



THE URS OF RAJGANGPUR: A LIVING TRADITION OF SUFI DEVOTION AND COMMUNITY BONDING

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Abstract

Rajgangpur, a town in Odisha's Sundargarh district, has carved out a distinct spot in the region's cultural and spiritual landscape with its annual Sufi Urs celebration. Urs, a Sufi saint's death anniversary, is viewed as a celebration of the saint's union with the Divine rather than a sorrowful occasion. This festival in Rajgangpur illustrates the perfect blend of devotion, local customs, and inclusive cultural expression. The Urs of Sufi saint Lal Sha Baba in Rajgangpur is spiritual observance that transcends barriers of religion and becomes a community-wide celebration, resulting in a unique, inclusive, and highly significant tradition. This work investigates how devotion to a Sufi saint evolves into a dynamic cultural event characterized by rituals, offerings, fairs, and community gatherings. It also emphasizes the festival's inclusive nature, examines the assimilation of Hindu Muslim culture and the participation of marginalized groups, and assesses its impact on the local economy and traditions. Through field observations, interviews, and cultural research, the study exposes Urs as a cultural tradition that unites faith with festivity, promoting communal unity and preserving intangible heritage in a modern time.

Key words: Urs, Saint, Devine, Devotion, Cultural, Marginalized.



1.1 Introduction

There is no one way to teach Sufism, and not everything can be put into words. You can find the wisdom of Sufism in stories, poems, art, calligraphy, rituals, exercises, readings, dancing moves, and prayer. People often talk about Sufism as a path, which means that it has both a beginning and an end. Sufism's goal is to get rid of all the barriers that keep people from being close to God. One can learn about Reality by following this path.¹ The ultimate reality is God, not this world of many things. People often say that Sufism is a path, which means it has a starting point and an end point². This remark suggests that understanding truth ultimately results in the acknowledgement of God as the ultimate reality. The distinguished Sufi philosopher Ibn Arabi elucidated that only God actually exists, whereas all of creation is provisional and dependent upon Him. The mundane world, therefore, acts as a veil that hides the divine reality. The mystical traditions that are at the heart of all faiths are very similar to Sufism. Mysticism spanning multiple religions is nevertheless one stream, just like a single river flows across numerous places and is claimed by each as its own. The final goal is always the same: to personally experience the Divine.

1.2 The Journey of Sufi Tradition Across the India

The history of Sufism in India is a complicated and multi-faceted story that goes back hundreds of years. It is characterised by the mystical Islamic traditions that have been woven into the rich cultural and spiritual fabric of the subcontinent. Sufism, which comes from the deepest parts of Islam, stresses going inward to get closer to God via practices like meditation, dhikr (remembering God), and the search for spiritual knowledge. Hasan al-Basri (642–728) and Rabia al-Basri (714–801)³ were major figures in the early development of Sufism. They were known for their asceticism and devotion to God. During the Golden Age of Islam (8th to 14th centuries)⁴, Sufism became more prominent, and well-known Sufi gurus came to be. Bayazid Bastami (804–874)⁵ is one of the most famous early Sufis. Bayazid Bastami (804–874) was a famous early Sufi known for his deep mystical experiences, while Junayd al-Baghdadi (830–910)⁶ was another famous early Sufi who underlined the importance of spiritual teaching. The prominent Persian theologian and mystic Abu Hamid al-Ghazali (1058–1111)⁷ is often recognised as the author of “The Book of Guidance” (Al-Hidayah), the foundational text of Sufi philosophy. Al-Ghazali's thoughts had a big impact on how Sufism and orthodox Islamic thought



