, whose Jnaneshwari made the Gita available in Marathi around 1290, through **Namdev, Eknath and Tukaram**, to **Ramdas**, and the Varkari pilgrimage to Pandharpur is its living institution.
- The Varkari tradition matters politically as well as religiously, since it created a Marathi devotional public that later historians including **Ranade** connected to Maratha political consolidation under Shivaji.
- Comparison to make in an answer: nirguna saints attacked the social order and left small panths, while saguna saints accommodated it and reshaped popular religion across the subcontinent.

Sufism: doctrines and practices

The doctrinal vocabulary is what most scripts lack. Get the terms right and the comparison with Bhakti becomes precise rather than vague.

- Sufism sought direct experiential knowledge of God, called **marifat**, through stages of the path, and it distinguished the outer law **shariat** from the mystical path **tariqat** and the inner reality **haqiqat**.
- The **pir and murid** relationship, master and disciple, is the organising social form, and authority passes through a documented spiritual chain called a **silsila** reaching back to the Prophet.
- **Khanqah** is the hospice where the pir lived, taught, fed visitors and received petitioners, and its openness or closure to the public is what most distinguishes the orders from each other.
- **Wahdat-al-wujud**, the unity of being associated with **Ibn Arabi**, held that only God truly exists and creation is His self-manifestation, and it was the dominant Indian Sufi position.
- **Wahdat-al-shuhud**, unity of witness, was advanced by **Sheikh Ahmad Sirhindi** in the seventeenth century as a corrective, insisting that the apparent unity is an experience of the mystic rather than an ontological fact.
- That distinction is examinable, because Sirhindi's position was a deliberate move away from the perceived accommodation of Hinduism that wahdat-al-wujud allowed.
- **Sama**, devotional music, was permitted by the Chishtis and rejected by the Suhrawardis, and the resulting **qawwali** tradition is the most visible Sufi legacy in South Asia today.
- **Urs**, the death anniversary of a pir observed as a wedding with the divine, made dargahs into permanent centres of popular devotion attended by Hindus and Muslims alike.
- Practices included **zikr** or remembrance of God through repetition, **chilla** or forty days of retreat, and **futuh**, unsolicited offerings that the Chishtis accepted but refused to hoard.

	Chishti	Suhrawardi
Founded in India by	Khwaja Moinuddin Chishti, Ajmer	Bahauddin Zakariya, Multan
State patronage	Refused land grants and office	Accepted grants, property and office
Sama, devotional music	Permitted and central	Rejected
Social reach	Open khanqah, wide popular following	Narrower, court-linked
Key figures	Nizamuddin Auliya, Nasiruddin Chiragh, Baba Farid	Bahauddin Zakariya, Jalaluddin Tabrizi

The two orders named in the syllabus. The attitude to patronage explains almost everything else about them.

The orders in India

The syllabus names Chishti and Suhrawardi specifically, but a strong answer knows the later orders too because they change the picture after the sixteenth century.

- **Khwaja Moinuddin Chishti** settled at Ajmer in the late twelfth century, and his dargah became and remains the most visited Sufi shrine in the subcontinent.
- **Nizamuddin Auliya** in Delhi, who died in 1325, is the order's greatest figure, refusing to attend court under seven sultans, and his conversations are recorded in Amir Hasan Sijzi's **Fawa'id-ul-Fuad**.
- **Amir Khusrau**, his disciple, is the cultural bridge, writing in Persian and Hindavi and traditionally credited with developing qawwali and with the tarana form.
- **Baba Farid** of Ajodhan is the Punjab Chishti whose verses were later incorporated into the Sikh **Adi Granth**, which is concrete textual evidence of the overlap between the traditions.
- **Bahauddin Zakariya** at Multan built the Suhrawardi order on the opposite principle, holding property, accepting office and maintaining close relations with the Sultanate.
- Later orders extend the picture: the **Naqshbandi**, brought by Khwaja Baqi Billah and developed by Sirhindi, was orthodox and politically engaged; the **Qadiri** attracted Dara Shukoh; and the **Firdausi** flourished in Bihar under Sharfuddin Yahya Maneri.
- **Sirhindi**, called Mujaddid-i-Alf-i-Sani, criticised Akbar's religious policy and campaigned for a stricter observance of the sharia, so Sufism includes a reformist and exclusivist current as well as an accommodating one.
- That internal range is what an examiner most wants stated, since answers that present Sufism as uniformly syncretic misdescribe half the tradition.

Bhakti and Sufism compared

Asked in 2026 through the claim that Sufis created a climate of peace and harmony between sects. That question needs a careful yes and no.

- Convergences are real: both privileged **direct personal experience over ritual expertise**, both used vernacular idiom, both organised around a teacher, and both attracted followers across communal boundaries.
- **Shared vocabulary and imagery** developed, particularly the metaphor of the soul as the yearning bride, which appears in Sufi premakhyan romances and in Bhakti padas alike.
- **Jayasi's Padmavat** of 1540, a Sufi allegory written in Awadhi using a Rajput legend, is the single best text to cite for genuine cultural fusion.
- Institutional evidence supports the harmony claim, since dargahs attracted Hindu devotees, Baba Farid's verse entered the Adi Granth, and Kabir was claimed by both communities at his death.
- Divergences are equally real: Sufism remained within an **Islamic theological framework** with the Prophet, the Quran and the sharia as reference points, while Bhakti operated within an Indic one.
- Institutional relations to the state differed sharply, since Suhrawardis and later Naqshbandis were courtly and politically engaged in ways that most Bhakti saints were not.
- Sirhindi's reformism, Aurangzeb's Naqshbandi sympathies and the ulama's periodic hostility to sama all show that Sufism contained forces working against accommodation as well as for it.