came together. Sufism began to spread in India in the 12th century,⁸ mostly through Muslim religious saints known as Sufis. They focused on love, peace, devotion to God, equality, brotherhood, and service to humanity. This principle appealed to many Indian people, especially those from lower castes and the poor who were being treated unfairly by people from higher castes. Sufism spread in India when several Sufi saints moved there from Central Asia, Persia, and Afghanistan at different times. The advent of Moin al-Din Chishti⁹ during the Sultanate period signalled the start of a profound change in the country's religious life. During the Sultanate period, which lasted for the following three hundred years¹⁰, Sufism spread to every part of India. The Sufi saint built khanqahs¹¹, which are places where Sufis and their students get together to worship, learn, and give to charity. These khanqahs are the main places where Sufi principles are spread. They speak the native language and teach about love, equality, and giving. Qawwali is an important feature of Sufism that draws individuals from many different religions. The qawwali is a type of religious poetry or praise for a Sufi saint. The rise of Sufism is another reason why the Delhi Sultanate and the Mughal dynasty got support.¹²

during the Mughal and Afghan periods, several Sufi saints came to Odisha to propagate Islam. The king also supported the Sufis and wished to gain blessings for their success. Many Hindu monarchs have also supported the Sufi saint and given him land. There are many Sufi shrines in Odisha that show how much people loved them. There are tombs of Sufi saints all over Odisha, but the most important ones are in Cuttack, Puri, Balasore, Astarang, Khurda, Pipli, Kakatpur, Kaipadar, Manikptana, Satyabadi, Kendrapara, Sambalpur, Tarbha, Sundargarh¹³, and so on. These studies focus on Hajrat Haji Sayed Lal Shah Baba Rahmatulla Alaihi and his shrine in Rajgangpur, Sundargarh District. These works provide a concise elaboration of the stories and the celebration of the Urs festival, including their customs and societal significance.

1.3 Geographical Setting of Rajgangpur

The North Western part of Odisha state is made up of Sundargarh district. The district's main office is at Sundargarh town. The district is not a compact unit in terms of geography. It is made up of several different areas, including large, open areas with trees, solitary summits, immense forests that are hard to get to, big river basins, and steep terrain.¹⁴ The map of Odisha shows that Sundargarh is an industrial district. Some of the most important industries in this District include the steel plant, fertiliser plant, cement factory, ferro vanadium plant, machine building factory, glass and china clay factory and spinning mills.¹⁵ Sundargarh is a major mineral



area in Odisha and has a lot of iron ore, limestone, manganese, dolomite, and fire clay. Odisha Cements Ltd., Hart Fertilisers Ltd., and Odisha Industries Ltd. are the biggest companies in the state. Rourkela, an industrial town in this District, contains the first government-owned plant established with help from other countries. It was also the first in India to use LD oxygen technology.¹⁶

Sundargarh district located in the northwestern section of the Indian state of Odisha. To the west, Sundargarh district is bordered by Raigarh district in Chhattisgarh. To the north-west, it is bordered by Jashpur district in Chhattisgarh. To the north, it is bordered by Simdega district in Jharkhand. To the east, it is bordered by West Singhbhum district in Jharkhand and Keonjhar district in Odisha. To the south, it is bordered by Jharsuguda, Sambalpur, Deogarh, and Angul districts in Odisha. The district's main town is Sundargarh. The biggest city in the whole district is Rourkela.

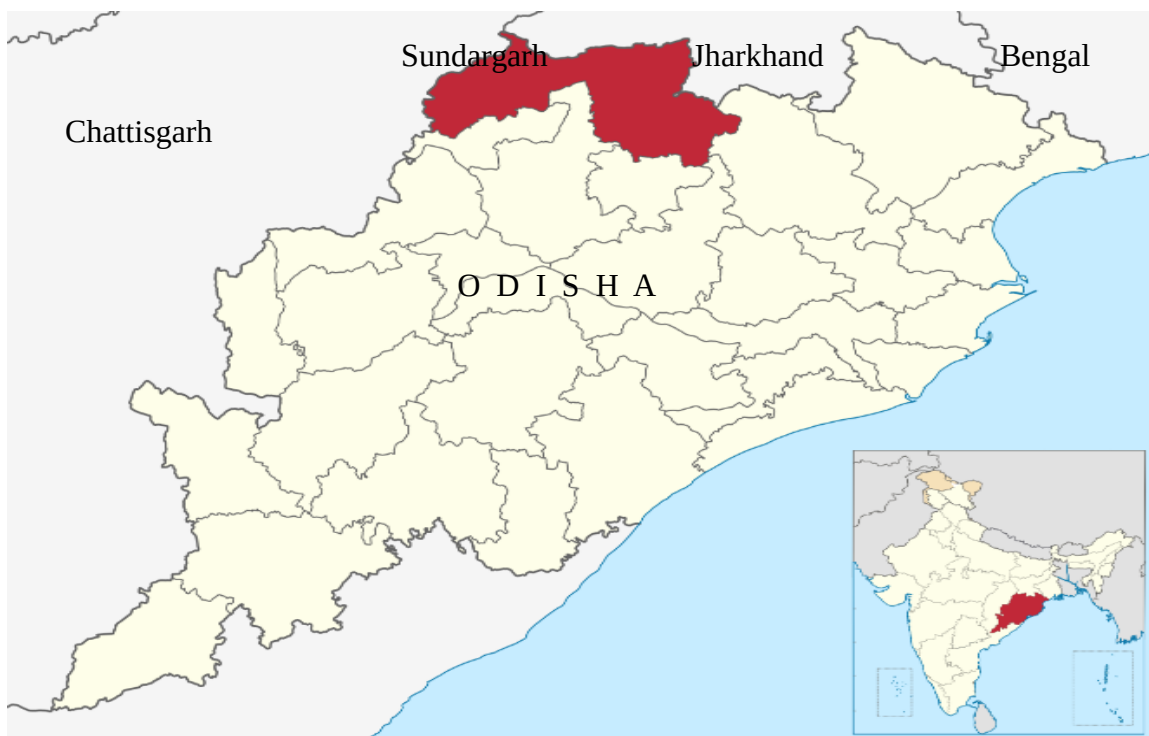


Figure 1 Map of Odisha and Sundargarh District

Rajgangpur used to be part of the princely state of Gangpur, which is where the term “Rajgangpur” comes from. “Raj” means royal and “Gangpur” means the formal state. It became part of Odisha's Sundargarh district after independence.¹⁷ In the twentieth century, the growth of industry, especially cement manufacture, turned Rajgangpur from a tiny village into an industrial town.¹⁸ The cement business is the main source of income for Rajgangpur. The Dalmia cement



factory, which was one of the first cement plants in eastern India, helped the economy grow.¹⁹ The local economy also benefits from farming in the nearby rural areas and small-scale trade.²⁰ Rajgangpur is an industrial city in the Sundargarh district of Odisha. It is a major city in western Odisha, around 30 kilometres east of Rourkela. The Gangpur royal state gave Rajgangpur its name. In 1905, the commissioner of Chotanagpur moved this small town to the Odisha division.²¹

1.4 Sufi and Tasawwuf

People sometimes use the words “*Sufi*” and “*Tasawwuf*” to denote the same thing, but they don't mean the same thing. Understanding the difference between the two helps people better understand Islamic spirituality and clears up common misunderstandings. In short, *Tasawwuf* is the Islamic study of spirituality and cleaning up the inside. It is all about feeding the heart and soul so that a believer might become closer to Allah. It stresses purifying the soul, having good intentions, moral discipline, building character, loving and remembering Allah, and not being too attached to earthly things. On the other side, Sufis are people who practise *Tasawwuf*. They are people who want to develop their spiritual lives and themselves by following Islamic or *Tasawwuf* teachings. This can include following a spiritual master, becoming part of a Sufi order (*Silsilah*), and regularly remembering, reflecting, and working on their morals.