- For the 2026 question, the defensible answer affirms the harmony claim for the **Chishti tradition specifically and at the popular level of the dargah**, while qualifying it by noting the Suhrawardi and Naqshbandi currents and the theological limits.
- Avoid the two lazy conclusions, that the movements merged into one syncretic faith and that they were entirely separate, since the evidence supports neither.

Regional literatures and lasting effects

Named in the syllabus and the movement's most durable product. Devotion is why the modern Indian languages became literary.

- **Hindi in its Braj and Awadhi forms** carries Surdas, Tulsidas and Jayasi, and the Ramcharitmanas is arguably the most widely known literary work in north India.
- **Punjabi** acquired scripture with the Adi Granth compiled by Guru Arjan in 1604, which is a multilingual anthology including Kabir, Namdev, Ravidas and Sheikh Farid alongside the Gurus.
- **Marathi** was made a literary language by the Varkari poets from Jnaneshwar to Tukaram, and Marathi devotional song remains a living mass tradition.
- **Bengali** developed through the Vaishnava padavali and the Chaitanya hagiographies, and **Assamese** through Sankaradeva's Ekasarana movement with its borgeet and ankiya nat drama.
- **Gujarati** through Narsinh Mehta, **Rajasthani** through Mirabai and Dadu, **Kashmiri** through Lal Ded and Nund Rishi, and **Sindhi** through Shah Abdul Latif complete the map.
- **Dakhni Urdu** grew in the Deccan sultanates with Sufi and courtly patronage well before Delhi adopted the language.
- Social effects were real but bounded: caste was criticised and softened in devotional space without being abolished, and several panths that began as caste-rejecting later became castes themselves.
- **Malfuzat literature**, the recorded conversations of Sufi masters such as the Fawaid-ul-Fuad, and the Bhakti hagiographies such as Nabhadas's Bhaktamal, are the period's most valuable social sources, because they record everyday questions about food, debt, marriage and neighbours that no chronicle preserves.
- Political afterlives are substantial, from the Sikh Panth becoming a state under Ranjit Singh to nineteenth century reformers claiming Kabir and Nanak, and Ambedkar's own engagement with Kabir and Ravidas.
- The formulation to close on: Bhakti and Sufism together made devotion vernacular, personal and available without ritual mediation, and that shift did more to shape everyday Indian religion than any political change of the same centuries.

Last-mile revision

- Artisanal base: Kabir julaha, Ravidas chamar, Namdev tailor, Sena barber, Dadu carder.
- Nirguna Kabir, Nanak, Ravidas, Dadu; saguna Chaitanya, Vallabha, Surdas, Tulsidas, Mirabai.
- Kabir in Bijak, Adi Granth and Granthavali; ulatbansi; Ravidas and Begampura; Nanak's sangat, pangat, langar.
- Chaitanya 1486-1533 and sankirtan; Vallabha's Shuddhadvaita and Pushtimarg; Tulsidas Ramcharitmanas 1574; Jnaneshwari about 1290 and Pandharpur.

- Sufi terms: shariat, tariqat, haqiqat, marifat; pir, murid, silsila, khanqah, sama, urs, zikr, chilla, futuh.
- Wahdat-al-wujud from Ibn Arabi; wahdat-al-shuhud from Sirhindi; Chishti permits sama, Suhrawardi rejects it.
- Moinuddin at Ajmer, Nizamuddin Auliya d.1325 and Fawa'id-ul-Fuad, Baba Farid in the Adi Granth, Bahauddin Zakariya at Multan.
- Jayasi's Padmavat 1540 for fusion; Hawley on the constructed idea of a single Bhakti movement.

Common errors to avoid

- Presenting Bhakti as one unified movement. Hawley shows the idea was largely constructed later, and nirguna and saguna differ fundamentally on caste.
- Calling Kabir a synthesiser of Hinduism and Islam. He rejected both establishments rather than combining them.
- Describing Sufism as uniformly syncretic. Sirhindi and the Naqshbandis were reformist and exclusivist.
- Confusing wahdat-al-wujud with wahdat-al-shuhud. The first is Ibn Arabi's ontology, the second Sirhindi's correction of it.
- Saying Bhakti abolished caste. It criticised caste in devotional space, and several panths hardened into castes.
- Forgetting Maharashtra dharma, which is named in the syllabus and runs from Jnaneshwar to Tukaram and Ramdas.

Mains Practice

“The Sufis created a climate in which people belonging to different sects and religions could live in peace and harmony.” Discuss.

10 marks · 150 words · 2026

“Religious themes inspired a large section of literature in provincial languages in late medieval India.” Comment.

10 marks · 150 words · 2025

“The principles of Sikhism represented a harmonious blend of Islamic and Indic religious beliefs and practices.” Comment.

10 marks · 150 words · 2025

Evaluate the contribution of Qalandariyyah to medieval Indian culture.

10 marks · 150 words · 2024

Discuss the importance of Sufic literature as a source of history.

10 marks · 150 words · 2023