1.5 Term of Sufism

Sufism is an Islamic religious tradition that focuses more on purifying the self from the inside than on performing rituals on the outside²². People are still arguing about where the word “Sufism” comes from. In Arabic, *Tasawwuf* means Sufism. The word “Sufi” comes from the Suf word “wool,” which means “woollen robes.” The first Sufis wore these robes. Most Sufis agree that it originates from the word “Safa,” which means “pure.” Some people might connect it to “Saff means rank,” as if Sufis’ spirituality were the highest rank since they are so near to God.²³ It also calls the origin of Sufism “Ahl al-Suffa” or “Ashab-e-Suffa,” which means “people of bench.” In the early days of Islam, a poor Muslim sought refuge in the porch, or porch, of the prophet Muhammad’s (PBUH) mosque. e. They used to meet at Masjid Nabawwi, which is famous in Islamic history as Suffa, which means “raised site”. At this place of study and teaching, the Companions of Muhammad (Pbuh) were always talking about the Hadis, the Holy



Quran, and Islamic philosophy. Some other researchers say that “Tasawwuf” is not an Arabic word or an Islamic word. Instead, it originates from the Greek word “Sofia,” which means “wisdom” and “understanding.”²⁴

1.6 Sufi Culture in Rajgangpur

Cultures associated with Sufism may be discovered in virtually every state in India. In a similar manner, it is also possible to observe it in the state of Odisha. In various regions of Odisha, one may observe the shrines of Sufi saints and the devotion of the thousands of people who follow them. In a similar manner, Rajgangpur is also home to a significant manifestation of the Sufi tradition. Even though it is a relatively tiny town, the essence of various cultures may be found within its soil. These cultures are intertwined with one another to create a living tapestry of harmony and legacy. Every culture has its own distinct location, as well as its own way of life rhythm. The Sufi tradition flourishes in Rajgangpur with a fervent devotion, which is honoured by the people of Rajgangpur with a great deal of pomp and circumstance. Through the weaving together of the stories, practices, and living traditions that make Sufi culture in Rajgangpur a shining part of its identity, this paper aims to depict the energy, dedication, and celebration that are characteristic of the Sufi culture in Rajgangpur.

In 1978, the holy shrine of Sufi Saint Hajrat Haji Lal Shah Baba was built in Rajgangpur.²⁵ It became a symbol of devotion and harmony. Its spiritual pull goes far beyond Odisha, bringing people from Jharkhand, Bihar, Uttar Pradesh, and Chhattisgarh. During the Urs festival, hundreds of thousands of people come together to honour and celebrate,²⁶ turning Rajgangpur into a living ocean of faith, qawwali, and prayer. This shows how powerful Sufi tradition is even now. Throughout the course of the year, devotees from different part of India travel to this holy shrine, during which they offer prayers and send their most sincere wishes to Peer Baba. The Urs of Lal Shah Baba, on the other hand, is when the shrine is at its most vibrant and enthusiastic. Over the course of two days, Rajgangpur is transformed into a bustling center of religious activity, with hundreds of thousands of devotees gathering there to show their respect. During this time, the atmosphere is filled with the sound of qawwalis and prayers, the shrine is illuminated by lights and decorations, and the streets are filled to the brim with the aroma of incense and the warmth of hospitality.²⁷ They are joined by their love for the saint and the ageless spirit of Sufi culture, which brings them together in this ocean of devotion. People from a variety of different backgrounds stand shoulder to shoulder.



1.7 Urs Festival

The Urs festival in Sufism is an annual celebration of the death of a Sufi saint. It is seen as a spiritual connection with the Divine. There include prayers, qawwali music, dhikr (a group remembering of God), processions, the giving of chadar, langar (a community feast), and big groups of devotees at the saint's shrine. In Arabic, the word "Urs" signifies "wedding." In Sufi tradition, the death of a saint is not mourned but celebrated as their Wisaal (union) with the Almighty—a spiritual marriage of the soul with the Creator.²⁸



Figure 2 Chadar Procession

This Urs celebration was also attended by people of many faiths. The Urs celebration goes on for more than two days. On the first day of the event, a decorative chaddar was brought to Baba's grave shrine after being driven across town with music and qawwali.²⁹ the majority of devotees from many states, such as Jharkhand, Madhya Pradesh, Uttar Pradesh, Bihar, and West Bengal, come to the temple to take part in the Urs celebration. Local leaders and committee members organised the ceremonies and made sure everything was set up for a calm celebration.³⁰

The celebration of Urs is meant to take place on the eighth day of the Islamic month of Moharram; however, it is not celebrated since people are mourning the loss of Hajrat Imam Hussain, the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad, who was killed in the battle of Karbala.³¹ May Allah be pleased with them. Due to this particular cause, the celebration of Urs takes place



during the Islamic month of Safar, which is the month that follows Moharram. The fifteenth day of Safar was the day of the Urs festival for the Sufi saint Hazrat Haji Lal Shah Baba.³²



Figure 3 Hajrat Lal Shah Baba Shrine During Urs Festival

Over the course of the Urs festival, which lasts for two days, the entire shrine is decked out with blooming flowers and brightly glittering lights. An additional feature of the street and road is the presence of colourful lights and flags. There are hundreds of outside sellers who have arrived to offer their various wares, giving the impression that the setting is a massive marketplace. The celebrations of Urs bring together thousands of believers from different regions. Approximately two and a half tonnes of langar are being distributed by devotees or members of the committee that oversees the temple. This celebration is attended by around fifty percent of people who are not Muslims.³³

1.8 Qawwali Tradition in Urs Festival

In South Asia, qawwali is a type of music that comes from Sufi poetry. It is a type of devotion that uses mystical songs to help people understand the message of the songs.³⁴ Qawwali is a type of South Asian religious music that is quite similar to light classical music from the area. It also has a number of unique traits that have to do with its religious purpose. A band is a group of Qawwali singers. A traditional Qawwali party has between four and eight people, however the number can change. The sarangi, a stringed instrument, played the melodic



line of early Qawwali. Some people still say that the sarangi is the only instrument that should be used to play Qawwali, however not many qawwals use it these days.

The lead singer usually plays the harmonium, and the beat is usually given by a tiny, barrel-shaped, double-headed hand drum called the dholak, which is played with hand claps from other party members. Modern, professional Qawwali parties often use tabla, which are the two-headed drums used in North Indian classical music, or even electronic, synthesised drums. However, most traditional ensembles still use the dholak. The song usually starts with an instrumental intro, then the clap, which is a short-improvised passage that shows the song's melodic mode, or raga, and lets the performer make up a few vocal lines. After that, the lead vocalist sings one or more verses, which are typically made up on the spot, without any rhythm. In South Asia, the death of a Sufi saint is seen as a change from being separate from God [Allah] as the eternal Beloved to being one with God. Sufi poetry and Qawwali song lyrics use the romantic language of the lover (the Sufi seeker) and the Beloved (God, Allah) to talk about this situation. In this way, the saint's death is celebrated as a person who lived in close connection with God, the divine Beloved, and who has now won the right to be with God forever through an eternal marriage with Beloved God.



Figure 4 Second Night Qawwali

The Islamic (Hijri) calendar says that Hazrat Haji Lal Shah Baba died on the 8th of Muharram in 1366 (1978 AD). The 'urs festival is celebrated on the 15th and 16th of Safar month. This was a public event that was one of the most important events of the year for the Muslim community in



the camp area. Hafiz Haji Lal Sha Baba loves Qawwali and music. He was a member of Chistia Silsila. Chisti Silsila is definitely a big enthusiast of Qawwali. On the second night of the celebrations, Famous Qawwali groups from Delhi, Mumbai, Agra, and other states have been invited to take part in the Urs festival. Many devotees join to the Qawwali ceremony. There is a politician, a minister from Sundargarh, an MLA from Rajgangpur, and other authorities at this occasion were participated. The Qawwal and one of his followers are on stage. Almost a thousand people came to the Gopabandhu Govt High School ground, which is right next to Hajrat Lal Shah Baba dargah. A big stage was built on the main road, and professional lighting and sound systems were rented and set up surrounding the stage. By 9:30 pm, people were starting to arrive in the area, trying to get front row seats. By 10:00 pm, when the Qawwals started to set up their instruments and complete their sound check, the grounds were full and spilling out onto the street. Qawwali groups were getting ready to perform on stage. The Qawwal sing the Qawwali first in the names of Allah Subhan wa Taala and the prophet Muhammad (Pbuh), and then in the name of Haji Lal Shah Baba. The Qawwali talks about prayers, miracles, legends, and how much people admire the Sufi saint.³⁵

A Qawwali performance can happen at any time and last for any kind of time. The most crucial thing is that the performance should not happen at the same time as the five daily prayers (namaz or salat). Because of this, Qawwali shows are generally held at night, starting soon after the evening prayer [isha'a] and ending in time for the morning prayer [fajr]. The event doesn't have to go on all night, but the schedule is flexible in case it becomes so interesting that the people who are there don't want it to end. The main goal of this Qawwali show was to entertain people while also propagating a strong Sufi message. The message was mostly religious, but the attention was on the musicians as entertainers, but not all the listeners as spiritual seekers. The main purpose of the mahfil-i-sama' is to make the listener's subjective experience the most important part of the gathering. Even though the 'urs occasion and the nearby dargah made this a religious event, the experience was mostly about getting people to show their excitement in public, like at a Western Pop Music concert. The main goal was the spiritual growth of the individual, as is clearly stated in the mahfil. The festival atmosphere, like most of the 'urs celebration, was interesting and a chance for spiritual reflection.



1.9 Healing and Spirit possession Practices at Urs Festival

The Urs festival is a religious event that marks the death of a Sufi saint. Every year, the devotees celebrate it with love and devotion. On the other hand, the Urs festival at the Lal Shah Baba shrine is well-known for its spiritual healing and rituals related to spirit possession. Many devotees come to the Urs celebration because they believe that the Sufi saint's spiritual power or blessing can heal physical, mental, or supernatural problems. A religious expert sees these therapeutic methods as a part of Sufi culture. Sufi shrines serve as both places of devotion and as centers of social and psychological support for those experiencing distress, disease, or perceived spiritual issues. People thought that the individual who entered the saint shrine's sacred place was possessed by a jinn³⁶ (a supernatural being) or spirit during the Urs festival or even on normal days. The spirit gets frustrated and starts to cry, scream, shake its body, get angry all of a sudden, or speak in a strange way. But with the blessing of Haji Sufi Lal Shah Baba, the spirit leaves the body. The shrine's khadim then blows prayers, touches the person's head, and waves a peacock feather over their body. As a result of these actions, the jinn or spirit departs from the body. In traditionally the sweeping of peacock feather symbolize removing negative energies spirit.

1.10 Urs Celebration's Impacts on Society

The Urs festival has an enormous impact on society since it brings people together, strengthens communities, boosts local businesses, and gives people a place to exhibit their culture and reflect on their spirituality. People visit Sufi Urs celebrations to remember the death of important saints, celebrate their spiritual connection to the Divine, and enjoy a mix of devotion, music, community, and cultural celebration. People from Hindu, Christian, sikhs and other groups also visited to the urs festival in hopes for blessings, healing, or the fulfilment of vows. This made the shrine a place of hope and trust. It also breaks down barriers of caste and creed and encourages everyone to be included. Some Sufi scholars say that the Urs celebration is a way to promote peace and unity among people of different religions, fight extremist ideas, and bring the society together. These festivities bring together people from all walks of life, regardless of their wealth, caste, or where they live.



1.11 Celebration Impact on Marginalized Group

The most important significant of this festive to impact the marginalized group such as vendors, beggars, disable people, lower cast communities, informal worker and economically disadvantage population they may be excluded from other spaces. In this Urs festival found large number of marginalised group people take participate for seeking spiritual blessed and opportunity for economic support. Urs festival provide opportunities for participating in devotional practices such as qawwali, communal meals (langar) and offereing at the shrine. During the urs celebration at Haji Lal Shah Baba shrine a large number of marginalised individuals participating informal activities around the shrine premises. Among them many women and their children sit near the entrance of the shrine and offer to safeguard the footwear of devotees while they enter the shrine for prayer. In return, devotees give small amount of money as a token of gratitude. These work reflect the formation of temporary informal religious economy. Large Urs gatherings often boost local economies through fairs, bazaars, and hospitality services. By the huge gathering it increase the demands of goods, food, transport and accommodation.

1.12 Impact on the Lower Classes

Sufis teachings on equality and universal brotherhood particularly impact to lower caste Hindus, offering them a pathway to dignity and social mobility. Many from the Dalit communities, who faced severe discrimination, they take shelter in Sufi orders where they were treated as equals. By challenging the rigid caste system, Sufis provided an alternative social order based on inclusivity and spiritual merit. Sufi Hospitality and Generosity Sufi khanqahs functioned as centers of hospitality, where food and shelter were provided to all visitors, irrespective of religion or social status. The principle of selfless service was a fundamental aspect of Sufi practice, emphasizing generosity over accumulation of wealth. Even in times of scarcity, Sufi saints ensured that guests were offered at least a bowl of water as a sign of hospitality. Sufis played an instrumental role in shaping socio-political and interfaith dynamics in the Indian subcontinent. Their emphasis on inclusivity, non-coercion, and spiritual guidance made them vital figures in bridging cultural and religious divides. Despite opposition, their humanistic and pluralistic approach contributed significantly to the social and religious fabric of the region, making them influential agents of peace and harmony.



1.13 Sufism as a Bridge Between Communities

Sufis were very important in improving relations between Hindus and Muslims. They followed local customs and added parts of native culture to their practices, which made Islam easier for people from all backgrounds to understand. Chishti Sufis allow Hindus worshippers in their khanqahs and talked with yogis of other religions. Even while fundamentalist ulema didn't like these practices, they helped bring together people from different faiths. The relationship between Sufis with the Sultanate was complicated, with both cooperation and resistance. Some Sufis stayed away from politics, but others worked with rulers to make society more fair. Sufi orders had significant effects on South Asian society by encouraging spirituality, interfaith harmony, and social equality, no matter what their views were on the state.

1.14 Sufism and Gender Equality

Sufis have always asserted that men and women possess equal spiritual connection to God, opposing conventional views that limit women's religious roles. The Quran often talks about both men and women at the same time, which shows that they have the same moral and spiritual duties.³⁷ Women have also been very important in Sufi traditions,³⁸ both as mystics and as intellectuals. Rabia al-Adawiyya are good examples of how important women are to Sufi mysticism. There are many Sufi shrines in India, but some of them allow women into the inner chamber and some of them do not. In Ajmer Sharif Dargah, women are allowed to enter just like males. females are not allowed to enter the grave room at the Haji Lal Shah Baba shrine in Rajgangpur. Only men are allowed to enter, and ladies must stay outside the main tomb chamber.



Figure 5 in the shrine main door mentioned that ladies are not allowed



Certain academics say that women should refrain from approaching graves, as Islamic teachings restrict their visitation to graveyards. Conversely, some asserted that women may enter but should refrain from physically contacting a male saint's grave. During the shrine management interview, the Sufi saint disapproved of the proximity of women, which is why they are prohibited. According to a statement from another shrine committee member, men and women should have distinct prayer areas; the main hall of the shrine becomes congested, necessitating the segregation of women into separate parts. Certain shrine officials assert that the inner grave chamber is a hallowed site, necessitating stringent adherence to ceremonial cleanliness. Consequently, ladies are advised from entering the grave room of a shrine due to considerations of purity; this interpretation is occasionally associated with issues surrounding menstruation, which pertains to the notion of purity throughout menstrual cycles. Certain experts advise against women visiting graves; nevertheless, these interpretations are not widely endorsed by the majority of researchers.

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